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Ezra 7:27–28, NRSV, edited.

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

Three Easters: *The hand of the Lord my God was on me.*

I want to talk about three stories concerning the return from exile, three stories of resurrection, three stories about a return from bondage and from spiritual death, that is: three Easter stories. The first is the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. The second is the resurrection of Christ. The third we will get to.

There are two books of the Bible, in the middle of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, that concern the return of the exiled Jews from Babylon. They are the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were one book in the original Hebrew, and were not divided into two books by Christians until the fourth century A.D. It is these two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, that contain almost all we know about the years that followed the return from exile of the Israelites. Remember that around 597 B.C., Babylon captured Jerusalem and sent many of the Israelites deep into the kingdom of Babylon. This was the key, defining calamity that struck

the Chosen People. They had fallen into corrupt lives and into worshipping the pagan, human-like gods of their polytheistic neighbors. God was punishing them by allowing the Babylonians to destroy the Temple and then ship many of their leading citizens into exile. It was perhaps 550 miles “as the crow flies” and 900 miles – by foot – by the route they had to take. The leader of the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar, saw this as a way of keeping the Israelites from organizing themselves and rising against their conquerors. These were the educated people, the priests of the temple, skilled folks, the nobility - anyone who was influential. It’s estimated that 25% of the population was exiled, leaving perhaps 100,000 people remaining in the Holy Land. But in about 538 B.C., at least 40 years later – although most say it was more like 70 years - the Persians conquered the Babylonians. There was now a Persian king on the throne in Babylon, Cyrus. He had control of Israel, and he thought that happy people who had their own homeland and their own religion would be less likely to rise in defiance. Also, Israel had fallen into disarray, with farms and buildings not being maintained, and no walls around the city, and no Temple to pray in. Certainly, a revitalized city would be more valuable of an asset. So, he set the captives from Israel free. Depending on the timeline we accept as historically accurate – and 70 years is probably a better estimate – those who returned were descendants of those who

were exiled. They had, to a large degree, lost their cultural identity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us what happened when the Israelites returned home.

The people returned in three waves, spanning several decades. The first wave was led by Zerubbabel, a descendent of King David. He oversaw the rebuilding of the Temple. The second wave was led by Ezra, a high priest, and a rigidly religious man, and he saw himself as reviving the people morally. The third wave was led by Nehemiah, the “cupbearer” to the Persian king. He brought food and drink to the king; he was the first to taste everything, and so he protected the king from being poisoned. He became a trusted advisor. Nehemiah’s goal was to rebuild the protective walls around Jerusalem. Many of the men who had remained in Israel, as well as those who had lived in exile, had married pagan women from surrounding tribes. Nehemiah wanted this practice stopped. Ezra demanded that these foreign wives be abandoned. This seems cruel to us, but Ezra was trying to reclaim the spiritual focus of his people.

The stories of Ezra and Nehemiah reverberate with the hand of God working to restore the Chosen People to their land and their faith. Here are the first four verses of the Book of Ezra:

1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

² *“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”*

Note that *“the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia”*. Now here is Ezra offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God causing the Persian king to free the people so they could rebuild their Temple.

²⁷ *Blessed be the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.*

The powerful hand of God runs through the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Here are verses 8 and 9 of the first chapter of Nehemiah:

⁸ *Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’*

This is part of a prayer offered this time by Nehemiah before the king of Persia allows him to return to Israel and rebuild the city. Nehemiah is repeating God’s long-standing promise that if the people return to their faith, they will be restored. Ezra and Nehemiah together represent the combined theological and

practical sides of restoration. These two books tell us that we must look within ourselves and change whatever needs to be brought into alignment with the ways of God, but that it also takes actions on our part. We must be proactive in reaching out into the world to restore our place as visible believers, as those who follow in the footsteps of a kind, loving, and forgiving Jesus Christ.

We will turn to Easter in a moment. But first, my sister was four years ahead of me in school. She was and is enormously gifted. As a student, I walked in her footsteps. I went to the same college as she did. My getting a Ph.D. in part inspired me to do so. When my sister was in high school, and I was in grammar school, she applied to be a foreign exchange student. As I recall, there was a period when she knew she was going to go to some foreign nation, but she had not yet been given her assignment. She would go wherever that was and live with a family; she would attend school with students in that country. As I recall, her assignment came by paper letter, and I know my parents waited to hear.

This event happened to impact my father in a way that I would consider spiritual. When he was a young man, he served as a Sargent in the Marines in the Pacific in World War II. He was put in charge of a combat unit. After the war, my father met my mother. He was still a Marine and still wearing a uniform, despite having to walk with a cane from having been hit with shrapnel. My father

attended church with the rest of us every Sunday, and he also gave of his time to the church. At the time, he managed a car and tire shop, and he would occasionally help the church out with car tires and mechanical repairs. To me, he was the perfect Christian. But because of my sister's time as a foreign exchange student, his faith grew even stronger. I'll get back to this.

The return from exile in the Hebrew Scriptures is linked powerfully to Easter. Both speak of restoration, of new beginnings, of rising from death. The returnees from exile experienced a spiritual and cultural resurrection. Easter Sunday represents a spiritual if not cultural resurrection. This notion of being reborn is what binds us most strongly to our Old Testament roots. The earliest Christians had no New Testament. For several hundred years, the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, Revelation, and other manuscripts were hand copied and passed around, but there was no compiled canon, no official New Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures rooted people in the ancient story of God. Easter, the resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate return from exile story. We were no longer held in spiritual bondage because Jesus was no longer held in physical bondage.

We all know the traditional Easter passages from the Gospels. Here is a compressed version from the Gospel of Luke, starting with the end of Chapter 23, and continuing in Chapter 24:

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. **24** But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.

During the time of Jesus, only very wealthy people were buried in tombs cut from rock. Jesus would certainly not normally have been a man who would have been honored in this way. But a man named Joseph donated a tomb. This was no temporary gift, as many people have thought. A person was typically left in the tomb for about a year, laid out on a ledge cut from the rock inside the tomb. Then when all that was left were bones, they were placed in a box called an ossuary. This box was then placed deeper back in the tomb so that the ledge could be used for someone else. The point is that once a member of one family had used a tomb, only members of that family could ever use the tomb again. Remember what was said about this tomb cut in stone: *where no one had ever yet been laid*. So, it was an expensive, permanent gift. No other family could ever

use that tomb. After Jesus had been in the tomb for some days, with a huge, circular stone rolled through a trench and placed blocking the entrance, a handful of women visit the tomb. It is Mary Magdalene, a woman named Joanna who is a follower of Jesus, and another woman named Mary, who is the mother of some follower of Jesus named James. Two angels tell them that Jesus is no longer among the dead. He has undergone a *physical* transformation.

Here is another piece of the resurrection story, from the Gospel of John, after Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. Again, this is heavily edited:

21 ²*Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.* ³*Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

⁴*Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.* ⁵*Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No."* ⁶*He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.* ⁷*That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord."* ⁸*The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.*

⁹*When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."* ¹¹*So Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish. Although there were so many, the net was not torn. They knew it was the Lord.* ¹³*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.*

Depending on how you count them, this is one of eight to twelve appearances that Jesus makes after he is resurrected. It's intriguing in that at first, the Apostles do not recognize Jesus. Several of them are out on a boat in the Galilee, which is in

truth a lake, and they catch nothing. The sun rises, and they see a man on the shore, who calls them “children” and asks if they have caught anything. They say no, and this man tells them to move their net to the right side of the boat. This time, the net is bulging. It takes several of them to drag the fish ashore. It is “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*”, who is the author of the Gospel, John, who finally recognizes Jesus. Then we are told that “*Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them.*” We see that Jesus performs a miracle for them, before they even realize who he is. He then reconnects with them as the Son of God. This underscores that Jesus has undergone a *spiritual* transition: he is glorified now, a heavenly leader for all times, not just the man who taught his disciples how to spread the Word. He has done more than simply rise from the dead physically. He is offering all humanity entry into a new Kingdom, a new life.

I said up front that I wanted to talk about three sorts of resurrections. The first is the restoration of the exiles to Israel. The second is the resurrection of Christ. The third has to do with a revival today. We are all aware that the church has been growing in Africa and Asia for many years. But the church is growing here, too. This small Methodist church has seen attendance rise sharply in just a year or so. There is a noticeable increase in young people attending church in the United States. This includes traditional church structures, and alternative

churches in places like abandoned theatres, peoples' homes, and coffee shops. There is a rapid growth in the digital church world, with people watching online services, and importantly, taking part in live, interactive church streams. Like in the days of ancient Babylon and in the days of the Roman Empire, the world has become a scary place. We have learned just how far we have wandered from being caring, respectful, and forgiving people. There is now a rejection of the brutal, destructive, vicious world of social media where people make use of being anonymous to be cruel and hurtful. This is causing people to view their spiritual lives as an integral part of their worldview. The COVID crisis caused people to realize that they are not in control of the universe: church attendance has been surging since the end of COVID, which forced many people to stop attending. Interestingly, it is small churches, not the large mega, destination churches that are seeing the sharpest growth. In the U.S. there has been a sharp increase in Bible sales. All in all, there is indeed a revival, a spiritual resurrection.

Back to my sister Mary. One day, the letter came in the mail. She was about to learn what nation she was going to. Mind you, this wasn't really that long after World War II, just a couple of decades. I don't remember many of the details, but I think we all stood around as Mary opened it. She read the name of the country: *Japan*. I vividly remember looking over at my father, to see how he

would respond. He never talked about the war. He was a gentle man and a gentleman. He looked passive for a moment, no expression. We were all silent. Then, slowly, he nodded. He smiled. He either said this at that moment or later to my mother and me. But my father said something like: "It's beautiful. It was a horrible war. I killed Japanese people. And now my daughter is going there to study and live. They're our friends."

My father showed me in that moment that we can change. We can embrace old enemies as dear friends. We can rise again and be new people. My father was a Christian. But after my sister left for Japan as an exchange student, I noticed a change in him. He didn't just sit in church and politely pay attention. He was truly present. He had my mother buy him a rosary, and I keep his rosary on my desk at home to this day. The exiles found their way back to God and to their land. Jesus rose from a human death to be the symbol of our ability to rise from spiritual death at any time. The Church as a whole and this church are growing. I'm not surprised. I witnessed my father leave an old world behind and discover a subtly deeper but very critical trust in God, as well as a love for all those made in the image of God.