



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Resurrection Within: The Invitation of Easter

-Rev. Thom Muller

A sermon delivered on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017 at

Hillside, an Urban Sanctuary in El Cerrito, CA



April 2017

Readings

Isaiah 55:1-3

[...] Everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”²

² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven* §3212

The state of the Lord's glorification can be grasped to some extent from the state of our regeneration, for our regeneration is an image of the Lord's glorification. When we are being regenerated we become completely different from before and are made new. Once we have been regenerated, we are called one who has been born again and created anew. At that point a person's face and speech remain the same, but not their mind. Once he they regenerate, their mind is open towards heaven, and love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor, together with faith, reside in it.³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society., 1983.

Every few months, I receive the official magazine of the Theosophical Society, called *Quest Magazine*. A recent edition included an interesting article by Gary Lachman. Some of you may already be familiar with him. He wrote one of the biographies of Swedenborg that we have out on the book table entitled *Swedenborg -An Introduction to His Life and Ideas*. The article was called *If Consciousness is Evolving, Why aren't Things getting better?*⁴

This is a question that I find tends to come up quite often in discussions among Swedenborgians. We have this idea that Human consciousness and spiritual awareness is at a new stage in its evolution, and if you take Swedenborg seriously, you would think that you'd buy into his claim that things would continue to get better and better.

Much of Christianity has traditionally had a “pre-apocalyptic” outlook on the future of humanity. That things would decay to catastrophic dimensions before the final judgment, the second coming of Christ. Swedenborg claims that the second coming of Christ has already happened, because like everything in the Word, the Story of Jesus is a story of us, and his second coming is something that happens within and around us as we receive this new state of spiritual awareness.

Now to be fair, the claim that things aren't getting better deserves to be questioned. While there are many terrible things going on in the world, if you look at humanity as a whole, there has been a dramatic decrease in violent deaths, hunger and wars. Steven Pinker of Harvard claims that the average person has never had as low a likelihood of violent death than at any point in history.⁵ Never in the history of this planet, one could argue, has there been as much awareness and promulgation of ideas such as individual liberties, civil rights, gender equality, actual participatory democracy, LGBTQ inclusion. The list goes on and on.

Yet as we all know, the notion that things are really getting better can be hard to swallow, some times more than others. And it should be. Because the reason things change for the better is because people are unhappy with the way things are. The values of peace and coexistence and freedom are under constant assault, and clearly it is up to us as humans to keep up the fight. But still, if the second

⁴ Lachman, Gary. "If Consciousness Is Evolving, Why Aren't Things Getting Better?" *Quest*, February 2017, 13-17.

⁵ Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*. London: Allen Lane, 2011.

coming is really here right now inside our hearts, and all we need to do is wake up to it and live it, shouldn't it be a little bit more obvious?

Today we celebrate Easter. And it is with this tension of between a narrative that sounds too good to be true, and the reality of human suffering that I'd like to approach the topic of the resurrection. Easter is a celebration of light, and life and love. Of resurrection. Last week, we addressed the darkness that precedes this event in the Gospels. And I'm very happy that we did. In our tradition, there sometimes seems to have been a lack of engagement with darkness, and with the suffering of Christ. In this specific case, I think a lot of that goes back to the fact that Swedenborgian theology very strongly rejects the notion of vicarious atonement, the idea that somehow Jesus died as a ransom sacrifice for sin and that it is a belief in that sacrifice that saves. In fact Swedenborg repeatedly calls this a "hellish" idea. And the truth is that this concept is still present in the minds of a lot of people in our culture when addressing the Christ narrative, and many people's understanding of the betrayal, passion and execution of Christ is tainted with a belief in a punishing wrathful God, who keeps score of our shortcomings and judges us accordingly.

What's interesting is that the Gospels themselves never even talk about vicarious atonement. But if the suffering of Christ depicted in the Gospels is not about sacrifice, or punishment, or debt and payment, what is it about? And does the light of Easter simply extinguish the darkness of Good Friday? Because if there's one thing I know it's that darkness was NOT erased on that original Easter. We see it all around us. And yet the message of Easter, I believe, is indeed a message of hope, of triumph and of victory. It is the victory of divine reality over the illusions of the ego.

Swedenborg reads the life of Christ as a life of gradual growth and temptation. The temptation of giving in to falsity, of identification with the subjective "I". Pure divinity brought into the realm of earthly appearances and deceptions. Money, fame, reputation, greed, anger, arrogance, hate, success and failure and.... death. The appearance that it is "I" who matter first. The deception that the EGO is, in fact, what we are. That this physical body, this external reality, this temporary experience we are having in these vessels of flesh and blood is the ultimate reality.

All of the great mystics, be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu seem to point out that it is this fundamental human fallacy, the identification with the finite and material mind-body complex, that is the root of all spiritual misconception. As Swedenborg writes:

“The outer self is only a kind of tool or organ, in itself devoid of life, that receives life from the inner self. When it does, it appears as if it contains inherent life.”⁶

As Christ walks the path of humanity, he continuously resists these temptations, transcends the human condition of ego-identification. Even to the last temptation, the passion on the cross. With no anger, no hate, no judgment even, despair, but not condemnation. The crucifixion is the ultimate image of what sucks about the human condition. It’s the ultimate image of betrayal, of shame, of helplessness, and of death. And it’s an all too familiar image, if you think about it. It’s all those things that scare us most as human beings. And by earthly standards, the story of Jesus is a story of complete failure. Where’s the political revolution? Where’s the overthrow of the oppressors? Jesus, from a human perspective, dies as a failed, disgraced, betrayed and ridiculed cult leader.

In John 18, we read:

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

What makes this story so relatable for me, if read from a Swedenborgian perspective, is that just like we are faced with the temptation of identifying with our external self, with our conditioning, our limitations, our manufactured temporary identities, etc. etc., so does Christ. The image of Jesus himself walking on this earth longing for union with the divine, and despairing at the fact that it just doesn’t

⁶Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Secrets of Heaven*. Translated by Lisa Hyatt. Cooper. New Century Edition. Vol. II. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012.

⁷*New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

always feel like that. And that this gradual process, this struggle between earthly and divine reality is the same journey that we are on.

Again, let me quote from *Secrets of Heaven*:

“The union of the Lord’s Human Essence with His Divine was not effected at once, but successively through the whole course of His life, from infancy to the end of His life in the world. He thus ascended continually to glorification, that is, to union.”⁸

This story, as are all stories in the Word, is the story of us. The Easter narrative is an invitation. And it is a deeply personal invitation to all of us. It’s an invitation to transcend the appearance that the human, earthly experience is the ultimate. That our human fears, our pain, and our failures are what defines us spiritually. The appearance that we are the EGO and that we are separate, from God and from each other.

“If Consciousness is evolving, why aren’t things getting better?”

This could be a question asked by the disciples at the time of Christ’s passion and death. They were devastated. They’re torn from within. One of them even commits suicide.

And again, our tradition invites us to see the characters in this sacred narrative as representing part of ourselves. Are we looking for the kingdom of God in all the wrong places? Are we, like the disciples, at times in a state of existential frustration and confusion and despair? Are we expecting the Kingdom of God to come in the form of immediately visible, tangible earthly changes? For Christ to tear down the political and religious establishment for us, and bring about an instant kingdom of heaven?

This Easter, let us bear in mind that in this story, this story of us, the glorification of Christ, the ultimate victory over death, over finite-ness, Christ’s self-actualization as pure divinity, that union with the ultimate, that Christ had been longing for, happens not in a moment of triumph, or even success. It happens at rock bottom. Amid what by any human standards would be considered a failure. It is the most dramatic, almost offensive slap-in-the-face sort of way of illustrating that the Kingdom of God is

⁸ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society., 1983.

Within You. And it is from that place that we can become truly useful in realizing this kingdom externally, by being the hands and feet of God.

I think that the core of my message today is that the Resurrection is not something to be believed. It is something to be experienced.

Amen.