

"Game Changer"

The Scripture text for today, Easter Sunday, is not one you would probably associate with Easter. It is chapter Acts 17, verse 6: "Those people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also."

It's the first century. The Apostle Paul and his missionary team have come to the city of Thessalonica. Paul goes into a synagogue there and begins to teach about Jesus as the Messiah. Some of the Jews believe, but others become jealous. They gather some lowlife characters and start a riot. They want to seize Paul and Silas and bring them to the authorities, but they can't find them. So, they drag a believer named Jason to the city officials, screaming, "These people who have turned the world upside down have come here also."

This is how they describe these Christians! It wasn't meant to be a compliment! It was a complaint! These followers of Jesus who are creating a stir wherever they go have now shown up in our town! *The Jesus movement was spreading, really shaking things up!*

What are people outside the church saying about the Christian and the church today? Hardly that! That Christians are turning the world upside down! They may be saying, "Those Christians are so stuffy and judgmental." "The Church is irrelevant and out of touch with life as it really is." Usually how the world sizes up Christians is not very complimentary. But probably more so, they're not saying much of anything today about the church. As our American culture becomes more secularized, for more and more people, Christianity and the Church is simply not a part of their lives, or even in their thoughts. And, in fact, the American landscape is dotted with churches that are in decline, often small congregations huddled together trying to survive.

"These people who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). What made the difference, that these followers of Jesus in the first century created a stir and made an impact on people and society wherever they went? What caused the Jesus movement of the first century to spread like wildfire throughout the Roman world and beyond? What drove these early Christians to share the news about Jesus, even when they faced opposition, or were ostracized, or in some cases paid for their faith with their lives? What made the difference? What was the ***game changer?***

It wasn't because they had magnificent church buildings and well greased church programs! They met in homes. They didn't have well educated, seminary trained pastors.

It wasn't because of their access to great Christian literature, study books, Bible reference books, a vast selection of beautiful Christian music or inspirational videos explaining the Christian life. They had none of that.

And it wasn't the Bible that made the difference and set them on fire to impact the world. The first Christians were Jewish converts. They had the Hebrew Scriptures (basically our Old Testament), but none of our New Testament. Those who were Gentiles and came to Christ had no Bible. It was only later in the first century that they might have had access to some of

the writings that became part of our Bible. This is not to say that the Bible isn't important. It is! But they didn't have the Bible as we do today.

So what set these Jesus followers loose to turn the world upside down for Christ? ***It was their experience of the resurrection of Jesus!***

When Jesus was put on trial, sentenced to death and crucified, these Jesus followers scattered. Heartbroken, devastated, scared, they hid behind locked doors. Jesus, their Master, was dead. And in a sense, so was their faith. But He told them He would be killed, then rise again after 3 days. (They didn't grasp what He was saying at the time). And He did exactly as He said He would! I love what Andy Stanley says. He notes that if somebody says they're going to die and three days later come back to life, and does it, that's pretty convincing!

When they actually *saw* Him, alive again after being buried in a tomb for 3 days, it lit a fire in them that made them unstoppable! Not even being threatened with death could keep them from joyfully sharing the message about Jesus with the world!

The resurrection of Jesus is at the center of the Christian message! The historical fact of Jesus' resurrection is absolutely essential to our faith!

Just before this past Christmas a columnist from the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof, wrote a column titled "Discussing Future of White Evangelicalism". The column was an interview he had with Jim Wallis, a noted Christian author and justice activist. The tone of the column and dialogue was basically that evangelical Christians consistently fail in the area of social justice and are often on the wrong side of the fence politically. At the end of the interview, Kristof asks Wallis, "A final question...I consider myself a Christian, for I admire Jesus' teachings, but I doubt the virgin birth, Resurrection and other miracles, and it does seem complicated to be a Christian who questions the Resurrection. So: Am I a Christian?"

How did Jim Wallis respond? He replied, "That's not for me but for you to answer." He said, "Following Jesus is the core of being a disciple of Jesus, which also implies a personal relationship with Jesus", but then he kind of skirts the issue, saying our limited human comprehension of mysteries like miracles and resurrection "are less important to me than what can transform our lives and the world. One of my mentors, Desmond Tutu, needed a real resurrection to sustain him in the South African struggle, and I do today as we struggle for a genuine multiracial democracy...".

So...you don't believe Jesus was raised from the dead? Well, ok...that's not that critical of an issue. It's ok for some...but not that much of a game changer.

But the Apostle Paul didn't see it that way! Look at what he writes: "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved" (1 Corinthians 15:1-2a). Paul reminds them of the gospel he preaches, the gospel through which they are being saved.

He goes on: "For I handed onto you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This is the message handed down, he says, that Jesus was crucified for our sins, died, and three days later was raised to life in fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

He continues by maintaining that this resurrection was validated by Jesus appearing to the various disciples, and over 500 followers at one time. Paul further insists on how essential the resurrection is to our faith: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ..if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:12-14, 17). I like the Good News Translation of verse 14: "If Christ has not been raised, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe."

If Jesus had never risen from the dead He would have been just another revolutionary or charismatic leader whose movement died when the leader died (and stayed dead)! But Jesus isn't dead! He came back to life – just like He said He would! And that's what infused new life and vitality into these first Jesus followers. It was *the game changer!*

So, I've spent most of this sermon basically saying that Jesus' resurrection is at the heart and center of the Christian message, and that it was the difference-maker for the first Christians. *So what?* Some of you may be thinking, "I already believe in Jesus' resurrection. Is that all you've got to say to me today?"

*But here's the important question: Have you and I experienced the **power** of Jesus' resurrection? Is it a **game changer** for us?* See, we can believe that the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, but it makes no difference in our life. We accept it as a fact. But we have to go deeper.

The Apostle Paul, reflecting on his conversion to Christ and how it had changed his life, summarized his goal for living by writing: "I want to know Christ, and the *power* of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). *I* myself want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection! Don't you? It's when we *know* Christ by surrendering ourselves to Him and having a personal relationship with Him...when He becomes the central Figure of our life, that we can begin to tap into the amazing power of His resurrection!

What's it like when we really begin to connect with Christ and the power of His resurrection? We get some clues when we look at how the resurrection changed that first group of Jesus followers. Here are some things that can happen.

We'll find a new power to overcome the dark and evil side of our human nature. Jesus' resurrection broke the power of sin and evil. In a number of places in the New Testament it

says of Christians, this is what you once were like – into all these kinds of evils - but now you're different since you have a new life in Christ!" Jesus followers weren't perfect by any means – but a lot of the old sinful behaviors died in them.

When we know the power of the resurrection we'll be able to live life with hope. I love what is says in 1 Peter 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." There's so much hopelessness in the world! Jesus' resurrection gives us hope in the worst of circumstances, because our hope is rooted in God and God's promises. In our darkest days, God brings people across our path. God opens doors. He refreshes our spirit, and sometimes God just hold us tight in His hands to get us through the rough times. Resurrection people are people of hope!

When we experience the power of Jesus' resurrection it brings joy to our life! Those first Jesus followers suffered a lot of persecution for their faith. More than once we read how when the disciples were perhaps beaten, or endured the lashings of the whip, they *rejoiced*, that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ! How strange is that! Joy! Resurrection people are joyful people!

They loved. When we really experience the power of Jesus' resurrection it gives us a capacity to love people in a way we just couldn't do on our own. Stephen, for example, was a godly church leader among those first Christians. As he's being stoned to death just for being a Christian what are his last words? "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Wow! No one loved more than Jesus. And His resurrection power in us enables us to have a new capacity to be kind, to forgive, to love.

Perhaps most incredibly, experiencing the power of Jesus' resurrection assures us that we too shall rise again! We can laugh death in the face! Jesus' resurrection won a massive victory over death for us. 2 Corinthians 4:14 says, "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus...". In that great 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting...but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55, 57). *When you no longer have to fear death, what is there to fear?*

The whole Christian message rests on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead! That was the game changer for the first Jesus followers, and that power for triumphant living and dying is available for you, and me, and everyone! I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection!

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