

The Only Rival to An Easter Faith

Romans 4:13-25

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Paul Tillich was a brilliant and complex philosophical theologian, who taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City this past century. I wish I could say that he was one of my favorite theologians, but the truth of the matter is that he was ordinarily much too deep for me. One of my favorite stories from seminary days was the tale about when Paul of Tarsus and Paul Tillich died and arrived in heaven at the same time. Jesus met them at the gate and said to Paul of Tarsus: "Paul, who do you say that I am? And Paul replied, "I agree with my colleague, Simon Peter: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" "Very well," said Jesus, "enter into my glory." Next he turned to Paul Tillich and said: "Paul, who do you say that I am?" And the weighty theologian replied: "Ontologically, thou art the ground of my being; existentially, thou art my ultimate concern!" To which Jesus replied: "Huh?"

Nevertheless, occasionally in his works Paul Tillich would say something that I both understood and found insightful. In what was probably his best known and most frequently read of his books, *The Courage to Be*, Tillich argued that Christianity has only one real philosophical rival and has had only one since its inception with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And do you know what that philosophical rival was and remains Stoicism! Now to be sure, many philosophies have been at odds with Christianity at various points in history but none has been so popular and none so at odds with Christianity as its Stoicism. Since the days of Zeno in Athens in the third century BCE, Stoicism has taught that people ought simply to resign themselves to things as they are in nature and in life. Reality for the Stoic is fixed, and static and human beings have little real power to alter or modify anything. Therefore, the best humans can do is simply to accept things as they are and "live consistently with nature." The Stoic says we should give in neither to joy nor grief and we should strive to be indifferent to both pleasure and pain. Since we cannot change things as they are, and since things as they are are not even subject to change, the best we can do is to rationally control our desires and our dreams and encourage each person just to become the captain of her own soul. The master of his own fate. For the Stoic, you see, the universe is rigidly determined by natural law. God always abides by this established law and humans might as well since it is the only option and since they have no control over what happens anyway. Good and evil exist only in the minds of life's participants and things that occur in life are truly morally neutral.

Now perhaps you are beginning to sense how Christianity in general and an Easter faith in particular are radically at odds with traditional Stoicism. Christianity affirms that reality is not static, powerless and predictable, but rather dynamic, powerful, and occasionally even surprising. Because life is not simply a given but is open to new possibilities, the Christian can approach difficulties like racism, climate change and the current COVID pandemic with hope and

encouragement. The Stoic, on the other hand, must simply resign himself or herself to things as they are.

If a Stoic were to move into a deprived, rundown, and crime-ridden neighborhood, he would probably decide that one needs to go along in order to get along and one should not rock the boat. One should simply accept that certain gangs are in control and nothing that you can do will alter that fact. Things are probably not as bad as they seem and any good that you might attempt would not be as great as you imagine. On the other hand, if a devout Christian, a person with an Easter faith were to move into that same neighborhood, a person like Frances Perkins or Dorothy Day, she might rightly say to herself, what can I or we do with God's help to change things in this neighborhood? We should not put up with conditions or practices that abuse people and condemn them to lives of poverty, ignorance, illness and misery. Let's get to work!

So, for the believer, whether Christian or Jew, life is open to new possibilities because God can and may do wonderful and amazing new things in us and through us and around us, and if that is the case, there is every reason for hope and every reason to contend against the forces of evil. Did you hear this Psalmist this morning in Psalm 66: "Come and see what God has done: He is awesome in his deeds among mortals. God turned the sea into dry land; they passed over through the river on foot. We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. Come and hear all of you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me." Yes, for the believer, Jew or Christian, our God is an awesome God and he does amazing things that we could never have been predicted or imagined.

It makes a great deal of difference whether or not a person believes life is open-ended or closed, whether human history and human life are in the hands of impersonal fate or in the hand of a loving, responsive, powerful and personal and redeeming God.

Years ago, I heard the late John Claypool tell of a graduate student in the Psychology Department at nearby Duke University who ran an experiment years ago on two identical rats. Each rat was put into a vat of water, the one difference being that the first vat was sealed shut and the second left open at the top. The rat in the first vat had no chance to escape and swam furiously for six minutes until the helpless little creature gave up instinctively, sank to the bottom and drowned. The other rat in the second vat, seeing a possibility for escape and maybe even sensing an unlimited supply of oxygen, swam for an incredible thirty-six hours before the experiment was mercifully ended. What did the experiment reveal if anything? Does it imply that the first rat was obviously a Stoic and the second a baptized, believing rodent? No, but it might be suggesting that while we have often heard, "Where there is life, there is hope," the reverse may be equally true, "Where there is hope, there is life!"

Bible scholars may be right in saying, as some have, that Stoicism as a philosophy had an influence upon Christianity at certain points, but let me assure you that it was no Stoic who wrote to the Romans describing the dynamic force behind the universe as one who "Gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." And it was no Stoic who declared that the promises of God are open to all who believe and obey. Father Abraham was no stoic either, for Paul say of him: "Hoping against hope, Abraham believed" and thus he became the

father of many nations as promised, despite the age and seeming barrenness of both Abraham and Sarah. (Next week we will look at the Abraham/Sarah saga a bit more closely as an example of today's message.)

My friends and Christians, we are an Easter people and we proclaim as Easter faith. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave is the ultimate affirmation that reality is open-ended, and that life is subject to miraculous and new possibilities. If that empty tomb discovered by the women early on Easter morning was emptied by nothing less than the power and love of God, then the Stoic has to go back to the drawing board! The Resurrection is either history's greatest hoax or history's greatest hope! If it were a hoax, if it were a manufactured tale or a clever trick, then we Christians are as Paul says in *I Corinthians 15:19* "much to be pitied." But – if God Almighty liberated Jesus from the tomb, if God raised the dead to life, if God's love is stronger than human hatred and God's power greater than worldly strength, that is to say if Easter is true, we need not resign ourselves to things as they are – things in ourselves, in our families, in our marriages, in our churches, at our work stations, in our communities, in our nation, in our world. Though the redemptive and creative power of God there are new possibilities for each of us and all of us. And we dare not give up on ourselves or on others for to do so would be tantamount to giving up on God. A Jewish Rabbi, Anthony Holz, told me years ago that for the Jew the only true heresy is despair. "Despair," he said, "removes God from the picture and dismisses God's presence and power."

Now of course I realize that all of us are tempted at times to be stoics. Our generation knows only too well the climate of despair. Who has not felt overwhelmed by life's realities, its injustices, its cruelties, its hardships? Who has not been frustrated by our seeming inability to change things as they are or even be changed ourselves? But if Christ is risen, risen indeed, then the tombs of despair and defeatism have been eternally opened. There is hope for us and others. By God's grace new possibilities lie before us each and every day.

Some years back now a social worker from Louisville, Kentucky, was reading a case history to some of her colleagues at a regional meeting. The true story she related is one I have been unable to forget, since reading of it years ago. She told of working one day in an urban ghetto and seeing a little boy sitting on a tenement step, a heap of crumpled human flesh grossly deformed. So pathetic was the sight of this boy that she stopped to talk and learned that several months previous to this he had been hit by a car and his parents, who were fresh in from the hills of Appalachia, had no idea how to secure, much less how to afford proper medical attention. And the boy's deformity thus was the unacceptable and seeming inviable result.

Now, the social worker was so touched by this child's condition and so angry that such an injustice could occur in the city where she resided that she took the child's case as one of her own. She cut through all of the bureaucratic red tape; she found an orthopedic surgeon who would assist and medical college that would allow the needed reconstructive surgery. And through a series of operations, the child was physically returned to normal.

Two years later her office door opened and in walked a beaming and grateful young man who performed a cartwheel right in her office. The social worker thought to herself: "If I never

accomplish anything else in my life, at least I will be able to point to one person to whom I have made a difference, one positive change I helped to bring about.”

Then there was a pause in the presentation according to the article and the social worker said: “That was several years ago. Do you know where this boy is today?” Caught up in the idealism of the moment, the listening audience was probably thinking – he must be an orthopedic surgeon himself, a minister, a schoolteacher, a social worker. “No,” said the social worker, “He is now in the State Penitentiary for having committed one of the worse crimes imaginable.” And then with tears in her eyes she said: “I helped this boy learn how to walk but there was no one around to teach him where to walk.”

“See,” says the Stoic, “you can’t change things. Resign yourself to that. There is nothing you can do to change the plight of the human condition.”

“No,” the Christian retorts, “by the grace of God it is possible to teach people not only how to walk but where to walk and why to walk.” Maybe we will never do all that we should or could do but we can certainly do more than we have done. Maybe at this moment you are working or living in a seemingly hopeless situation, maybe your dreams have been dashed, your future has been destroyed or your self-esteem driven into the dust, but on this third Sunday in Eastertide I am here to tell you that if Christ is risen from the grave, if God can open tombs and bring what is dead to life, surely God can change us as individuals; surely God can transform our homes, our marriages, our families, our work stations. Surely God can revitalize our dead churches, revamp our human institutions, restore our crumbling educational system, revive our nation’s morality and restore its values, alter our communities, reconcile our competing interest groups, and redeem each and all of us. The empty tomb proclaims that nothing is beyond the realm of God’s love and power. Yes indeed, if Christ is risen, then you and I can live with hope and we can take on all kinds of human problems because we dare to believe that God can do new and miraculous things in us and through us.

The Resurrection, my friends, is the ultimate demonstration of what God has been trying to communicate to his people for centuries, and that is that “Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those that love him.” Christ is risen! That being so, let us then move forward in hope and in confidence toward the promises and blessings that our God is anxious to bestow. Amen.

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¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,

¹⁷as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

²³Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.