

This world and the next?

Acts 4:32-35
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Several years ago, we did an adult study at First Congregational Church entitled, *Jesus in the movies*. We reviewed a half dozen "Jesus" movies and examined the varying ways Jesus has been portrayed in film. The films we viewed and discussed included: Franco Zeffereilli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, *Godspell*, and *Jesus of Montreal*. You will find some very different portraits of Jesus among these movies!

In one film, you will find Jesus the superhero -- strong, assertive, self-assured, powerful -- but not very believable ... not a real Jesus, but a comic book Jesus.

In another, you will find Jesus the moral teacher -- solemn and aloof, with cold blue eyes and stern demeanor, spouting platitudes ... a Jesus distant and out of touch, not a real Jesus either.

The Jesus of another film is a self-absorbed mystic, so preoccupied with his own internal spiritual struggles that he is no good to anybody, not even himself!

Godspell portrays Jesus as a playful companion, awakening wonder and delight and love among his friends.

Another film poprtrays Jesus as an intense young man, a fiery prophet, a restless critic of the established elite, and a champion and friend of the poor and weak and powerless.

The last film we viewed shows us a Jesus who is a man just like the rest of us ... and yet a man who subtly and powerfully transforms the lives of people around him by accepting them and challenging them, by telling and showing them the truth, by giving himself in love to heal them and empower them. I think this portrait of Jesus comes closest to the Jesus I know from the gospels.

But none of the films do very well with Easter! All of the movies about Jesus fail to portray the resurrection in a convincing and moving way. It's understandable because resurrection is certainly something that is beyond the limits of our experience. And yet resurrection is not beyond the limits of our imagination!

I'm not suggesting that resurrection is imaginary, but that it requires imagination to grasp what reaches beyond our usual expectation. Unfortunately these movies lack this kind of imagination! The portrayal of resurrection in these films is either hokey and unrealistic, or resurrection is reinterpreted to refer to the "immortality" of ideas and ideals, or to Jesus "living on" in our hearts. None of the films is able to deal with the extraordinary miracle of the resurrection of Jesus in a straightforward and realistic fashion.

But it makes a difference how we understand the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the defining event of our faith, the event that brings the Christian church into existence. The resurrection of Jesus is the focal point of New Testament belief: the God in whom we put our faith is the God who raised Jesus from death.

It makes a difference how we understand the resurrection of Jesus, and, even more, it makes a difference what the resurrection of Jesus changes about us. Our religion is defined by Easter: if our view of the resurrection of Jesus is hokey and unrealistic and unconvincing, our religion will be hokey and unrealistic and unconvincing. On the other hand, if resurrection simply means the persistence of nice ideas, our religion is really no more than a celebration of ourselves.

But are these the only options? Or is it possible that we encounter through our faith a God who is real, a God who is there -- engaging us, reaching out to us, loving us, transforming us? Is it possible that our religion puts us in touch with the living God?

Not all religion is the same. Not all religions are alike, and not all the varying expressions of faith within one religion, like the varying forms of faith within the Christian religion, are alike.

Some religion is about escape. Some religious faith is about using religious devotion as a way to forget the problems and difficulties of this life. This kind of faith looks forward to the next world because it is tired of this one.

Some religion is about pacifying people. Some religious faith is about comforting poor people with the news that they will have riches in heaven, comforting oppressed and weak people with the news that the last will be first, comforting grieving people with a promise of life after death. This kind of faith looks forward to the next world because this one isn't working.

But resurrection is not about escape, and it is not about pacifying people. Resurrection is about transformation. Resurrection religion, resurrection faith, is about transformation, about transforming this world, not about leaving it behind.

Acts 4:32-35 describes the mood and activities of the followers of Jesus in the aftermath of the resurrection. The apostles are witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus with great power and this powerful witness has two results among the people: *the group of believers was one in mind and heart ... and there was no one in the group who was in need.*

The group of believers was one in mind and heart ... The resurrection of Jesus created real community. Resurrection is about more than the personal promise of life after death. It's about more than removing the sting of death itself, about pacifying believers in the face of this great enemy. It's about God's victory over the power of death in all its forms, God's victory over all that divides us and pulls us apart and destroys us.

Resurrection is about restoring the integrity of creation. Resurrection is about restoring to humanity its original purpose. It's about bringing us together and making the renewal of real community possible. The resurrection of Jesus makes us new people -- not stuck with old ways, old loyalties, old feuds, old divisions. There is no more us and them, no more take care of myself and mine, no more protect myself against what you might try to take from me. *They all shared everything they had ...* Easter faith is about community, a faith that is not just my own business.

There was no one in the group who was in need ... Easter religion is as much about this life as about the next! No one was in need! They took care of each other. They took care of each other in very practical ways. They fed hungry people, clothed naked

people, gave shelter to homeless people, gave money to poor people, befriended lonely people, prayed for sick people. Their joy in the resurrection of Jesus did not lead them to look beyond the needs of this life, but to pay attention to such needs all the more!

It is significant that the gospels tell us that Jesus after he was raised from death took care to let people touch his wounds and to watch him eat. The gospels tell the story of a bodily resurrection, not just a spiritual resurrection. Neither Jews nor Christians make a sharp distinction between soul and body. For both Jews and Christians a human being is both soul and body, intertwined and inseparable, one. So resurrection is resurrection of the whole person, spirit and body.

But in that case, resurrection is not about immortality. The idea of the immortality of the soul is escapism, a way for us to imagine that death is not as final as it seems. Resurrection is not about the immortality of the soul, but about transformation, about the power of God to make all things new, including ourselves.

Think of what that means! It means that this life is not irrelevant or unimportant. We don't merely bide our time doing *whatever* until the next world comes. The "next" world begins now as the resurrection of Jesus transforms who we are and what we do. People who believe in the resurrection make a difference now. Bodies matter, people matter, this life matters. We do God's work when we work to overcome illness and oppression, indifference and injustice, poverty and loneliness.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus makes us into people who care about each other in very specific and practical ways. We do not merely look forward to the next world, but celebrate the ways God is already beginning to transform this one. The most powerful evidence of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus will be in our lives ... in our transformed and transforming lives.