

# *Death Has No Purchase*

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A sermon preached by Ms. Lee Cheek, Licensed Lay Preacher  
Grace Episcopal Church, Great Barrington, MA,  
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“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, **on earth as it is in Heaven.**” Amen.

*“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. **And I don't mind.** Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. **I just want to do God's will.** And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! **And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything.** I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!”<sup>1</sup>*

You may recognize these words as the ending of Dr. Martin Luther King's final public speech in Memphis, Tennessee, 50 years ago this month, April 3, 1968. The very next day he was assassinated before he was able to lead the black sanitation workers and their supporters in a march to protest the unjust exploitation of their labor with unequal pay and mistreatment by the city.

How in the world could he be so happy when things were so terribly bad? Did the prospect of death have no purchase on his happiness? What kept him speaking the truth about who gets thrown under the bus when the politics of racism, poverty and war animate people? What was the source of his vision of this Promised Land that he gave his life to?

Of course, he was speaking of Moses, who led the Israelites out of their enslavement in the Egyptian Empire. God commanded Moses to tell the Israelites that if they got on the move and left Egypt he would provide a real home for them, a promised land of plenty, for all. This imagery proved powerful to enslaved Africans in America, as well as to their descendants during the Civil Rights struggle who had been experiencing decades of the new chains of slavery since the Emancipation.

About 2000 years ago, another young man, a Jewish teacher, challenged the systems of unequal power and wealth that benefited the few at the expense of many. He, too, was murdered, in this case by the torture of public crucifixion used by those powers to install fear in the body of every observer. The public lynchings were used in the U.S. to undermine the assimilation of former black slaves into a life “equal under the law” as provided in our 15<sup>th</sup> amendment. These terrorist warnings to blacks to stay out of the Promised Land lasted until 1981.

But this morning, we are focusing on the aftermath of the lynching that took place in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. It is three days since the burial of this victim. Astonishing reports about an empty tomb are flying. Some of the disciples of this victim have holed up in the Upper Room.

Today's reading begins after two disciples have tried try to describe their stroll to the village of Emmaus with a man they did not recognize as Jesus until he broke bread with them. An unexpected guest arrives.

Imagine, after his arrest, trial, execution, and desertion of friends, Jesus softly and gently arrives in that Upper Room and says simply, “Shalom. Peace be with you.” **“It's okay”.**

The disciples are startled and terrified and think they were seeing a ghost, unable to fit all the bits of testimony that had heard up to this point. In Luke's telling, Jesus convinces them that he is not a ghost by showing his wounded hands and feet. He invites them to touch and see. He asks for something to eat. He then opened their minds to understand the record of what God has been doing for all humans since the beginning of time—the record of all the hopes for unity with the only God in God's Land of Plenty for all.

Much of what has been written about what the resurrection has been a thin and ultimately uninteresting discussion to prove or disprove something about God, Jesus, or the Christian religion. What we do know is this: **the resurrection of Jesus occurred within a world built on the assumption that the dead stay dead, and that victory belongs to the powerful.** A *resurrected* body claims that the last word is *not* left to death, nor to the powers that use the threat of death for their purposes.

What I think is more important to understand is that Jesus entered into a *new manner of existence where death has no purchase*. His return from that experience has opened a new field of consciousness for everyone else since then—a world where death has no ultimate sting. What a shock. ***Grace has gone wild.***

N.T. Wright says that the resurrection is “not an absurd event within the old world, but the symbol and starting point of the ***new world.***”<sup>2</sup> In other words, “Jesus does not remain a wonderful idea inside his disciples' minds and hearts.”<sup>3</sup> I know and you know that a wonderful idea would not be enough for the disciples to risk everything and go for broke telling everyone about it. His new body made something new quite real for them.

As we know most Jews of that time did believe in an eventual resurrection, a resurrection *for all* that would take place at the end of history, when unity *for everyone* with God, would be complete. Jesus never repudiated this.

This leads us to surmise that Jesus was resurrected into God's Kingdom simply *before everyone else*. This enabled the disciples to see what they were unable to see when they were with him before his death. At last, their eyes were un-clouded by the culture of fear.

Since 2008 I've been keeping a list of phrases about God's Kingdom that have struck me so true as to give me hope. I invite you to sit back as I read a few of these that I've collected them from scripture, hymnody, experience, and reflection. See if any resonate with your heart. You might use the journal you received from Pastor Janet to start your own list.

### ***Kingdom of God***

It exists.

It's wider than I thought.

It has no boundaries

No one is excluded entry.

I don't have to earn my place in it.

It is given to me.

Its basis is love.

There are no victims.

There is no rivalry.

There is enough for all.

It is full of gratuitous forgiveness.

It is soaked with prodigal love.

It is never-ending.

Everything is included.  
No one is left out.  
There is no expulsion.  
There is no dis-order. There is only One Loving Originator.  
It is not threatened by human evil.  
It is the destiny of all.  
When we come as we are, we are there.  
It's where you know you belong.  
It's where everybody is somebody.

**This.** This is why I come here to gather with you each week. I want to be in the company of you who dare to hope in a New Creation such as this. I want to sing with you of a God who has reassured us that the Promised Land does exist where we are living right now.

I come to be provoked into humility and wonder by **your** forgiving and loving witness **to me**—that even on earth as in heaven, there is indeed a **realm of love for the other and solidarity with the suffering.**

I want to live from the hope of this New Creation, and I know it's not going to be easy. The powers are strong even as they are not ultimate. Wright says that Christian spirituality is learning to live in that new creation, and that Christian ethics is learning to let the power of that new creation shape your life.<sup>4</sup> That's what Dr. King, and so many others have done before us.

In his book *Surprised by Hope*, Bishop Wright says

“believing in the resurrection of Jesus ceases to be a matter of enquiring about an odd event in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and becomes a matter of **rediscovering hope** in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word.”<sup>5</sup>

Christ is risen! A different world-view is now possible!<sup>6</sup> Let us proclaim together:

Alleluia, Christ is risen! **The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

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<sup>1</sup> Washington, James Melvin. editor. *A Testament of Hope*. HarperOne, 1986, p. 279. Audio may be found by searching the web.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope*. HarperOne, 2008, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, “Jesus’ resurrection was as shocking then as it is now,”

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/aug03/Christianity-resurrection-religion>.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> This sermon was guided and infused not only by Bishop Wright’s reflections, but also by Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR, in *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2008), especially this statement (p. 63): “The Christian vocation keeps on being a vocation until the world is made new in the light of the risen One. The cloud of witnesses, saints, martyrs, mystics and reformers, those who have been transformed in varying degrees by what has been revealed, accompany all believers in their experience of the resurrection effect.”