

# “Being Raised Up on the Last Day” by Ken Burton

August 12, 2018



## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Having been graced these past two Sundays with sermons offered by Jean and Emmy Lu, as we celebrated respectively their 90<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> birthdays, I hope that you will indulge me this morning. While it is true that my birthday was last Friday, it was only my 74<sup>th</sup>, so by comparison with what we have heard these last two Sundays, I speak from my relative youth and inexperience.

Moving on from that reference to time and its passing, I would like to focus on a passage from the Gospel for this week that has something of a timeless quality. The author of the Fourth Gospel, who is usually referred to as “John”, has Jesus saying at Chapter 6, verse 44 “No one can come to me unless drawn by

Abba God, who sent me—and those I will raise up on the last day.”

This verse first drew my special attention, although I had heard it many times before, at Gordon Cosby’s memorial service where it was the powerful final hymn, made more so by that service’s evocation of the life and ministry of Gordon, one of the truly prophetic voices of the twentieth century. The hymn is called “I am the Bread of Life”, and it gives some emphasis to being raised up on the last day. It was written in the mid 1960’s by Suzanne Toolan, RSM, who also wrote the familiar Taizé chant “Ubi Caritas”. You will hear a recording by John Michael Talbot of “I am the Bread of Life” during our offertory.

But why, why, I asked myself, did and do I find that phrase about being raised up on the last day so compelling, both when I first heard the music at Gordon’s service and now every time I hear Talbot’s recording? I’m still not sure I have a good answer to that question, but working with it led me to check our lectionary for its occurrence, which turned out to be today, and which caused me to sign up several months ago to preach today. (Let me note parenthetically that signing up to preach on a Sunday months in the future is probably not a good idea. Too much can happen in the intervening time.) But be that as it may, I would like to share with you a few thoughts from my learning about being raised up on the last day.

The first question here is what is meant by “the last days”? Biblical literalists see this term as being part of the “end times” or the “apocalypse”. This is when, or perhaps where, the “Son of Man”, generally identified with Jesus, will return to Earth and engage in various activities that will culminate in the establishment of a “new heaven” and a “new Earth,” governed by the returned Jesus from a “new Jerusalem”. For more information, see the Book of Revelation. Well. With all respect to those whom I know disagree with me, perhaps including some of you, this understanding of “the last day” as

a future end-of time event simply does not work for me. I'm not going to talk about why I feel this way, but my guess is that most of you understand.

But if we reject anything like a literal apocalypse, how are we to understand this passage about being raised up on the last day? One option is to ignore it, and preach about something else. The passage from John that Billy read has as a major focus Jesus teaching about himself as "the bread of life". This image is one of the central images of Communion. Its importance is reinforced by the passage from Kings that Deborah read about Elijah being given bread by an angel when he was about to die of hunger, and one verse of Psalm 34 that calls us to "taste and see how good the Holy One is." Elsewhere in Scripture, we have the mana from heaven offered to the Israelites in the desert and Jesus' Feeding of the Five Thousand to reinforce this theme of the role of bread as both physical and spiritual nurture. It would certainly be easier for a preacher to focus on these passages and let the "raising up on the last day" slide by. Why it would probably be quite possible to do a whole series of sermons working with various aspects of the biblical understanding of "bread", particularly in a world where so many are denied the bread they need for daily survival as a consequence of war, famine, or mismanagement.

As you have probably figured out, this quasi-denial solution is for me no better than that of the literal apocalypse. I want to share with you an understanding what it means to be "raised up on the last day," not take you on a tour of a spiritual bakery, and I am also not suggesting that this being "raised up" has anything to do with yeast.

Several twentieth century theologians, most notably C.H. Dodd, developed what has been called "realized eschatology", "eschatology" being a technical term for the study of the end times problems. For realized eschatology, the end times are *now*, in the present, and have been so ever since the life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus. The “new heaven” and “new Earth” are now, not some time in the future, so being “raised up on the last day” is to respond to God’s call and to live a faithful life today and every day.

Again, well! That certainly puts the whole matter in a different light. Although I haven’t explored this in much depth, it’s hard to see how “realized eschatology” adds much to the Christian message, except to provide an explanation of a number of biblical passages which are otherwise difficult to understand. Seekers and other Christians like to describe themselves as an “Easter People,” that is, as people whose lives are different because of Jesus’ resurrection, however understood. I’m not sure what difference this “realized eschatology” makes to that understanding or to other expressions of what it means today to be a faithful follower of Jesus who for us is the Christ.

This criticism of realized eschatology has been heard and responded to within the theological community in a position labelled “inaugurated eschatology”. Pioneered by Oscar Cullman and George Elden Ladd, this view works from an “almost-but-not-yet” understanding of the Kingdom of God to an eschatology that incorporates the here-and-now of realized eschatology with the future orientation of the traditional view. It might be criticized as “trying to have it both ways,” but that comment would not be taken as a criticism but as a shorthand statement of how the end times really are.

The frequent Christian testament references to the “Kingdom of God”, and particularly the rich supply of Jesus’ parables that focus on it could easily be the subject of yet another sermon series, but the short version is that God’s reign has already begun and exists in our midst (although sometimes it certainly doesn’t feel that way) and is a future time or event, the details of which are a matter for the future. Inaugural eschatology parallels that understanding, suggesting that the “end times” have already begun but are also still in the

future. If you find that confusing and contradictory, you are not alone. It sounds at first like a theological waffle, and not one served with butter and syrup!

Faced with this kind of problem, it is wonderful to be able to turn to one of our own, a resource from within the Church of the Saviour community. Kayla McClurg, before she left us, offered a gift of reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary Gospel passages. They are titled *Passage by Passage: A Gospel Journey*. About this week's lection and the present/future conundrum, Kayla writes: "Maybe we are not meant to understand these kinds of ideas with our so-called rational minds. Maybe they are best suited for new minds and new hearts."

And in the August 10 inward/outward daily quote Jean Pierre de Caussade reminds us that "all that is necessary is to love and to accept the present moment as the best, with perfect trust in God's universal goodness." Raised up on the last day, indeed!