

LET LOVE ARISE
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Easter Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 28:1-10

The women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy. They ran to tell the disciples when suddenly Jesus met them. "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee; there they will see me."

Which is to say, you'll find me wherever you live—in Galilee, or Syria, or Baghdad, or Egypt, or North Korea, or South Sudan, or Orlando. I will always be where you live.

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When I was a child I thought like a child. I thought the resurrection of Jesus proved there was life after death for those who believed in Jesus and so when I died I would go to heaven and play on streets of gold because at age seven I had "accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior."

I had been told that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life and that Christianity was the only ticket into heaven. So only Christians got in, of course. Or to be more precise, only true Christians like us born-again, Bible believing, washed in the blood *Baptists*. Only us Baptist!

I was a child. I thought like a child and that made sense to me. After all, I learned "punishment and reward" from my father's hand so I figured the so-called Heavenly Father operated the same way with hell as punishment, heaven as reward.

One of my favorite songs back then was: *This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through; my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven's open door. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*

Millions of Christians have sung that ditty or things like it for a hundred years or more. I guess that's why the church of my childhood couldn't care less about making this world more just, peaceable, beautiful or holy. We were bound for heaven and the only worry was that we would be so eager to get there *we might run right past it.*

When I was a child I thought like a child. My main worry about heaven was the dress code. From what I could see from pictures in my Sunday School class the citizens of heaven wore stupid white gowns and played harps all day long for eternity, which sounded like a really long time to be doing something you hated.

I was a child. I thought like a child. I didn't want to wear a white gown or play on a harp. I liked baseball and blue jeans.

So I took my worries to the best authority I knew on that subject: my mother. *I don't want to go to heaven if I can't wear blue jeans and play baseball*, I told her. And she assured me if wearing blue jeans and playing baseball made me happy

there'd be plenty of both in heaven. *The jeans would never wear out and I'd never strike out*, she told me. After that, I was all in with heaven.

That may have been the moment I became a progressive theologian. I realized there was more than one way of seeing things including heaven and the Bible.

I am no longer a child. I see things differently. I'm not sure about a heaven out there. But I'm certain about heaven here on earth. I've experienced it more than once and I'm guessing you've had heavenly moments as well, when everything is just right in your world.

I'm not sure about a heaven out there. Nor am I sure about a hell down there. But I am certain about hell on earth. I've experienced that too and I'm guessing you have too, when everything feels broken and miserable, as though you've fallen into a cavern of tormenting despair.

Far too many people are living in hell here and now for us to worry about hell somewhere else. When the most powerful military force in the world can rain down death and destruction anytime anywhere, hell is never far away.

I now see that heaven and hell are much better adjectives than nouns. And I now have a new favorite song. It's no longer, "This World Is Not My Home." My new favorite song is "Imagine" by John Lennon.

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people living for today*

Imagine that!

I once thought that song silly and naive but I now believe Lennon got it right. We must find a way to live fully in this moment, not for some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. We must learn to be here now—fully in love with all that God has made—all people, all creatures great and small, the whole blessed earth.

We must work to make this world holy, beautiful, free, just, peaceable and good and leave the unknown future in the hands of the One who breathed it all into being. If you've got to worry about things, don't worry about heaven or hell later. Worry about social injustice, inequality, poverty and war here and now.

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.*

Imagine that!

And that's where the Resurrection comes into play. We need the Resurrection story—and more than one—to awaken our imagination.

When I was a child, I thought like a child. Now I see things differently.

I'm not so sure the flesh and bones of Jesus skipped out of that tomb on Easter morning. Many do, including my mother. But, as she taught me, there's more than one way of seeing things.

Life has evolved on this planet over 4.5 billion years from simple forms into more and more complex forms and into larger and larger communities of interdependency. The evolution of human consciousness and possibilities can be seen in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. The Resurrection vindicates the way of Jesus, not the violent way of Empire.

The Resurrection vindicates the way of Jesus, the way of love. All are welcome. None are turned away.

Nothing evolves us like love and love is, indeed, a many-splendored thing. The Beloved has arisen. But there's a greater truth: *the Beloved Community is arising on this planet.*

So, let us live into this new creation. Roll away the stone. Come out of your cavern of despair. Let your stubborn and fearful self get out of the way—and let love arise.