Life Overflowing: An Open Future

“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”  I Corinthians 15:54-58

The Ticking Clock

Always laboring under deadlines can be the pits. We work feverishly, grimly aware of the clock ticking the seconds away. The future feels threatening, hanging over our heads like a dark cloud. Will we run out of time?

Such is our fallen condition as human beings beset by sin, death and the power of the devil. As hard as we try to deny it, we are finite creatures of space and time. There’s an invisible expiration date stamped on each one of us. Time is against us. Sooner than we realize, the end of our days catches up to us.

Living in this way, our possibilities are limited—our future is closed. The Big Deadline relentlessly rushes toward us. “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day.” (ELW #632)

Resetting the Clocks

But with Easter a new reality bursts into our time-bound lives. By raising up the crucified Jesus, God intervenes in the inexorable march of time-toward-death. The Resurrection is like Daylight Savings Time—we “spring ahead,” into God’s surprising future. Christ frees us from the tyranny of time.
When Jesus arose from the grave, God opened up an eternity of tomorrows—for Jesus, for all who belong to Jesus, and indeed for the whole creation. The Resurrection means that the future is fundamentally open—not closed. We come to see what, or rather Who, stands at the end of all things: the risen Christ who has death behind him, once and for all.

This, too, is part of the “life overflowing” that God graciously bestows upon us. God’s abundant gifts include the gift of time. The future comes back to us as a gift, not a burden—it is now, in Christ, a fundamentally open future.

What Comfort This Sweet Sentence Brings

We who live our days in the valley of the shadow of death find boundless comfort in the promise of the Resurrection. Because Jesus Christ is the “first fruits of those who have died” (I Cor. 15:20) we believe that all who die “in Christ” will also be raised by God who is making all things new (Revelation 21:5).

What would it be like not to live in this hope? Death would be The End. The grave would continually haunt us. The future would remain closed—a bleak “deadline” (accent on dead!) that would suck all the joy out of life.

But now, in the Resurrection of our Lord, we glimpse our own promised future. We mourn our loved ones who pass from us—but not as people who have no hope. We believe in a God who “plays for keeps,” from whose unfathomable love not even earthly death can separate us (Romans 8:38f).

New Creation Emerging from the Tomb

But the open future God lavishes upon us in Christ, the Risen One, isn’t just good news for our personal lives. There is a corporate dimension to God’s promised future. Easter is what makes God’s mission alive—calling forth our best gifts, our time, our substance, our passions and abilities.

This might seem counterintuitive. If God has taken care of our future, why should we care about what happens in the meantime? Some wags accuse Christians of being “so heavenly-minded as to be of no earthly use!”

This gets it all backwards, though. In I Corinthians 15, Paul speaks in one breath of the victory over death Christ has won….and in the very next breath calls us to excel “in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (I Cor. 15:58)
Bishop N.T. Wright of the Anglican Diocese of Durham (England) puts it this way: “When Jesus rose again God’s whole new creation emerged from the tomb, introducing a world full of new potential and possibility. Indeed, precisely because part of that new possibility is for human beings themselves to be revived and renewed, the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t leave us as passive, helpless spectators. We find ourselves lifted up, set on our feet, given new breath in our lungs, and commissioned to go and make new creation happen in the world.”

Present-Tense Jesus

People and congregations who’ve been grabbed by the Resurrection-reset of the clock start talking in strange ways. No longer is there even a hint of “good old (departed, absent) Jesus.” If we wear WWJD bracelets (as I mentioned in last month’s column), we know the letters stand for “What WILL Jesus Do?” That’s because Jesus is alive and well, right here, right now—alive in the Word, alive in the Sacraments, alive in all people who are “in Christ.”

So, though it makes some of us older Lutherans nervous, we speak in present-tense terms about God. People stop, look and listen—often!—and realize that God is up to something in our world. “God sightings” are reported, and “thank you, Jesus” is a prayer regularly uttered.

Can you see what a huge difference this makes for how we think, talk and act on God’s mission in the world? This mission sinks its hooks into us, it is real—the mission of naming and claiming all the ways God in Jesus Christ is making all things new, starting with you and me and everyone else who hungers to hear the Gospel. We think, speak and act in surprising ways because the Easter Surprise has dawned upon us. Because Jesus didn’t stay dead, the future—our future—is fundamentally open.

When my wife Joy and I visited India last autumn, we caught glimpses of this “present-tense Jesus” and his impact on the exuberant disciples of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church. Many of them are converts (or children of converts) from Hinduism, a religion that teaches a closed, cyclical view of time. The vast majority of Christ-followers were formerly Dalits (sometimes called “untouchables”) who were at the bottom of the social ladder in India, often stuck in dead-end jobs. No wonder the message of Jesus Christ crucified and risen is so enlivening and attractive for them! No wonder the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church—already India’s largest Lutheran church body—is growing!

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But the risen Christ’s open future inspires mission efforts closer to home, too. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America program unit for Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission (EOCM) just announced that it will share the startup costs for a promising mission start in the Frazee-Vergas area. In partnership with Immanuel Lutheran Church of Osage, Pr. Phil Johnson will soon “work the soil,” visit prospective members, offer worship opportunities and plant a new mission outpost in our synod. Praise God for this and so many other mission ventures in our midst—all because “Christ has died. Christ is risen. [And] Christ will come again!”

In the Risen Christ,

Bishop Larry Wohlrabe
Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God’s work. Our hands.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Tell about a time when you labored under a deadline. How did that affect your attitude, creativity and energy?
2. What difference does it make to you that, in Christ, the future is open? What difference does it make to your congregation?
3. How might our church’s life be different if we all spoke more regularly about Jesus in present-tense terms?
4. What mission venture is your congregation ready to embrace in this season of Easter?

This is the fourth of twelve articles on the theme Life Overflowing—an ongoing exercise in missional theology for the disciples and congregations of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod during the year 2010. These articles may be used for personal reflection; they may also serve as background study or a devotional resource for congregation councils and other parish leadership groups.