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Resurrection: Love Conquers Death

Dale Launderville OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, dlaunderville@csbsju.edu

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“Resurrection: Love Conquers Death”
Dale Lauderville, OSB

When a loved one is on his or her final journey home to God, we who keep vigil recognize that a momentous event is happening before us. As believers, we live in hope that this journey will bring the loved one to a better place. We regard the dying process as the one by which a believer is born into eternal life. As communication with the loved one fades, it is as if a veil descends between the dying person and those gathered around. This fading of communication marks the transformation of the loved one’s earthly body into a heavenly one.

We Christians can face death with confidence because we believe that Jesus Christ has conquered death. After Jesus died on the cross, he was buried, only to rise on the third day. The disciples were persuaded that Jesus had gone against all odds and risen from the dead. They had seen the tomb was empty, and many of them testified that the resurrected Christ had appeared to them. By passing through death and rising to new life, Jesus overcame death not only for his individual body but also for those who would join themselves to him. St. Paul explains to believers that they have been baptized into Christ’s death so that they might be raised to new life (Rom 6:3-4). The victory that Christ has won for us weaves itself into the ups-and-downs of our lives.

A family that keeps vigil with a dying father recognizes that he symbolizes in a unique way their bonds with one another. A father lays down his life for his family in numerous ways. This self-sacrificial love imitates the love that God shows for us when Jesus dies for us. Such love does not end in death but breaks forth into a new, more abundant life. Self-giving love brings new life not only to those who receive it but also to the one who gives it. A family that honors a dying father gives thanks for his love that has brought them to life repeatedly.

As Jesus on the cross breathes his last, the Roman soldier nearby proclaims: “Truly, this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). The way Jesus approached death seems to have triggered this awareness in the soldier. He understands who Jesus is more profoundly than the disciples who have been with him for three years. When Jesus rises from the dead, the truth of the centurion’s proclamation will be evident to others. Now his testimony resounds through the generations wherever the Gospel of Mark is read.

This claim that Jesus is the Son of God contradicted the foundational belief of monotheistic Judaism because it appears to make him a rival to the one God. Jesus’ admission before the high priest that he is “the son of the Blessed One” (Mark 14:61) opens the way for the high priest to charge him with blasphemy. Jesus elaborates on the high priest’s identification of him by saying: “You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). When Jesus dies and rises, he defeats the power of death and stands ready to bring this victory to full expression when he returns at the end of time. Those invested in the Jewish monotheistic views of their time would be much slower to accept the identification of Jesus as the Son of God. To do so, they would need to reinterpret their exclusive fidelity to YHWH (“the Lord”; Deut 6:4) in light of Jesus’ dying and rising. Christians would later identify themselves as followers of Christ by proclaiming that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3), a statement they could make only by the presence of the Holy Spirit within them.

When Christians hear the saying, “You are dust and to dust you shall return,” they believe that the death and decomposition of the physical body point to a more profound transformation of this body into a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:42-44, 51-57). Believers can take courage from St. Paul’s words: “Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been

poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This same Spirit leads us to cry out, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:16). As children of God and co-heirs with Christ, the life given to us is not confined to our individual bodies but rather is part of a cosmic whole. St. Paul explains that the sufferings that Christians must undergo between Jesus’ resurrection and his second coming are minuscule in comparison to “the glory about to be revealed for us” (Rom 8:18). He goes on to explain that the sufferings of all the cosmos are a form of birth pangs that will result in a new and glorious freedom—a new creation.

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