

“Christ Is Risen! So What?”
1 Corinthians 15:19–26; John 20:1–18
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First Baptist Church Raleigh (and the Capitol Square at 6:30 AM)
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Have you ever wondered what the purpose of an Easter sermon is? In part, it is to say as little as possible. Today is more about the music than dissecting the details of the day... Theology should always lead to doxology but today is mostly about doxology. Yet, to the extent that a sermon might serve some purpose, what might that be?

It is not to recreate what happens on the first Easter. We don't have to raise Christ from the grave. God has already done that, and the Spirit of the Risen Christ is at work among us always, not just on Easter. This is good news because we don't have the ability to recreate life.

Modern medicine has come a long way. A friend of mine in Winston-Salem is a urologist and regenerative medicine specialist. He can make a new bladder from the genetic material of your old bladder. It is amazing! But even modern medicine cannot bring back to life a person who has been dead for numerous days, and even if we learn how to genetically engineer every organ, including the brain, the essence of the person, including memories, would not be there.

The purpose of the Easter sermon is not to recreate resurrection, nor is it to explain or prove it. The biblical accounts do not explain how resurrection happens! There are first-person accounts of people seeing an empty tomb and interacting with a Risen Christ. We find both in the reading from John 20 wherein Mary Magdalene sees an empty tomb and meets Jesus, though she doesn't recognize him at first. So, we have stories that point to the resurrection, but we don't see it happen, and no one can explain how it does, nor is there any proof for it.

The best argument lies in the transformation of disciples locked away in fear when Jesus dies into courageous witnesses to the resurrection willing to die for their faith. What could explain this radical transformation other than an encounter with the Risen Christ? But for most of us, it is not any explanation but an experience with the Spirit of

Christ that convinces us. (And if we get up at this crazy hour on Easter, we aren't coming to be convinced by a sermon, we already believe.)

In his novel *St Francis* Nikos Kazantzakis wrote this.

'Listen, my child' [St. Francis] said, 'each year at Easter I used to watch Christ's Resurrection. All the faithful would gather around His tomb and weep, weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open. And behold! In the midst of our lamentations the tombstone crumbled to pieces and Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven, smiling at us and waving a white banner. There was only one year I did not see Him resurrected. That year a theologian of consequence, a graduate of the University of Bologna, came to us. He mounted the pulpit in church and began to elucidate the Resurrection for hours on end. He explained and explained until our heads began to swim; and that year the tombstone did not crumble, and I swear to you, no one saw the Resurrection.' (*Saint Francis*, p. 231)

I have nothing against theologians. I am one! But the good news of resurrection cannot be proven or explained. It has to be experienced.

So, what is the purpose of the Easter sermon? Perhaps it is to address the question in my title, "Christ Is Risen! So What?" Even if we believe the claims of our faith, what difference does it make for us nearly two thousand years later that this one man lives again? He isn't walking among us. The Ascension explains why, but he isn't here. We still seem to be struggling all these years later, people still get sick and die, injustice is all around us, fear and hatred are on the rise. What difference does it make even if Christ is risen from the grave?

In our reading from 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul insists it makes a great deal of difference. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," he says, "we are of all people most to be pitied." In other words, if there is no resurrection, we have made a disastrous choice in following Jesus. Why? Because everything hinges on resurrection, not

just whether there is life after death, but whether the powers of evil and injustice, oppression and persecution, can ever be overcome.

This is why Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the other disciples are disconsolate at the beginning of the reading from John 20. It is not just that Jesus, their friend and mentor, has died a brutal death, though this is devastating, but there has been more at stake. They have left everything to follow him. They have bet it all on the promise that he will bring hope when no one else can. They have trusted him with their lives, trusted that he would help them overcome the oppression of Rome, trusted that he has a connection to God that can transcend all obstacles.

But now he has died and with him all their hopes and dreams. Victory belongs to the mighty. The Empire prevails. All this talk about service and love, sacrifice and self-giving, overcoming evil and injustice with kindness and humility is just a bunch of nonsense. I think of the Ziggy cartoon in which our friend says, "The meek may inherit the earth, but as soon as they do, the not-so-meek will take it right back."

If Jesus dies and that is the end, everything he has fought for has died with him, and those who follow him are on a doomed path. This way of sacrifice and self-giving love will never work in the real world, and when they die, even if it is for their faith, that will be the end.

But if Jesus is raised, since he is, Paul says, everything changes. There is hope for more than this life, and there is hope that in the end, love will prevail. Christ will ultimately overcome every ruler and every authority and every power, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death. For Paul and others in the early church, this does not mean Rome collapses immediately nor does it mean the church is free from persecution. It means that God's way of love and justice will win in the end, and thus the faithful are willing to risk their lives for it, trusting that as death does not have the final word for Jesus, it will not for them.

This is what the resurrection means for early believers, and it means something similar for us. That there is hope for something more than this life is still significant. No matter how sophisticated we become, and no matter how far science advances, finitude is a stubborn thing, like all facts of life. And the fact that our life will one day end,

like that of every living thing, creates existential anxiety we try our best to deny, but it is still there, eating away at us.

A well-known existentialist once said that while he did not believe in God or any kind of afterlife, living with this perspective left him feeling desolate. It was like peering into a bottomless well. So, he said he chose to live as if there is a God and an afterlife. It takes a gift for mental gymnastics to pull that off, but so does any denial of death.

The Easter story does not provide proof for an afterlife, any more than “near-death” stories do. The only proof is in the crucible of experience which we all get to sample someday. How we live now is a matter of faith, not proof, but the testimony of our faith is that Jesus dies and is raised as a sign of hope that there is more than this life in what a predecessor of mine called “the mystery of the resurrection.” Early believers who encounter the Risen Christ and have their lives transformed by him, in addition to believers to this day who encounter Christ’s Spirit and are changed by it add our witness to this testimony.

But just as hope for life after death is not the only thing at stake in resurrection for early believers, it is not the only thing at stake for us. There is still evil and injustice, oppression and persecution for us to confront. There is poverty and violence we strive to eliminate but only see grow. There may not be a Roman Empire, it died a long time ago — like all empires throughout history, it had a beginning and an end — but there are still Empires that oppress, for example, a hostile aggressor like Russia or an expanding power like China. And the truth is we might also see elements of Empire at work in our own land where freedoms are disappearing, advancements are being halted, lies and deceitful propaganda are replacing facts and truth, and fear is used to control.

It may feel like we are losing the battle, and any effort to turn things around by following a humble Nazarene may seem destined for failure. Kindness and compassion, sacrifice and self-service can’t change things in the real world with its raw power. And if the cross is the end, we might just be resigned to this perspective.

But the cross is not the end. The prospect of resurrection means that God is not finished even when it seems like God is. There is another chapter to the story. Love will cast out fear, justice will prevail

over wrongdoing, life will overcome death in the end. As a result, we have the motivation we need to continue engaging the struggle between good and evil. We have reason to believe that a life of sacrifice and self-service makes sense. We can trust that God's realm will prevail over all the Empires of this world. Everything may not be accomplished in our time, but our efforts will not be in vain, and even in the worst-case scenario, one which costs us everything, all will not be lost because this life is not all there is.

The 1986 film "The Mission" illustrates how what may appear to be tragic is not from an eternal perspective. Based loosely in history, the film tells the story of Jesuit missionaries who serve in South America in the 18th century and a former mercenary and slave trader who is doing penance for having killed his half-brother in a duel.

The missionaries seek to convert the Guarani in the Paraguayan jungle, but they also share music with their new friends and become fond of them and their culture. So, when political realities change, traders come to take the Guarani into slavery, and the church calls the Jesuits home, they refuse to go. Instead, they decide to stay with and defend the Guarani, the former mercenary with weapons, the Jesuits with their love. They are killed in the process whereupon one church official present calls the event sad but inevitable, saying, "We must work in the world, Your Eminence; the world is thus," to which another replies, "No... thus have we made the world. Thus I have made it."

Is this a tragic ending? In many ways it is, this is not a Disney film! But in the light of resurrection, it is not hopeless. The Jesuits, at least in the film, remain on the path Jesus blazes, even when it costs them their lives, but death is not the end. They do not free the Guarani, but in time, they will be freed, and only because others, like the Jesuits, speak up for them.

Furthermore, the final clergy exchange is enlightening. The world is not fixed as it is, it is what we make it, in God's grace, more like God's intent or less. There is hope here, as well incentive to be about the work of God's realm. Christ is Risen! So what? That's what and much more!