

The Radical Results of the Resurrection



Gary Wilkerson January 4, 2016

I come from a long line of preachers that goes back several generations. So I wasn't surprised when my oldest son, Ashley, wanted to preach as soon he was old enough to form sentences. My dad was visiting when Ashley announced he wanted to preach his first sermon to us. He led us to his room where he'd set up a cardboard box for a pulpit. Dad and I sat on the floor as Ashley launched into a message he called "The Day the Sins Got Out."

"The sins were terrible," Ashley shouted, sort of like his Grandpa. "Jesus died on the cross for the sins. Then he threw the sins into the pit. But Jesus' brothers were jealous, so they threw him into the pit, too. Now Jesus and the sins were both in the pit, but Jesus got out. Then the sins got out, too. So the sins were all over the world and they're still going on today. The sins are bad, and we've gotta stop sinning!"

Unfortunately for Ashley—who today is a missionary to global troubled spots—we recorded his sermon and still have it on tape. Obviously, his theology had to improve over the years for him to minister Christ's gospel as he does now. But a lot of Christians have never improved their very limited theology—and they're stuck in immature thinking about the Christian life.

Almost any Christian can tell you, "Jesus died for my sins." But I've learned that surprisingly few can say what his resurrection means in their daily life. Like a very young Ashley, they know certain parts of the story—that Jesus died and rose again—but not enough to apply God's powerful truths to the way they live and believe. And that makes all the difference in the world.

Christ's resurrection has radical consequences not just for eternal life but for everyday life.

What is the purpose of the resurrection? Most of us associate it with eternal life, not with daily life on earth. How is the resurrection significant in our marriage, our job, our family? How does it affect a life inundated by 200 data messages a day, a life harried with errands, chores, obligations, demands?

Paul reminds us that Christ's death, burial and resurrection are of first importance "It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and *raised for our justification*" (*Romans 4:24-25, ESV, my emphasis*). What does Paul mean when he says Jesus was raised so that we might be justified?

Justification has to do with newness of life. Without it, we'd be stuck in an unchanging cycle of sin and forgiveness. Think about the practical weight that sin carries in our lives. How many times have you lain awake at night grieving over something awful you've said or done? Shame, guilt and condemnation come with everyday life; we can't get away from it. Yet Paul tells us Jesus was "delivered up" to cleanse us of these very things.

So is it enough to be forgiven of our sins? That's where the last part of the verse comes in: Jesus was "raised for our justification." Not only are our trespasses gone, but we are justified—meaning, it's as if we had never committed those sins. Now we are a delight in God's eyes. In short, we are resurrected into newness of life—every day!

What a great and powerful truth. Yet often Christians don't experience this newness in everyday life. I admit there are days when I say to my wife, Kelly, "Is this really newness of life? I'm frustrated, cranky, disappointed." Try as we might, we don't personally possess the power to renew our lives. We can't simply make ourselves new. That comes from Jesus alone—and it's called resurrection power.

To remind ourselves of this, Kelly and I have learned to repeat a certain phrase to each other: "Jesus paid it all." He finished the work, he rose again, and he has blessed us with newness of life. And we are to claim his resurrection power, putting it on like a suit of clothes. "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'" (*1 Corinthians 15:54, NIV*).

Paul says boldly that without Christ's resurrection there would be no reason to be a Christian at all.

There are voices in the church that say it doesn't matter whether there was a resurrection. Some have famously written, "I would be a Christian even if it was proved there was no resurrection. Christianity has made me a better person and it has made the world better." Some scholars hold that Jesus' encounters after the crucifixion were just mythical stories meant to encourage the early church.

Paul rejects all of this in the strongest possible terms. He says that if Christ weren't resurrected the consequences are dire: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised" (*1 Corinthians 15:14-15*).

Paul is saying, in effect, "If you don't believe Christ was resurrected, then stop believing in God at all. Everyone stop preaching, evangelizing and doing good works in Jesus' name. We'll all be better off. You would do better to get wisdom from Dr. Phil or Oprah or a pop psychologist. They have more to say than someone whose every action is based on something that never happened."

In short, the Christian faith is not some moral code to be kept. We don't gather on Sundays just to get solace about eternity. Christ is either risen or he's not—and if he isn't, then our sins were never forgiven.

You may object, "But Jesus' *death* took care of my sins. My forgiveness doesn't depend on the resurrection." Paul says it does: "For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (*1 Corinthians 15:16-19*).

When I had my doubts about God as a teenager, I started looking into other religions. At that time I found the Baha'i faith appealing. It basically says all religions are true, that all roads of faith lead to heaven. But then I read C.S. Lewis who corrected my loosey-goosey thinking. He wrote that all of Christianity rests on one question: Was there a resurrection or not?

If we can't answer yes to this, then it doesn't matter whether there was a literal ark or a six-day creation period or an actual Garden of Eden. If Christ's resurrection didn't take place, none of those things matter at all. But if there was a resurrection, then everything else became possible: Lazarus could be raised, people could be healed, sins could be removed, heaven could be a reality. That is resurrection power—and it gives us something Paul calls our "blessed hope": "...waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (*Titus 2:13*).

The more I read as a teenager, the more I came to a firm belief about the five hundred witnesses who saw Jesus after his resurrection: "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep" (*1 Corinthians 15:6*). I began to see the resurrection as not just an additional event, but the culmination and consummation of the work of Jesus' death for us. And the blessed hope that was planted in me became a source of life each day.

If we don't claim Jesus' resurrection power in our everyday life, we won't experience

what his resurrection won for us.

So many in the church today live as if they've accepted defeat. Their thoughts are ruled by doubt rather than belief. They live with habitual patterns of sin. They keep their faith to themselves, thinking if they struggle so badly how could they possibly help someone else? This is what the Christian life looks like without resurrection power.

Actually, that's what the disciples' lives looked like after the crucifixion. So what was the first thing Jesus did after the resurrection? He dealt with his followers' fear: "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (*John 20:19*).

The disciples had literally locked themselves in, afraid of the world outside. They feared mockery, derision, persecution, even the possibility of a death like Jesus experienced. But Christ came straight through those walls to meet them in their fear. And his first words to them were, "I give you peace." Even then they were still afraid. So Jesus had to say it to them twice: "Peace be with you" (see 20:19, 21). Christ still didn't berate or judge them for their fear. Instead, he met them at their deepest point of need.

The same thing happened about a week later. Again the disciples had locked themselves away in fear, and once more Jesus entered bringing peace: "Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'" (*20:26*).

Sometimes Jesus has to say things to us more than once. Even so, he didn't judge the disciples for their fear. Instead, he showed them all patience. Earlier that week Thomas had expressed disbelief, but now Jesus invited him to examine his scars to remove any doubts. "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (*20:28*).

Here in Thomas's response we see Christ's remedy for our fears: Believe. Jesus proclaims this to his church, and his church proclaims it every week to all who enter its doors: "Peace be with you. Don't be afraid. Believe on him."

Jesus not only freed the disciples from fear but equipped them with resurrection power to be his witnesses on the earth.

"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (*John 20:21-23*).

Jesus wasn't making his disciples like priests, giving them power to actually forgive sins. Rather, he was giving them authority to represent him on earth, saying in essence, "You have experienced my finished work on the cross. Now you get to proclaim it. Preach the remission of sins. Be an advocate for my gospel, a voice for my good news, my instrument to set captives free!"

Friend, the power of the resurrection is that *Jesus is alive*. He is a living Savior, and he gives us true, solid peace that frees us from all fear. In turn, he breathes into us his own Spirit, empowering us as his witnesses. And he gifts us with the privilege of bringing his good news—the blessed hope—to all who are lost and afraid. That is the radical result of the resurrection!

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