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Welcoming the resurrection gift of peace

John Dear | Apr. 3, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Easter invites us to welcome the risen Christ?s resurrection gift of peace with all our hearts.

?My peace I give you; my peace I leave with you,? the nonviolent Jesus told his friends the night before he was executed. By all accounts, when he appeared to them that Sunday, he said to them over and over again, ?Peace be with you.? He comes back and shares his peace with us. He offers it to us as a gift. He wants us to live in his peace. Indeed, he lives on in us when we welcome his peace and make it real within and around us.

Easter is the time to welcome this great gift of Christ?s peace with all our hearts. As Easter people, we take that gift of peace seriously, and make it part of our lives, and do what we can to share that resurrection gift with others, even the whole world.

But as we look around at our hearts, our lives and our world, one wonders if anyone is interested in accepting that resurrection gift of peace.

On bad days I think to myself, we don?t want that resurrection gift. We are quite comfortable with our miserable war-making selves and world. Or we think we can make peace on our own, that we are in charge of peace, that we don?t need him or his resurrection.

The Easter story announces that the risen Jesus comes back in the fullness of life without a trace of anger, resentment, revenge, retaliation or bitterness. Instead, he comes in perfect peace bearing the gift of peace. With the early community, we?re invited to receive his gift of peace with gratitude and joy, and take that peace to heart so that we can live more and more in his spirit of resurrection peace.

How do we do that?

I presume living in the spirit of resurrection peace means trying to live in the presence and spirit of the risen Christ. That means practicing daily prayer, quiet meditation, solitude, gospel reading, nonviolence, mindfulness, love and gentleness.

It includes noticing all the things within us and around us that are not peaceful, and pondering how we can deepen the spirit of peace within and around and among us, that we radiate that spirit of resurrection peace. And of course, it demands renouncing any cooperation with the culture of violence, injustice and war, that we do our part to support Christ?s subversive movement of resurrection nonviolence.

I write this in New York City where I?ve been spending a few weeks visiting my Jesuit friends, Daniel Berrigan, Don Moore and Bob Keck, in the Jesuit infirmary. I lived with them in community for many years; they lived together for nearly 40 years. Bob spent most of his life as a massage therapist, spiritual director and community superior.

A few years ago, he fell in the subway and never quite recovered. He developed Parkinson?s disease and

declined rapidly. I visited Bob and the others before I left to speak at Rivier University in New Hampshire and visit my cousin in Maine. But Bob took a turn, was hospitalized and died on Palm Sunday. He was 83 years old.

We all agreed: Bob Keck was the gentlest person we have ever known. I knew him for 30 years and he never once raised his voice, rushed through anything, or spoke a sharp word to anyone. Indeed, he seemed to move through life in slow motion, in grace and consolation as he liked to say. He was like our friend Thich Nhat Hanh ? a natural practitioner of mindfulness and nonviolence.

I share this grief and joy because in my circle of friends, Bob was a model Christian who spent his life accepting, welcoming and celebrating Christ?s resurrection gift of peace. In so many ways, he showed us all what it means to live in the spirit of resurrection.

Dan and I traveled the world with Bob, made over fifty retreats together, attended many demonstrations together and vacationed together for decades. Often, after dinner, Bob and Dan would recite poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins. I will never forget how Bob used to recite to me ? in the hallway, in the car, on the subway, at the beach ? the beginning of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*:

Thou, mastering me,

God! Giver of breath and bread;

World?s strand, sway of the sea,

Lord of living and dead.

Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fashioned

Me flesh,

And after it almost unmade, what with dread,

Thy doing: And dost Thou touch me afresh?

Over again I feel thy finger, and find Thee.

Bob taught me the importance of healing and caring for the body as an integral part of the life of peace. We have to take care of ourselves, remember to breathe, do stretches and yoga, and help the body discover ever new depths of healing peace, he would say. At our annual retreats over the decades, Bob always led the community in the morning in 45 minutes of silent, stretching exercises. We did it as prayer.

Throughout his illness, he never complained, never argued, and never lamented his fate. Indeed, his focus remained on others until his last conscious breath.

Once, perhaps 15 years ago, I asked him to share with me what he did for his daily meditation. He told me that every day for many years, as he sat down in prayer, he would be overwhelmed with peace, joy and consolation. Tears would well up ? every single day. That?s as far as he would get, he said, because he was filled with permanent gratitude and grace.

I know he had hard times, too, but I don?t think I?ve ever heard such testimony for anyone else. We considered him an angel in our midst.

At his wake in the chapel, we passed around a microphone and told stories. I read from a Facebook entry by the

nephew of a deceased community member, David Toolan. Young Devon practically grew up with us, and wrote:

Everyone has their own view of what Easter means to them. To me it is a time of rebirth?Spring time!?when the circle of life is most easy to observe in patterns of weather and nature. I lost an adoptive uncle this week, a Jesuit that I?ve known all my life. He was a kind, gentle person with a tiny ego. He could move mountains with a touch. He never expected much and his greatest joy was healing and easing pain. He was such a truly humble person, and probably never guessed how much everyone loved him. He wasn?t a preacher. He didn?t tell anyone how they should live. The way he lived was a lesson for me. I will miss Bob, but on this day of rebirth, I feel blessed. He made me a better person.

For me, Bob Keck was a great teacher of peace, like my friend Bob Lax from Patmos. He was a shining example of what we could all become ? Easter people who live in the grace and consolation of resurrection, people who take the resurrection gift of peace to heart and never let it go.

May we all follow Bob?s beautiful example and spend our lives in the peace of Christ?s resurrection.

Or better, as Hopkins wrote in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ?may he Easter in us.?

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This weekend, April 5-7, John Dear will lead a retreat on ?Jesus the Peacemaker [1]? in East Stroudsburg, Pa. Everyone is welcome. To see John?s speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, visit Johndear.org [2]. His 2011 talk at the Sabeel Palestinian conference in Bethlehem is featured in the book, *Challenging Empire [3]*. He is profiled in *Divine Rebels [4]* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books) and *Doing Time for Peace [5]* by Rosalie Riegle, (Vanderbilt University Press). John?s essay on Jesus? nonviolent action in the Temple is available in the new book, *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For [6]*. *Lazarus, Come Forth! [7]* and other recent books, such as *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [8]; Put Down Your Sword [9]* and *A Persistent Peace [10]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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