

The Power and Purpose of the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:3-10

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When the New Testament writers presented their proof to support the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they built their argument around one clear assertion that was repeated over and over again: “We have seen the Lord.” This was the message first declared by Mary Magdalene when she and her sisters in sorrow went to the tomb expecting to anoint the dead body of Jesus according to the Jewish rituals of that time. Instead, she encountered Jesus in the garden where the tomb was located. At first she thought he was the gardener, but when he spoke to her, she knew it was Jesus who had been raised from the dead. She rushed back to the apostles and became the first witness of the resurrection when she declared, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

The message of the early church was a consistent testimony: Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and buried, has been raised from the dead, and has been seen by his followers. The apostle Paul sums up that testimony in this passage in I Corinthians 15: 5-8 when he says, “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time.... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (NIV).

Those early Christians did not focus on the empty tomb in that garden in Jerusalem. They did not dwell on the fact that the giant stone that had sealed Jesus inside the tomb had been rolled away. Just because the tomb was empty did not mean that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In fact, when Mary first saw the empty tomb, she thought that someone had simply taken the dead body of Jesus away to another location. The early Christian community was not formed around the news of a missing corpse. The message was not that the body of Jesus was simply missing. An empty tomb may tell us where Jesus was not to be found, but it did not address where Jesus actually was. An empty tomb and a missing body is not the heart of Easter faith!

Faith was not born and fear was not shattered until Jesus who was in the tomb suddenly appeared to his disciples. Faith was born when a doubting Thomas was allowed to touch the wounds in the body of Jesus. Faith was born when travelers on the road to Emmaus suddenly discovered that they were in the physical presence of the risen Lord. Faith was born on the road to Damascus when Saul of Tarsus encountered the living Lord whose message he had been trying to stamp out. Faith strong enough to endure the fiery trials that would soon fall upon the Christian community was not rooted in a dead Jesus or an empty tomb. Only one thing fueled the faith of those first believers, and that was their consistent testimony: “We have seen the Lord!”

The same must hold true for Christians today. We must live with the same certainty found in the Easter hymn that proclaims, “I serve a risen savior who is in the world today.”¹ I have been to two locations in Jerusalem where tradition suggests Jesus had been buried. One is in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher inside the walls of Jerusalem, and the other one is a cave on the outskirts of the city. I knew perfectly

well, two thousand years later, that the body of Jesus was not in either of those locations. I also knew that his body had not returned to dust like the remains of the Ark of the Covenant in the Indiana Jones movie. I believed then and I believe now that Jesus was raised from the dead. While I cannot say that I have seen the Lord, I can say that I have encountered his spirit and his presence all through my life. I can say that the living Lord has been with me in sickness and sorrow. I can say that the risen savior has shown up in church services and in private devotions. I may not have seen his face or touched the wounds in his body, but I can sing with the hymn that says,

I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.
And he walks with me and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am His own.
And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.²

The apostle Paul underscores the importance of the resurrection of Jesus when he writes later in this same chapter, “If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Thus, the resurrection of Jesus is as central to our faith as Christians today as it was for the early church two thousand years ago. There are several reasons why Easter and the resurrection of Jesus should be claimed and cherished by every Christian.

The first reason for the importance of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus is that it clarifies the reason for our worship as Christians. The phrase “the Lord’s Day” has a special meaning for the church. Among the Jewish worshippers of the first century CE, there was another day for worship and another reason for doing so. They honored the Sabbath Day which was the last day of the week, and they did so to remember the God of creation who, according to the Genesis 1 narrative, made the world in six days and rested on the seventh day.

I celebrate the creator aspects of God’s power and purpose. I marvel at the beauty of the earth, and I often tremble at the awesome power of nature. I have lived all of my life in places that experience all four weather seasons of the year. I delight in the spring rains as much as I do in the wintry snow. I delight as much in the summer sun as I do in the cool air of autumn. However, none of that touches at the root of my faith as a Christian. I do not simply pray to the God of creation. I rejoice in the God of resurrection by whose power sins are forgiven, death’s power is shattered, and the grace we need for daily living is assured. If Christ is raised from the dead, then God can surely meet any and all of our needs in this life. Therefore, we gather to worship on the first day of the week, because as John 20:1 says, “Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.” We worship when we do and why we do because it was on the first day of the week that God raised Jesus from the dead.

The second reason why the resurrection is important is as much political as it is theological. The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval on the life and teachings of Jesus. The resurrection was God saying YES to everything Jesus said and did. To read the crucifixion story is to realize that at its heart, that event was about people saying NO to the message that Jesus came to bring. Those who plotted his arrest and conducted his trials were saying NO to Jesus. Those who mocked him and placed a

crown of thorns upon his head were saying NO to Jesus. Those who cried out “crucify him” and those who actually drove the nails into his body were all saying NO to Jesus. Jesus had come to offer love and forgiveness, to become in his own body the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. But on the cross of Calvary, the power structure of that world pronounced their sentence on the man and his message with one great word of rejection: NO. The words of John 1:11 carry a special poignancy: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

Now comes the good news of the gospel. Caiaphas and Pilate and all their successors of earthly power do not have the last word. Political leaders may say no to the values lifted up by Christ. They may seek to subvert the teachings of Jesus: the value of every human life, the equality of all persons, the need to care for the poor and the oppressed, the futility of warfare, the destructive power of hatred and bigotry, and the challenge to show mercy and kindness in a world that is awash with bitterness and division. The resurrection is nothing less than God’s endorsement of all these things that the world seeks to reject or resist. Shall I love my neighbor as I love myself? YES. Shall we turn away from sexism, racism, homophobia, nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnic rivalries? YES. The resurrection of Jesus serves as a punctuation mark, an exclamation point that the message of Jesus is true.

Jesus came preaching a message of repentance of sin, of love for our enemies, and of devotion to God as our highest allegiance. In Luke 4 he not only declared that he was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, but he also preached that the love of God was not limited only to Israel, but extended to a Syro-Phoenician widow and a Syrian leper. God does not love one country or one culture above all others. God who created the whole earth loves all the nations and people of the earth. God is not interested in making Israel or America great again. God’s agenda is not “God Bless America.” God’s favorite hymn says, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” That is the message to which the world said NO when Jesus was crucified. That is also the message to which God said YES when God raised Jesus from the dead.

How sad it is to acknowledge that the truth about the message of Jesus does not need to be held up only before our secular and political leaders in this country, but to many of our conservative Christian brothers and sisters as well. Being against a handful of social issues is not what it means to be a Christian. The message of Jesus is not defined by one’s views on marriage equality, or a woman’s right to make reproductive choices, or stacking the US Supreme Court and many of the Federal District Courts with judges that will rule in opposition to many of the things that the majority of citizens in this country clearly support. How sad that many of the voices saying NO on matters ranging from women in ministry, to immigration policies that show compassion for refugees fleeing danger in their home countries, to prison reform, funding for childcare, easier access to affordable and accessible health care, and voting rights for all qualified citizens are the voices of some Christians who seem to want blessings and benefits for themselves that they are unwilling to afford to others. Now as in the days of the early church, there are contrasting views about what it means to be a Christian.

We may wonder, as did Pontius Pilate, about what is the truth. Let there be no doubt about it: God has raised up the truth from the grave where wicked men had sent him in order to blot out his message from the earth. The grave could not hold

him. Death could no longer detain him. Christ is risen. As Phillips Brooks wrote,

Tomb, thou shalt not hold Him longer,
Death is strong, but Life is stronger,
Stronger than the dark, the light,
Stronger than the wrong, the right.
Faith and Hope triumphant say
Christ will rise on Easter Day.³

There is a third and final reason why Christians should cling to the power and purpose of the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection answers a question as old as time that was captured in the words of Job 14:14 when he asked, “If someone dies, will they live again?” It is obvious by his question that up to that point in human history, no one known to Job had been able to answer his query. No assurance came from the Laws of Moses, or the Psalms of David, or the Wisdom of Solomon. David did hint in Psalm 90:9-10 about how long our earthly life might last when he said, “Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.” What Job wondered was what happens after “we fly away.”

There is an answer to Job’s question. It came when John was being held captive on the Isle of Patmos. In Revelation 1:14-18 John said he saw someone. “The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. His tongue was like a two-edged sword. His eyes burned like coals of fire. His face was like the shining of the sun. When he spoke he said, ‘I am the first and the last. I am the living One. I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever. And I hold the keys of Death and Hades.’”

Someone tell Job that the answer to his question is Yes. King Jesus has the keys to the prison cell of death. God flung open that door on Easter when Jesus was raised from the dead. We all have to pass through the prison-like place called death, but by God’s grace, our sentence is not everlasting. He who raised up the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:41-42) will likewise raise up all those who have called upon and trusted in His name. He who called Lazarus by name and bid him come forth from the grave (John 11:43) will likewise call our names and bid us join Him in a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (II Corinthians 5:1). The earliest Christian hymn found in I Thessalonians 4 invites us not to grieve over death like those who have no hope. It proclaims, “For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, /And so we believe that God will bring with Jesus /Those who have fallen asleep in Him.”

I remember the first time my son took an airplane flight without his parents going along. He was flying from Cleveland, Ohio, to Atlanta, Georgia, to visit with his grandmother and that part of our family. My wife and I were more than a little anxious about him taking such a long flight by himself. This was in the days before the added security we now deal with at airports, so we were able to walk with our son to the gate and onto the plane to strap him in and kiss him goodbye. When that was done, we stood by the window and watched while the plane taxied down the runway and took off. We gazed into the sky until the plane was finally lost in the distant clouds. My wife and I turned to each other and said, “There he goes.”

What gave us reassurance was that down in Atlanta we knew that his grandmother was sitting by a gate in the airport in that city. She was watching the board that announced when flights would be arriving. And at just the right moment, we knew that she would start casting her eyes to the sky and watch while the plane that carried her grandson broke through the clouds. We could imagine that she would be saying, “Here he comes,” as the plane landed and taxied to the gate where she was waiting. That was our hope on that day: from “there he goes” to “here he comes.” So will it be for us because of the power of the resurrection of Jesus. Our earthly friends will say, “There they go,” but our risen Savior in glory will shout, “Here they come.” All of this is the power and purpose of the resurrection of Jesus. Hallelujah. Christ arose.

Notes

1 Alfred H. Ackley, “He Lives,” African American Heritage Hymnal (GIA Publications: Chicago, IL, 2001), 275.

2 Austin Miles, “In the Garden,” African American Heritage Hymnal (GIA Publications: Chicago, IL, 2001), 494.

3 Phillips Brooks, “An Easter Carol, poemhunter.com.