

“Practise Resurrection”: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter

Rev Ray Coats

28 April 2019

As we have only just celebrated the closing stage of Easter, today I would like to invite you to consider the proposition that we should worry *less* about what people say they believe happened one Sunday morning 2,000 years ago and *more* about whether we are living as if resurrection still happens. I found this quote from Clarence Jordan, "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the *full hearts of his transformed disciples*. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*. Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*".

So, who was Clarence Jordan? He was born in Talbotton, Georgia in 1912, the seventh of ten children. The Jordans were active members of the local Southern Baptist church. At church Clarence was taught a vision of racial equality ("Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight..."), but he was increasingly bothered that these lyrics were in stark contrast to the racial discrimination he regularly witnessed outside church walls, not to mention the racial segregation on Sunday mornings.

After graduating high school, Clarence earned a degree in agriculture from the University of Georgia, then a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He felt called to take Jesus' demanding words in the Sermon on the Mount seriously. As his days of formal schooling were ending, plans began to take shape to found a community to be called "Koinonia Farms," named after the Greek word for "fellowship or communion." He sought to unite his twin passions for agriculture and scripture with his commitment to radical Christian discipleship. It would hopefully be, in Clarence's words, a "demonstration plot for the kingdom of God."

In 1942, Clarence, his wife, and another couple purchased 440 acres of land about three hours south of Atlanta, but trouble came almost immediately. From the beginning they had put racial equality into

practice by inviting the workers on the farm to eat together, irrespective of race. This choice quickly spurred the local Ku Klux Klan into action. There were many caustic encounters with local racist residents, and one of his favourite questions for those with loyalties to their southern heritage was, “Your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ.” He commanded respect because he was so willing to put his life on the line for what he believed in, and he was famous for his pithy retorts, which helped defuse tension even as they prophetically critiqued the status quo. One famous example is when a pastor showed him an expensive cross the congregation had just purchased for the steeple, Clarence replied, “You got cheated. Times were Christians could get them for free.”

Koinonia Farms, in time, became Koinonia Partners, which eventually birthed Habitat for Humanity International under the leadership of Millard Fuller, who was deeply inspired by Clarence. I'm sure you have heard of their work around the world. Clarence died in 1969 not long after the first Koinonia Partners house was built, but the legacy and challenge of his life live on.

I invite you to hear again to his words: “The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.” Again, what I take away from this quote is that we should worry *less* what people say they believe happened 2,000 years ago and *more* about whether we are living as if resurrection still happens. The question is, “How are we partnering with God today in transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?”

A contemporary American prophet and poet Wendell Berry similarly challenges us to “Practise resurrection” in his poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” Here’s a taste of this poetic and prophetic masterpiece:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Give your approval to all you cannot understand.
Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not
destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant trees.
Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you
will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the
mould.
Call that profit.
Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all
the facts.

There is so much more to this wonderfully provocative poem, but I
continue to be most drawn to its closing line: “Practise
resurrection.”

So, what would it mean, not to “believe in the Resurrection,” but
to *practise resurrection*?

Peter Rollins, who is a Northern Irish writer and theologian, has a
powerful monologue that speaks to what it might look like to
practise — or fail to practise — resurrection. Rollins begins with the
intentionally shocking assertion that,

"Without equivocation or hesitation, I fully and completely admit
that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone

who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think".

After a dramatic pause, he continues,

"I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However, there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed".

Jordan, Berry, and Rollins are all pointing out that it is *less* important what people say they believe happened on a Sunday morning 2,000 years ago and much *more* important whether we are partnering with God to practise resurrection today. As we consider the aftermath of this Easter, these particular prophets are challenging us to ask, "How are — and how are we *not* — following Jesus' example of caring for the poor and of building the Beloved Community?

May we determine to open our whole selves — heart, soul, mind, and strength — to God's inspiring call to new life and renewed love. May we feel God luring us, prompting us, and encouraging us — each day and in each new present moment — to *practise resurrection*.