

"The Resurrection of Jesus: What Does It Mean?"

The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart and center of the Christian faith. In 1 Corinthians 15 we learn that already in the church at Corinth in the 1st century there were some saying there is no resurrection of the dead. The Apostle Paul writes to them, vehemently disagreeing: "Now, since our message is that Christ has been raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead will not be raised to life? If that is true, it means that Christ was not raised; and if Christ has not been raised from death, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe" (1 Corinthians 15:12-14 Today's English Version).

Our whole faith rests on whether the Jesus who was executed on a cross and buried in a tomb remained in that tomb or not!

A United Methodist pastor, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi were discussing funerals, and the question came up: "When you're in your casket and friends, family and congregational members are mourning over you, what would you like to hear them say?" The United Methodist pastor said, "I'd like them to say that I was a wonderful husband, a great family man, and a strong spiritual leader." The Catholic priest followed, "I'd like them to say I was a wonderful teacher and a loyal servant of God who brought forgiveness and love to peoples' lives." Finally, the Rabbi replied: "I'd like them to say, 'Look - he's moving!'" Other major religions have been founded by people who were held to be wise teachers or inspired prophets, but they are all dead now! Christianity stands firm on a Jesus who was once dead and buried in a tomb - but then started moving again!

But what does the resurrection of Jesus mean? What did God do, what is God doing, as a result of Jesus being raised from the dead? Let's take our Bibles today and explore that question!

First of all, Jesus' resurrection signals that the last days are upon us. In the book of Daniel in the Old Testament there is a vision of the last days and the end of the age: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt"(Daniel 12:2). This is one of the few references in the Old Testament to any kind of resurrection, and in the Book of Daniel this is connected to words about the last days.

That first Easter morning when Jesus walked out of the tomb marked the beginning of the end of this present world, marked by sickness, decay, evil and death. The New Age, the kingdom of God, where God will rule completely, is just on the horizon! It isn't here yet - we see that. There is a ton of evil and suffering in the world. We still die. But a new world is coming - and it will arrive when Christ returns in glory! Books are written saying we are just now in the last days. TV preachers into prophecy are telling us the same. But *we have been* in the "last days" for the last 2,000 years, ever since Jesus rose from the dead! The Bible says He is delaying His return to give us time to repent and turn to the Lord.

2 Peter, chapter 3, says there will be skeptics who say, "We're not in the last days and Jesus isn't coming back, because everything seems to be the same as it's always been." Maybe some of us feel that way. It's been 2,000 years and Jesus has not come back yet. Look at what it says in 2 Peter 3:8-9: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a

thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

*The resurrection of Jesus signals that the last days are upon us. But also **the resurrection validates Jesus as God's Son, the world's Savior and Lord.***

Romans 1:3-4 says this: "The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness *by resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ our Lord." A similar message is found in Acts 2:32,36: "This Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses...therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." It was Jesus' resurrection which proved that everything He said about Himself was true!

I can make certain claims about myself. My great-grandfather was Secretary of the Interior under Harry Truman. I was the state runner-up one year in the National Spelling Bee. I preached as a teenager in the Lancaster County Prison. How do you know if any of this is true? Only if I can verify and substantiate that it happened, and I'm not just making it up! Right? Jesus made outrageous claims: "I and the Father are one." I am the Messiah, the Christ" "If this temple (my body) is destroyed I will raise it up in 3 days". How do we know this is true? If Jesus had been executed, and that was the end of Him, then He would be just a liar, or delusional. But as Andy Stanley says, if someone says he's going to die and come back to life again, and actually does it, this person is worth believing in! Jesus didn't remain just a dead religious leader in a tomb! His resurrection validates everything He promised and claimed to be! He truly is the Savior of the world, one whom I can trust to be my Lord and my God!

The resurrection of Jesus also brings about our justification. Romans 4:25 says, "(Jesus) who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Handed over to death for our sins.....raised for our *justification*. Justification is a theological word. What does it mean? Basically it means to be made right with God.

One of the profound questions of life is how we sinful human beings can ever become acceptable to a God who is pure and holy, a God who hates evil. A lot of people think we are "justified" before God (OK with God) if we just live a good life or if we just come to church and practice religion. But the truth is, if we think we can stand on judgment day OK or "righteous" before God on the basis of our own goodness or achievements, we have little comprehension of both the holiness of God nor the perversity of the human mind and heart! Besides, if we could be made right with God by just being a good person or by just being religious-minded, *why did Jesus bother to die?*

The Bible says we are made right with God not by what we do, but by what *Christ did for us*, in His death and resurrection. Our part is to accept Him and what He's done for us as gift. This is what "faith" means. As someone has pointed out, when we do that we are "justified" - and it's

"just-as-if" we had never sinned!

Jesus' resurrection also empowers us to live a new life. Justification changes our *status* before God: we are counted as right before God. But something else happens: we begin to *experience* a new quality of life with Christ. Believing in Jesus and following Him *changes us*.

In the Book of Romans, chapter 6, it talks about baptism as a symbol of one being buried with Christ in a type of death. Then it goes on: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:4-5). When we come to faith in Christ, a mini-resurrection takes place! We are raised up to a new quality of living - *where we have Christ Himself living in us!* Our life is now centered in *Christ* and *His* will. We are given a new life of hope and purpose.

I've mentioned my former pastor, friend and mentor, Rocky Riedel, many times in sermons. Many of you in Community UMC remember Rocky worshiping with us after he retired from pastoral ministry. Prior to his conversion to Christ, Rocky was kind of a wild guy. He played in a country band. He would tell me stories of those days. Getting drunk. The guys driving around at night, for fun, shooting out street lights. But he came to Christ, and his life was changed. His wife wasn't a Christian. She said she didn't need to be converted because she wasn't as bad as him. But later on, she too gave her life over to Christ and became a new person in Christ.

We all are sinners who need a Savior. We all make poor choices; we all need help overcoming the evil within us; we all need God's forgiveness; we all need ultimate hope. All of this possible - a new start in life is possible - because Jesus was raised from the dead! That first Easter morning when Jesus stirred in the tomb, then came back to life again, He made possible the stirring of new life and new hope for you and me. "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

One more thing about Jesus' resurrection: ***Jesus' resurrection is the basis for our resurrection.*** 2 Corinthians 4:14 tells us: "Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence."

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul elaborates more on the resurrection of Jesus, and how it is a preview of our own resurrection if we have faith in Christ and belong to Him. "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.- For since death came through a human, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human, for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in its own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). "First fruits" are mentioned here. A devout Israelite farmer would bring the first portion of his harvest to present to God. These first fruits were a sign of the harvest to come. The resurrection of Jesus was the first installment on the resurrection of *all believers* that is to come! Our Christian hope is for a *resurrection* - more specifically, *the resurrection of the body*. This means that the essence of our

person, our unique personality, will not be lost. God will fashion a new mode of being for our essential personhood to live in eternity. For any of us who trust Christ and follow Him, we will be resurrected to everlasting life and be with Christ forever!

When all is said and done, the question about our eternal destiny, what happens after this life is over, is one of the most important issues of our human existence. We were created by God, and for God. We were made for more than just this brief physical life on earth. Even if we try, we can't erase the fact that the stamp of eternity is in our genes.

When George H. Bush (the older Bush) was Vice-President of the United States he represented this country at the funeral of Leonid Brezhnev. Bush noted the funeral's military precision and icy coldness. Since the Soviet Union was officially an atheistic country there were no prayers, no hymns, no mention of God. Mr. Bush was close to the casket when Mrs. Brezhnev came forward for her final good-bye. He relates what he saw: "(Mrs. Brezhnev) walked up, took one last look at her husband, and *traced the design of the cross on her husband's chest...*in that single act", Bush says, "God had broken through the core of the Communist system." We are destined for eternity, created to live forever with our Creator!

A young man named Steven from the New York metropolitan area contracted an intestinal infection that refused to respond to medical treatment. After living some years as an invalid, he reached the point where he knew he was going to die. Seven months before his death, he arranged with the Cryonics Society of New York to have his body frozen solid, in the hope that in the future when a cure was found for the disease, he could be brought back to life again. His body was placed in dry ice, suspended in a Crypt-Capsule, a giant bottle filled with liquid nitrogen, and maintained at a cost of \$200 per year (the baseball great Ted Williams is also preserved in this way).

His mother said that shortly before the 24 year-old's death, Steven made a tape to be placed in the capsule, realizing he might suffer brain damage. She commented that his death was easier to bear because there wasn't the same finality of putting someone away under the earth. She said, "I had talked about it with Steven, not morbidly, just ordinary conversation, and I came to accept the idea." When someone asked if she expected Steve to be raised from his Cryonics Capsule, her answer was, "I have only a remote hope for my boy's resurrection."

"I have only a remote hope for my boy's resurrection." Sad, isn't it. We can certainly understand a 24 year old doing all he can to hold on to life, and a mother unwilling to let go of him. But if we are in Christ and followers of Jesus, we have more than just a "remote hope" for our resurrection! We have Jesus' word on it! He said, "Because I live, you shall live also" (John 14:19).

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