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The Risen Body of Christ: Living into Resurrection

Resurrection is a strange thing to me. I mean more than just the fact that a man rose from the dead, which is even more than simply strange. But the fact that resurrection itself is such an integral part of our faith. Because while Jesus' defeat over the grave, God's ability to raise Christ's dead body up and out of the tomb, so that he might be and speak and eat with his disciples, is miraculous and wonderful, what does it really matter to us today? How does it affect the way we live and move and have our being here and now. It may give us hope for the resurrection we are promised at the end, but what about TODAY, what about here and now?!

If you were to visit Italy, throughout the country, you might stumble across a Nicholas Green school, or piazza, or even an amphitheater. You might purchase an espresso at one of the many Nicholas Green chain coffee shops, or take a stroll down a path of the same name. Because, his name is everywhere, and it has been for the past 30 years. Which may be surprising considering Nicholas Green was a child from Northern California. But, in the early 90's Nicholas and his family; his mother Maggie, father Reg, and younger sister Eleanor, all visited Europe for a family vacation. Nicholas was 7 and Eleanor was 4. After spending time in the Swiss Alps, Rome, and Pompeii, the four made their way to Sicily by way of an Italian highway. It was late at night, around 10:30 PM. As Reg, the father, suddenly noticed a car following uncomfortably close behind them. Reg tried to move over and slow the car allowing the other vehicle to pass, but they didn't. Instead they pulled up alongside the Green's and began shouting at them in Italian. They yelled as if signaling them to pull over and then began waving a pistol in the air. Fearful for the safety of his family, Reg sped up trying to get away. And no sooner did he hear a shot ring out and saw glass flying everywhere. Turning to check, the kids seemed to remain peacefully asleep in their booster seats. And so Reg continued until he found a police car and pulled over for help.

When Reg pulled over he went to open the back door of the car, only to realize something terrible had happened to Nicholas. Unable to wake or move their son, the authorities had him rushed to the hospital where he remained in a coma, after having endured a shot to the back of the head. News quickly spread, many newspapers reporting the incident as "our shame." And just as quickly as the news spread, so did the people's responses. Strangers converged on their hotel, looking on in empathy and solidarity, coming up to them outside of the hospital to relay their condolences, and share any kind of comfort they might be able to find or muster. And after 2 days in the hospital the doctors relayed the tragic news to Nicholas' family that he was brain dead, to which Maggie, his mom, blurted out, "shouldn't we donate his organs?"

In the year before Nicholas Green's death organ donation rates in Italy were about six donations a year for every one million people in the country! It was astoundingly low. Many chalked it up to a lack of knowledge and organization around both brain death and organ donation. But, on October 1, 2024, two days after arriving in the hospital, Nicholas Green was taken off life support, and his heart, liver, kidneys, pancreas cells, and corneas were donated to seven people around the country. A choice and an act that, as Maggie his mom put it, allowed them to find some goodness out of all the tragic nothingness of this horrific event. As newspapers and TV reporters descended on the story Italy began to see organ donation, not as something strange any longer, but now as a gesture of great courage, hope, and love! In fact today,

Italy's organ donation rate is one of the most successful in Europe. And, only five years after Nicholas died, Italy switched to being an opt-out rather than an opt-in organ donation system. The Nicholas Effect, which is what they call it, has been described as quote, changing "the national consciousness" around organ donation.

After eating a piece of fish and thus proving to his disciples that he was indeed a resurrected body, and not a ghost, Jesus says to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." Because the thing is, resurrection only matters in and as much as we choose to take part in it, to recognize it, and share it with others. Otherwise, what's it all for? Here Jesus begins to open the minds of the disciples to what it means to become the Risen body of Christ, not just then and there, but here and now!

Two years after Nicholas's death, a sculptor created a memorial for him in his hometown of Bodega Bay, California. It's called The Children's Bell Tower. The bells, of which there are 140, were donated, for the most part, by Italians from schools, churches, and ships, there is even a cowbell. The biggest bell on the tower was made by the Marinelli family, who have been making bells in Italy since at least the 14th century. The bell has Nicholas's name on it as well as the names of the seven people who received his organs. And, in 2018, Nicholas's sister got married under the tower, knowing she wanted him to be with her on that very important day. And as she heard the bells tinkling throughout the ceremony, she knew he was. Even today, Nicholas' heart continues to beat in the chest of a woman, who has now turned 50, thanks to the Green's generosity. A woman, who was able to give birth because of his gift, and who named her child Nicholas in his honor.

As the Resurrected Jesus approaches his disciples he says to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Because resurrection is a strange thing. It's not what we expect. We expect when someone dies they are dead. We expect when our world has been disrupted and our lives upended we will never find a way forward. We expect when everything feels out of control that chaos will rule forever. Which is why resurrection is strange, because resurrection says "NO!" There is hope, and grace, and love even, maybe especially, amidst death, and pain, and chaos. Because that is the way of God, to bring life and love into the world and into our lives, in whatever way possible, whether miraculous like bringing a dead man to life, or mundane like eating a meal with friends. Jesus Christ may have risen from the dead over 2,000 years ago and ascended into heaven 40 days later, but the risen life and body of Christ it's still here because it's you and it's me. So, wherever you find yourself on this journey we call life, I pray you might find resurrection, in something as selfless and life giving as organ donation or even just sharing a piece of fish or breaking bread with friends. Knowing you are part of resurrection, you are part of the divine miracle, which is love in spite of selfishness and life instead of death here and now, forever and for always!