

I Am the Resurrection and the Life
Stadium Village Church
March 23, 2008

I read a story about a Sunday School teacher who was telling her young students about the Easter story. She told them about Jesus had been killed and that His body was placed in a tomb. A large rock was rolled in front of the doorway to the tomb. Then on Easter morning this huge rock was rolled away and Jesus came back to life. She then asked her young students about what they thought were the first words that Jesus said after rising from the dead and coming out of the tomb. A little girl in the back quickly raised her hand and was saying, "I know, I know, I know." So the teacher called on her and asked – "What do you think Jesus said?" And the little girl responded by standing up, stretching out her hands and saying "Ta da!"*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a "ta da" moment – in fact it was and is the greatest "ta da" moment ever. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ was not raised from the dead our preaching is useless, our faith is useless, and we are still trapped in our sins. If Christ is not raised from the dead we should be pitied because we are following a cause that cannot help us.

But Christ did rise from the dead – He was resurrected back to life by the power of God. In fact, the resurrection is not just one of our beliefs as Christians, it is central to our beliefs. Right from the beginning, every branch of Christianity had at its core a belief in the fact that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. The belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to who we are as Christians.

A short time before His crucifixion, Jesus taught His disciples an important lesson about the resurrection. Jesus had been on the east side of the Jordan River with His followers. Some messengers came and told Him that His good friend Lazarus was very ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were friends who lived in Bethany, a village near Jerusalem. When Jesus heard the news about Lazarus, He stayed where He was for two more days. He then said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." His disciples questioned Him – why do that – they want to kill You in Jerusalem. Jesus said that they were going to wake up Lazarus. The disciples thought that Jesus meant that Lazarus was sleeping and getting better but Jesus told them that Lazarus had died. So they all went toward Jerusalem, realizing they may be killed.

When the family heard that Jesus was near, Martha went out to meet Him on the road. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus said, "Your brother will live."

Martha said: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha said – "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Martha goes back, tells her sister Mary that Jesus is here. Mary runs out to see Jesus, falls to His feet, and says the same thing Martha did: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus was very moved by her weeping and those with her. Jesus asks where they have laid the body. And it says in John 11:35 that Jesus wept – the shortest verse in the Bible that says a great deal.

Jesus then tells the people to take away the stone in front of the tomb and He calls Lazarus to come out – and he does. After being dead for four days, Lazarus comes back to life. It was significant that Lazarus was in the tomb that many days for it was the belief among Jews that after three days, a person's spirit finally leaves the body. So after this long, a person is really dead.

When Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life, He was urging His followers not to just believe in a doctrine but to believe in Him. He is the reason for death to be conquered. In raising Lazarus from the death, He put out notice that death is vulnerable. Raising Lazarus from the dead is not the same what would happen when Jesus was raised from the dead. Rather, it pointed to the fact that death will eventually be destroyed.

In a few short days, Jesus would face death Himself. He would enter Jerusalem, be arrested, condemned, and then crucified. Some of you were with us on Thursday evening when some of us shared a meal together, had Communion, and took a few moments to remember the night before Jesus was arrested. Then on Friday night we gathered together and took time to remember how Jesus was nailed to a cross, died, and was buried. At that time, we considered our own sins, wrote some of them on a piece of paper and nailed it to this wooden cross. Now on this Easter morning, we are celebrating the fact that Jesus came back to life – God raised Him from the dead. He was resurrected.

Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead – not like Lazarus whose body would still eventually die, but rather His new body, while touchable and seeable, would never die. He could eat, be touched, and be recognized by His followers, but it was no longer bound by natural forces.

This news – that Jesus died, was buried, and was resurrected is the greatest news possible for us humans. This is not just an interesting bit of trivia to add to our list of things we should know, this is the central event in human history. Therefore, in this short amount of time, we cannot adequately explore much of the consequences of this great news. So this morning, I don't have three concise points like usual – but rather I have a few things that I believe God put on my heart as I thought and read about Easter these past days. These are not concise, logical points, but rather a collection of things to which the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ call us.

First, the resurrection of Jesus Christ calls us to faith. The resurrection verifies that He is who He claimed to be. Jesus said that He was One with the Father, that He was the Son of God, that would die, rise again, and provide forgiveness for sins. By rising from the dead Jesus verified that what He claimed was true.

Now some of you may not be all that convinced that Jesus did rise from the dead. I thought it good to remind ourselves of some of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How can we be sure that Jesus really did rise from the dead? It will always be a matter of faith – believing in something one cannot truly prove. For me the following three kinds of evidence are most helpful.

Actions - the actions of the disciples were dramatically changed by the resurrection. They were not planning for such an event, they were not expecting such an event, in fact they had to be convinced that it happened. But once convinced it dramatically affected their lives. There is evidence that almost all of His closest followers were killed for believing and proclaiming that Jesus lived, died, and rose from the dead. A person doesn't do that for something they know is not true.

Bible - the Bible said it happened. It is not just an isolated few verses, but rather it is a central theme of the Bible. And with the overall reliability of the Bible, it is a reliable testimony that Jesus in fact rose from the dead.

Church - the church, the people who believed in Jesus and wanted to follow Him, grew very rapidly right from the beginning. In the face of much opposition, the number of people who became followers of Jesus Christ grew without force, without government support, without a clever marketing campaign, and without big church buildings. Rather the number of people who followed Jesus Christ grew through the proclamation of the news about Jesus and by showing love to others. For example, Christians were known for their caring for the sick when a plague would come to a city. They were known to care for the sick and dying even at risk of losing their lives. People don't join such a cause when they know it is based on a lie.

Those are three important pieces of evidence for the reliability of the record about Jesus dying and rising again. There are many more things that could be said, but it will come to a matter of faith – believing something is reliably supported but cannot be really proved. But these three – actions, Bible, church - can be used when talking with friends who are skeptical about your faith.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus Christ calls us to hope. It shows us that death has been conquered. Jesus Christ is the God the Son. He came to live as a human being. By dying and rising from the dead with a new resurrection body, He became the first human being to go through death to resurrection. He broke open the doors that kept us humans captive. We are assured that one day we will follow Him and be a resurrected person who can spend eternity with God.

Third, Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, His submitting to mistreatment and cruel execution calls us to humility. Jesus, although He was God, allowed Himself to be humiliated and killed. We are called to humility as well. One of the best indicators of being humble is our interest in others. Do we show real interest and concern for those around us?

You have been in conversations with someone in which all they do is talk about themselves. They ask you no questions, they show little interest in your opinions; it is all about them. Then you meet others who ask caring questions, talk little about themselves, and are more interested in your opinions than telling you theirs. That is a good sign of humility. I would challenge each of us that after having a conversation, think about what you learned about the other person and how much of the talking did you do.

Fourth, I believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus call us to comfort one another. Both the raising of Lazarus and the death of Jesus tell us that God shares in our suffering. The fact that Jesus suffered one of the cruelest ways of execution, tells us that God knows the pain of living and dying as a human. We cannot explain why there is suffering, but we can know that God is familiar with it. It is interesting and important that Jesus, although He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead – yet He was moved to tears by what had happened. Why didn't He say to the people – stop crying, I'm here, everything is going to be fine? Rather we see God crying. I think it shows that God knows well the pain and sorrow people experience in this world. Even though God knows and promises ultimate victory over every problem, He is affected by the pain that we experience. When life's problems seem tough, and it doesn't seem that God is answering our prayers, we may be tempted to think that God doesn't care and doesn't know how hard it is. But the fact that Jesus entered our suffering world shows that He does know and He does care.

The fact that God cares about the struggles and pains of others, calls me to care for others. Frankly, that doesn't come automatically. At times, when I hear about someone's problem, it brings me to tears. The other day, someone shared with me a family concern. I guess it was something that I could relate to because of things I have

experienced. When I prayed, it was like I was feeling the pain myself. But I confess that at other times, the troubles people are having do not connect with me emotionally. I can't force myself to feel their hurt, but I can take steps care. I can put their name on a prayer list; I can take action to help; and I can pray that God gives me a heart of compassion.

Fifth, the resurrection of Jesus calls us to work. It is extremely important that Jesus was raised to life with a new but tangible body. It apparently looked like the old body, but His body, as well as the body we receive when we are resurrected, is new and is prepared to spend eternity with God. It is important that Jesus' resurrected body was tangible. First, it gave evidence to Jesus' disciples that He really did rise from the dead – it was not just a spirit or ghost – but a real person who could eat breakfast and be touched.

It is also important that Jesus' new body, and the one we receive, is real and tangible, for it points to the nature of the new heaven and new earth that will be our eternal dwelling. It tells that it will be real – not just some spiritual, nonmaterial existence. But something like we have now only redeemed by God – made new and will be eternal. But is that important and does it affect us now. I believe the answer is a resounding YES.

In chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians Paul gives a strong argument for the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therefore our own resurrection. Paul ends the chapter with a rousing few lines that have become part of Handel's Messiah. He tells us that the dead will be raised in corruptible and that those living will be changed in a moment. Death has been swallowed up. Death no longer has a sting. It has been defeated. God gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ. And then Paul adds these instructions that almost seem out of place:

^{1Co 15:58} Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

One would think that after that rousing argument for the victory in Jesus Christ, work would be pretty low on the list. But Paul says, Therefore....always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord....

The fact that Christ's new body was real and tangible, as N.T. Wright points out, indicates that there is vital and important continuity as well as discontinuity between this world and that which is to be. Easter and Pentecost mark the beginning of a new creation.** Therefore, what we do now in this life has importance. We do not actually build the kingdom of God with our own hard work, but on the other hand our work is important. God doesn't simply throw everything in the trash as He creates a new creation. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, if we build on the right foundation with gold, silver or precious stones, it will last.

In John 20:21-23, we read that Jesus commissioned His disciples by saying they are sent into the world, they will receive the Spirit, and they are to declare God's forgiveness and His righteousness. As we go about our vocations, we are to be guided and empowered by the Spirit, we are to work in this world in ways that our work will last, and we are to proclaim that God forgives but also oppose what is wrong in this world.

*From David E. Leininger, Collected Sermons

** N.T. Wright in The Challenge of Jesus