

Why Resurrection Matters

John 20: 1-24

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Marley was dead to begin with. There is no doubt about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker and the chief mourner. Old Marley was as dead as a door nail.... This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come from the story I am about to relate.

You may be wondering why I'm starting an Easter sermon with the opening lines of A Christmas Carol. Here's why. Like the Easter story, A Christmas Carol has a mournful beginning setting the stage for a wonderful ending.

Not mincing words, Dickens states in no uncertain terms Jacob Marley was reliably and undeniably dead. As the story unfolds, Dickens draws us into Scrooge's shock and awe when Marley's ghost forces him to confront his sins before his reclamation and new life can begin.

Likewise, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John achieved the same aim, but with a different twist. Although Jesus lived a perfect life, as the passion story unfolds we find ourselves drawn into his suffering for our sins, preparing the way for our redemption on Easter morning.

We often wonder why this had to be. Couldn't God find a more humane way to accomplish his plan for our salvation?

If you ever asked this question, you're in good company.

When Jesus first warned his disciples he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, they were incredulous. Although the Jews were familiar with the prophecy of someone called the Suffering Servant, it was never linked to the promised Messiah.

According to every contemporary Jewish interpretation, the Messiah would be triumphant, vanquishing God's enemies before reestablishing the Kingdom of Israel. There was absolutely nothing in the mix about a Suffering Messiah dying an ignoble death. That explains the disciples' devastation, but also the Sadducees' and Pharisee's jubilation on Good Friday.

Jesus predicted on three separate occasions he'd suffer and die before being raised on the third day. The disciples, not wanting to hear it, never connected the dots.

On the other hand, the leaders of the religious establishment, felt vindicated. Heaving sighs of relief, they happily went to their homes to celebrate the Passover with their families. The death of Jesus proved they were right. Jesus was just another faker who'd soon be forgotten.

So, everyone agreed. Jesus was as dead as a door nail.

Knowing Jesus' death is universally recognized by everyone prepares the way for something wonderful to come out from this story.

But knowing Jesus was dead on Good Friday is a far cry from believing Jesus was resurrected on Easter morning.

In every Easter sermon I ever preached, I've made the same observation:

Even if film crews were at the entrance of the sealed tomb on Easter morning, ready to telecast throughout the world the stone rolling away with Jesus triumphantly stepping out, there'd still be doubters saying, "OK, you proved your point. Jesus was raised from the dead, but what's that got to do with me?"

That, my friends is the question. "What does the resurrection of Christ have to do with you and me?"

The usual answer is Christ's resurrection makes our salvation possible. By dying and then rising from the dead, death's hold over humanity was broken. For that reason, we can sing,

Thine is the glory, Risen conquering Son;
Endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won.

The predominant theme of Easter is the resurrection of the body to eternal life. Especially when loved ones pass from this life into the next, it's a comfort knowing God still care for them, even as God cares for us in this earthly world. But we're also promised when the last trumpet sounds, we'll be given new bodies.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul calls these new bodies "spiritual bodies." While differentiating between the natural body and spiritual body, Paul never described what the spiritual body will be like.

We only have a few clues from the Easter story. Jesus' resurrected body wasn't limited by time or space, even though he could still eat and drink. Strangely enough, he wasn't instantly recognizable. At first, Mary Magdalene thought Jesus was a gardener, until he spoke her name. Luke tells us later that same evening, two travelers on the Road to Emmaus thought Jesus was a stranger until he finally revealed himself in the breaking of the bread.

Bishop N T Wright makes an interesting observation about this. He says when going to the hospital to see someone who's been sick for a long time, after the visit is over you might say to your companion, "Poor Charlie looks like a shadow of his former self."

Wright then goes on to say with the resurrection of the body, it works the other way. Now, we're just shadows of our future selves, when we then become more truly us than we ever imagined.

What will our new bodies be like? Personally, I don't think we really need to know. Besides, we have even more pressing matters facing us in the here and now.

Remember, resurrection isn't just for the dead, it's also for the living. Contrary to popular belief, eternal life doesn't begin in heaven, it begins now, here on earth.

Unfortunately, being mesmerized by the heavenly aspects of the resurrection, we often overlook its earthly implications.

Knowing the Easter story, our imaginations focus on the other-worldly details of the narrative. We can imagine the stone miraculously rolling away. We can hear the angels announcing, "He is not here, he is risen," before quickly disappearing. We're amazed by battle-hardened Roman guards stunned into numbness. Even the grave clothes, neatly folded in the empty tomb add a mysterious touch.

Above all else, we try to imagine the Risen Christ in all his glory.

Don't get me wrong. These are essential things to notice but if that's all we see, nothing wonderful can come from this story. That's why we must pay attention to those brave souls, like the women who came to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body but found it empty.

And let's not forget Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus later that same night. Devastated by the news of Jesus' death, they tried consoling each other until they were met and comforted by Christ himself.

Learn from these first witnesses of the resurrection. Despite fearing their association with Jesus might end with their heads on the chopping block, they each took a risk by coming out of hiding.

If she were caught at the tomb, Mary Magdalene might have been thrown into prison for just showing up. Likewise, Cleopas and his companion risked confiding in a stranger who could've been a police informant.

But their bravery didn't stop there. Witnessing the resurrection and filled with a curious blend of joy and fear, they took an even greater risk when they spread the news, "Christ is risen!"

The resurrection of Christ on Easter morning is the turning point in the human story. Our exile from the Garden of Eden started our downward spiral into death and destruction. But then, in another garden a stone's throw from Jerusalem God kick started the Great Reversal moving humanity away from death and destruction.

How else can you explain the Saint Paul's brave taunt in his letter to the Corinthians, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. O grave, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Certainly Paul was talking about physical death but he was also talking about spiritual death.

Like it or not, we live under a spiritually dead world system organized in opposition to God's kingdom.

I recently read somewhere that death is the last weapon of the tyrant. Think of the tyrants on the world stage today. As powerful as they may seem, they won't have the last word because Christ's resurrection overthrew tyranny. One of our old hymns declares,

Our little systems have their day,
They have their day but cease to be.
They are both broken lights of thee,
But thou, O Lord are more than these.

In spite of the mess the world's political, economic and religious systems make of things, Easter promises in the end, God wins. In the meantime, God has launched the process to remake his creation into what it was meant to be from the start, a world full of his power and glory.

Isn't that our closing affirmation in the Lord's Prayer? "For thine is the kingdom and the power and glory forever."

As the children of the Resurrection, we share in God's glory so we can be agents of God's power.

Long before Christ, the Old Testament prophets already knew this to be true. They were forever exhorting God's people to set things right by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

Today, we don't have to look very far to do any of these things. Not too far from this pulpit are immigrant families needing sponsors, hungry people needing food, and lonely people needing to be welcomed into the beloved community. But before setting out to save the world the wise among us advise discerning God's will first. Making time for private prayer and corporate worship enables consensus to build within the faith community. Discernment also gives a clearer vision to see the Risen Christ leading his disciples in every challenge.

Remember, it's not our can do spirit, it's God's power and glory working to make things right. This was true four thousand years ago when God called Abraham to be the father of a nation destined to become a light to all the nations.

This was true when God sustained the nation of Israel throughout her stormy history. It continued being true when Jesus, one of Abraham's descendants was born in Bethlehem and crucified in Jerusalem. And it's true today, when God continues making all things work together for good by still turning our crucifixions into resurrections.

Like Jacob Marley, Jesus was as dead a door nail until something good came from it: Christ was risen from the dead.

It's the power and glory of God that raises us up to be Christ's light in a world still favoring the dark. It's not an easy vocation. Sometimes we may want to hide our light when the challenges of life loom large.

But on those dark days when you feel as empty as the empty tomb itself, if you listen hard enough you can hear that still small voice speak your name before assuring you, "I am the resurrection and the life... if you live and believe in me you shall never die. Do you believe this?"