



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

# The Resurrection: The End and the Beginning

## What Difference Does It Make?

### *Easter*

Most Lenten programs—with a certain logic—end before Holy Week. The liturgical demands generally take over. Since this study series is based on the lectionary readings for Lent, however, there ought to be a sense of completion, which would seem to demand the inclusion of a conversation about the resurrection.

Let me begin by stating what is both my personal bias and the historic faith of the church. The resurrection is not ancillary to the faith, it is the faith. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “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” (1 Corinthians 15:13–14). This session is not intended to convince anyone of the veracity of the Christian claim that Christ rose from the dead.

That is a matter of personal faith. The focus of this study is to look at the texts in their literary, historical and theological contexts, to understand and hopefully feel their implications for us individually and corporately, in our own time and place. So, let's get on with the task at hand.

## Opening Prayer

O God, who for our redemption gave your only beloved Son to death on the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to our sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of the resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Before we look at the gospel accounts of that first Easter morning, it might be of some value to look back at the words of the prophet Isaiah. Ask a member of the group to read the following passage. Then, following a time for silent reflection, have the passage read again, by another voice and, if possible, from a different translation.

### Isaiah 25:6–9

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On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured  
wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all  
faces,

and the disgrace of his people he will take away  
from all the earth,

for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that  
he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be  
glad and rejoice in his salvation.

In plenary, ask the group to discuss the following questions (7–10 minutes):

- 1) What phrase or image jumps out at you?
- 2) What are the connections to the Easter story and to the discussions we have had over the past several weeks about the mission and ministry of Jesus?

Record the thoughts that emerge.

## Some Thoughts Perhaps Worth Sharing

The followers of Jesus surely struggled to convey their experience of Jesus risen from the dead. Can you blame them—really? How do you begin to find the right words to explain the inexplicable? When what they had experienced so profoundly defied human understanding, they were able to begin their conversations by finding language and images in the words of the prophets. They understood the resurrection in terms of the fulfilment of the vision of Isaiah.

Death was indeed swallowed up in victory. The action of God would indeed wipe away death as the end of an individual's existence, but much more is at stake here. In Christ, God did indeed swallow up death forever, but that precious gift of eternal life does not lift us out of the reality of suffering and death in this world. For the prophet Isaiah, death does not refer only to the end of an individual's life; it is also a metaphor for the daily death, which is the

struggle, pain and suffering of human existence. It is the consequence of the power of the forces of evil and oppression that tear down and destroy human life. That death impacts on all people of all nations. The tears that would be wiped away were not just the tears of grief over the loss of a loved one, but the tears of those who understood what it meant to be vanquished and oppressed. They were the tears of humiliation and pain.

The reference to the feast of fabulous food and fine wine is interesting. John Dominic Crossan suggests that it is not those who eat regularly and well who envisioned God's intervention as a banquet. Rather, this is the vision of those for whom providing food is a daily challenge, for whom eating well is not an option, and for whom eating at all may be episodic. The resurrection, for the early Christians, represented both the initiation of and the invitation to that banquet, which was the end of oppression and the beginning of a new way of being.

Take 10 minutes to deal with the following question:

- 3) From this perspective, how does this passage from Isaiah link to the resurrection of Jesus and to how he and the early church understood his mission and ministry?

The lectionary gives us the option of two gospel readings for Easter. Rather than choose, it may be instructive to look at both. Have both passages read by members of the group. Allow a time of silence between gospel accounts to let what has been heard be absorbed.

## Mark 16:1–8

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### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices,

so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## John 20:1–18

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### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

## Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Now, in small groups, have the participants discuss the following questions (20 minutes):

- 4) As you read both gospel texts suggested for Easter, what similarities and differences do you notice?
- 5) How do you suppose the hopes and expectations of the disciples were changed by the crucifixion?
- 6) How were their lives transformed by the news that he had been raised from the dead?

Have a participant read the following:

## 1 Corinthians 15:13–14

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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.

But that is not the faith of the church. The church for the last two millennia has shouted from the rooftops that Jesus Christ is risen! That statement is not ancillary to the faith—it is the faith. Is it empirically verifiable? Of course not. But it is the very core of Christian belief. Without the resurrection, ours is a story of an itinerant preacher who, by all reports, did some rather extraordinary things while initiating a social movement to challenge the authorities of the day. Unfortunately it did not end well. He was executed. Interesting enough reading, I suppose, but so what? But that is not what we affirm. That is not what we proclaim. While it may seem an affront to many in our computer enabled, social media driven, increasingly secular world, we are an Easter people.

To say that we are an Easter people is to affirm three essential truths: death is not the end; life is. Violence, evil and oppression will not win the day; love will. This is God's world, not Caesar's. That is the Good News! That is worth getting excited about! That is a message to celebrate!

All of that is well and good, but when the alleluias of Easter die down and we return to life as normal, what does it look like to live as an Easter people? It is one thing to say we are, but it is quite another to demonstrate what that means as we go about the daily routine of life.

Listen again to the words of Paul.

## 1 Corinthians 15:54–58

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"Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable,

always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

## Teaching Moment

N. T. Wright, in his marvellous book *Surprised by Hope*, offers some valuable insights about what it means to live as an Easter people.

But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build for the kingdom. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians 15:58 once more: what you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that is about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that is shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in the garden that is about to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that in due course will become part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a child to read or to walk; every active care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God’s re-creation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and

continues mysteriously as God’s people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God’s new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there....

But I know that God’s new world of justice and joy, of hope for the whole earth, was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning, and I know that he calls his followers to live in him and by the power of his Spirit and so to be new—creation people here and now, bringing signs and symbols of the kingdom to birth on earth as in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit mean that we are called to bring real and effective signs of God’s renewed creation to birth even in the midst of the present age. Not to bring works and signs of renewal to birth within God’s creation is ultimately to collude with the forces of sin and death themselves.

—N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, HarperOne, pp. 208–9.

## Bringing It Home

In small groups, talk about the following questions (20–30 minutes):

- 7) What is the hope that is offered by the resurrection? (for us individually and for the world God created)
- 8) How does the resurrection shape what it means for us to follow in the “Way” of Jesus? What strength comes from being an Easter people?
- 9) How does this define the mission and ministry of the church?

Record any insights and feelings that emerge.

Take the time to affirm the participants for their efforts and their commitment to the journey they have shared over the past several weeks.

It may well be appropriate to bring this journey to an end by sharing in an informal eucharist. If not, close with a time of prayer for one another, the church and the world we are committed to serve, in Jesus' name.

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