

## Good News from the Graveyard

**John 20:1-18**

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A recent poll found that 84 percent of non-churchgoers believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That is stunning. It says to me that most people accept what Easter means but they do not know why it matters. What does it matter that Jesus rose from the dead? Most people salute the resurrection every Easter without really knowing why it matters.

The resurrection means that Jesus is the real deal—he is everything he said he was. In John 11:25, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” People who talk like this are usually either ridiculed or institutionalized. But Jesus proved the truth of his witness on Easter Sunday morning. He really does have power over life and death.

When Jesus threw all the moneychangers out of the temple (John 2:13-22), the Jews were indignant and they challenged him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” He was pointing to his own body as the temple of the Lord. The resurrection is the great historical sign of the identity and authority of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The resurrection means that Jesus had the power of an indestructible life all along. Neither Satan nor death itself has any power over him. He went to the grave as a volunteer. He *let* himself die and be buried. Nobody forced it on him.

This means that the cross was not a surprise to Jesus. It was not a murder. It was not a judicial mistake. It was not martyrdom for a cause. It was not the foiling of his plans to become king in Jerusalem. It was something he chose. And if he chose it, then we can only understand it as the necessary sacrifice for our sins. The resurrection does not erase his sufferings but instead validates his suffering as a gift for the salvation of the world. It was all a part of God’s plan from the beginning that he should make his life an offering for sin; that upon him should be laid the iniquity of us all; and that he should bear our sins away upon the cross; the consequences of our sins fell upon Jesus, and by his wounds we are made whole. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

The resurrection matters to me now because it means my past can be forgiven. Some people cannot get on with their lives because they are frozen in the past. Perhaps they dwell upon their

greatest failures or how they have been hurt. The past holds power over these people; faith, hope and love are beyond their reach or comprehension.

The Bible says, “When you were dead in your sins...and your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins...he took them away, nailing them to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14). I had a toy as a kid called an Etch-A-Sketch. You can draw all sorts of pictures by turning the knobs. But over time you get so many marks and lines on the Etch-A-Sketch that there is no more room for pictures. You must turn it over and shake it to clear the screen. In a similar way, the death of Jesus does this to our lives. His cross clears all accounts. The grievances and sins of the past are erased. God doesn’t want to rub your sins **in**, he wants to rub them **out**. By the power of the cross, we are set free from the past.

The resurrection matters because it means that my present problems can be managed. I love the story about the psychologist who used to conduct lectures on “Proper Parenting Techniques.” Then after she had her first child, she re-titled it, “Hints for Good Parenting.” Then came a second child, and she rewrote the title as, “Some Suggestions for Parents.” After she had the third child, she quit lecturing all together. Life is overwhelming: whether it is managing debts or marriage or children or cancer or unemployment, sooner or later we all hit the wall and discover that our lives are completely unmanageable and out-of-control. That is a scary thought, and many people try to anesthetize it with destructive habits and practices.

The resurrection matters because it means there is a living and powerful God who can give me the strength to manage my problems. The Bible says, “I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13)

The resurrection matters because it makes my future secure. What happens we die? Does the consciousness just extinguish like turning off a computer? Do our bodies simply become compost? Most people believe in some sort of heaven and hell—some kind of eternal consequence which evaluates our time spent on earth good or bad.

This gives rise to the basic moralistic and legalistic thinking that most people have. They believe that the way to secure your future is by practicing certain behaviors and refraining from others. By doing this, they believe they are building up a bank account with God, so that God will owe them heaven when they die. They understand God to be sort of a cosmic vending machine: you put your stuff in the slot and God kicks out the prizes. But how could any human being ever manipulate God? How could people ever put God into their debt? What could any

body really to do make up for their sins? God is not a dog we can train to do tricks for us, and Heaven is not a system we can game.

God's plan is that we get into heaven by trusting his Son, Jesus Christ. The story is told that during the civil war, a certain wounded veteran of the union army was not getting his proper benefits. No one seemed to be able to help him, so he stood at the gates of the White House longing to get in. He knew that if he could just explain his case to the President, things would be straightened out. But alas, the iron gates were high and the guards were not sympathetic to his plea. Then a little boy came up to him and said, "I can help you, mister. Follow me." The man, having no better ideas, followed the boy around the back of the house and through the bushes. The boy led him right through the back door, and no one stopped them. The man couldn't believe it. The boy led him right into the parlor where Mr. Lincoln was seated and said, "Dad, I think you need to help this man..." It is not by making bargains or negotiations with God that we will secure our future, but it is by trusting and following the Son, Jesus Christ. He alone has access to the Father, and we come only through him. My future is secure only through trusting Christ.

The great New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, said, "Heaven is a great place, but it's not the end of the world." What he means by this is that the resurrection is not some wacky miracle Jesus did once upon a time to give you pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. The resurrection reveals how the world will end. The kingdom has come in the glory of Christ. And the future has to do with the establishment of God's justice and righteousness on earth. God will renew the planet. There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1), and a new you. The Risen Christ is the first installment of this grand transformation yet to be completed. 2 Peter 3:13 says, "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

The resurrection matters because it means I can start living in this future now. When I seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ; when I seek to eliminate poverty and disease and relieve human suffering, I do so in complete confidence knowing my labor is not in vain. Easter can make a difference if, by trust and obedience, you join in a personal relationship to the Risen Christ whose last earthly words to his disciples were simply the invitation he gave to them at the beginning: "Follow me."