

The Story of God and Us: Resurrection

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:3-5 (NRSV)

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him! That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. Romans 8:15-21 The Message

So, remember that we're focusing on the whole story of God. This narrative that God is at work in our lives and is moving toward something. I want you to encourage you to learn or memorize it. I always say I didn't memorize my children's names, I learned them. I want you to learn the story of God. We're going to say what we've gone through already together. The words are there on your screen, so why don't you join as we read it all together.

God created the world and everything in it because God desired a relationship with us. We have free will, and our SIN moves us away from God so decidedly that we cannot overcome the separation on our own. But God reaches out to us to overcome our separation by creating COVENANTS - agreements to take care of us that God will uphold no matter what.

Through the INCARNATION of Jesus, we were brought into the deepest possible intimacy with God. Jesus entered the world to lead us back into the harmony from which we had fallen away to ATONE for our sins on the cross, overcoming the powers of evil. Victory over sin and death was achieved when Jesus was RESURRECTED after the crucifixion. God dwells in each Christian to guide, strengthen, and comfort through the HOLY SPIRIT.

The Spirit assembled a community of believers to become the church that worships and fulfills God's mission: to inaugurate the Kingdom on Earth. One day God will COMPLETE the new creation. There will be no more evil or suffering, and everything in the world will be restored and set right.

We'll be talking about that resurrection today. Check out this little video that reminds us of the Story of God.

Let's pray together. *Gracious, God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So, a little boy was in his Sunday school class in the days leading up to Easter. The teacher asked the question, "Do any of you know what Easter is all about - what Easter means?" And the little boy eagerly raised his hand and said, "I absolutely know." She said, "Well, tell us." He said, "On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross for us." She said, "Yes, very good." Then the little boy continued. "Then they put him in a tomb. And he was dead." The teacher said, "Yes, that's true." Then the little boy went on, "Then on Easter Sunday morning, he rose from the dead and he came out of the tomb." The teacher said, "Yes, that's exactly right!" Then the boy said, "Then he saw his shadow, and he ran back in the tomb, and there were six more weeks of winter!"

That's a stupid preacher's joke, but I like to tell it every few years because I just love it so much. But what it says to us is that so much of the time, we get some of the understanding of what Easter's about, but we miss the most important parts. And I think that's true for us.

So, here's what I want us to understand about the resurrection. Why is the resurrection important? Last week we said, "Here's what the atonement means for us - but what does the resurrection mean for us?"

And here's what I would tell you. The resurrection makes us people of hope. Here's our Scripture from 1 Peter 1:3; "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

"A new birth into a living hope!"

Peter, the author of this passage, is often thought of as the apostle of hope. If you go to the Notre Dame cathedral in Bologna - this isn't the one in Paris, but the one in Bologna. There on the mosaic floor as you come in are three words. The first word is *credo*, then the next is *spiro*, and the third word is *amo*. This means *I believe, I hope, I love*.

Some say these are built around the three great writers of the New Testament – Paul's saying, "I believe," focusing on faith. Peter is focusing on hope and the apostle John whose focus is love.

Peter writes to a Jewish audience that has been persecuted, and the persecutions have grown and gotten worse and worse, and he continues to tell them, "You need to hang in there; you need to continue to live lives of holiness because God is going to redeem us. The new creation has begun. Don't give up but hold on and continue to live lives of a living hope."

So, what's the basis, the aim, and what are we actually hoping for? What gives us hope as Christians? How does the resurrection do that?

I want to share three things. First, it gives us hope because when we die, we go to heaven. Now isn't that we were taught. That when we die, we go to heaven. That's what the resurrection is about. The song, "I'll Fly Away, Sweet Jesus," says, "One day I'll fly away!" It's clear that it's there in Scripture. Jesus says to the thief on the cross, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Paul says that he struggles with whether it's better to stay and remain in ministry or to "depart and be with the Lord."

In the Gospel of John, the writer talks about eternal life and that this is something that we can experience right now. We experience that eternal life in a relationship with Jesus, and that eternal life continues through death. That even death will not separate us from God's love. So that love of God will continue, and eternal life will continue through death as well.

There's no question of that picture of going to heaven is there in Scripture. But what's so interesting is that it isn't a major concern of the early Christian writers. Rather, it's viewed as sort of a - for lack of a better word - an intermission—time of leaving and being with God as a time of waiting and preparation.

Listen again to what the Scripture from 1 Peter says, "We are given a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation..." And here's the key phrase - "...ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:4-5).

So, the picture is that while we're with God in heaven, it's a time of preparation, a time of waiting.

Many of you had flooding in your homes during Hurricane Harvey. So, you left your homes, and you went to stay with friends or relatives, and they might have had a really nice house, and it was a wonderful time to be there. But, friends, that was not the end game. The end game was getting your own house fixed up, getting it right again, so you can return to it and be there and redecorate it yourself.

That's the picture that we get - of heaven as that time of being with God as we prepare for something that is still yet to be.

I like to think about it like if you were the starting pitcher in a baseball game. You go in and live your life and do the best you can and try to keep your team in the game. Then the manager comes out and calls you off, and you go and sit on the bench, and you go hang out with the guys. You hang out with the manager himself, and you chew your sunflower seeds, and you spit them on the ground. But now you're just on the side cheering them on. That's what the saints in glory do - they've gone on to be a part of the Church Triumphant. They are those who have done their part and are now waiting. But the real conclusion is that moment at the end when the champagne corks are popped, and we all get to be a part of the spraying of champagne and the victory celebration.

The first thing we would say is that we have hope that we're people of hope in Christ because, indeed, when we die, we go to heaven. But again, that's not resurrection.

Resurrection is something else. The second thing is we have hope for our own resurrection. That's the salvation that's ready to be revealed in the last days—the last time.

Here's what I want you to understand. Resurrection is a physical thing. When Jesus died, he was dead. He was dead for two days in that tomb. And what God did was bring him back to life again. The word for *resurrection* in Greek is *anastasis*, which means literally to stand up, to stand something up. So, it's like Jesus stood up again. And when the disciples went into that tomb, they didn't find a dead body whose spirit had gone, and they found that the body was missing. And later on, he sits down with the disciples by the Sea of Galilee and cooks breakfast on a charcoal fire for them. They eat it together. He says to Thomas, "Put your fingers in the holes in my hand to say, Look, you can touch me." It's not a body exactly like our body, but it's different in that he can move through walls and other things. He suddenly appears in a room where the doors were locked. But there's a physicality to the resurrection in the story.

Let me read to you what C.S. Lewis says about resurrection: "The earliest Christian documents give a casual and unemphatic assent to the belief that the supernatural part of a man survives the death of the natural organism. But they are very little interested in the matter. What they are intensely interested in is the restoration or 'resurrection' of the whole composite creature by a miraculous divine act."

Here's the way Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 15 - a marvelous chapter if you want to understand resurrection you should read that chapter. He wrote: "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ as the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:22-23)

I like that image of the first fruits. Firstfruits were always the best. You'd bring the first fruit of your harvest to the temple as an offering. Christ was the firstfruits and then later come the rest of us, who belong to Christ. That's the picture we get of the resurrection, that Jesus was raised first, and there's a day coming for the rest of us.

It says we're given these new bodies that are even better than our old ones. I don't know what your relationship with your body is. It's a funny thing - we all have sort of a love/hate relationship with our bodies, don't we? We want them to look good, and sometimes we take care of them, and sometimes we abuse them. Sometimes we whine about them, and sometimes we wish we had another one. But none of us want to lose them.

The Jews understood that life exists in a body, that life doesn't exist outside of a body but inside a body. Our thinking is built on chemicals moving through our consciousness, it's built on neurons moving, and you take those neurons away, we don't have life. We're given bodies, and

they are better bodies, they're unfading, undefiled. To use the image in 1 Corinthians 15, they're "raised in glory." It's a marvelous picture.

I was at a graveside service this last week at Glenwood Cemetery. It's over on Washington Avenue, and if you've never been there, I encourage you to go sometime and just drive through it. It's got all these elevation changes, and it's so beautiful. The front part of the cemetery, the part closest to Washington Street, is the oldest. It's got some old monuments, all very well maintained, and some of them are from the 1800s. There are places where there are multiple buried children who clearly died before their parents. I sit there and look across that, and I think of all the grief and the pain that has gone on in that place. But then I also think about what is to come. As the old spiritual says, "On that Great, Gettin' Up Morning" when there shall be that great reunion. That time when all are together again. It's going to be a marvelous day.

You see, in the resurrection, death is defeated, and we look forward to that time when our own lives are restored again, and we're with those whom we love.

That's pretty awesome, but as they say in the infomercials, "But wait, there's more!" You see, we have hope as Christians because the resurrection is the beginning of a new creation. Here's what funny. On Easter Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, pastors are always bummed out. We always struggle because the attendance has fallen so far. Here's what happens. In January, we're off to a good start. Usually, we have good crowds, and the people are here because they're made New Year's resolutions to come back to church. Then Lent begins, and the faithful have decided they really want to experience Lent. So, as they go through Lent, they decide they might give up something for Lent. They begin a time of confession; introspection, and they work at it. Then we get to Holy Week, and it's a powerful time, and we go through Palm Sunday. Then we go through Maundy Thursday, then Good Friday, and you can feel the power building. Then on Easter, we have this glorious Sunday, this wonderful time when we celebrate the resurrection. The places are packed. Then the next Sunday nobody comes. Well, people come, but it's a really different kind of thing.

The problem is that from then on, we get a little bump at Mother's day, but from then on, it's kind of back to usual. The problem is that it's like Easter is the end of something, but the truth is that Easter is the *beginning* of something. Easter is - to use the words of the great N.T. Wright, "Easter is nothing less than the launching of the new creation." It is the beginning of God re-creating the world and the cosmos and everything that's in it.

Dan Epp-Tiessen is a Mennonite professor in Canada and let me read to you what he writes: "Resurrection of the body does not mean that God will somehow need to re-gather our molecules, but the resurrection of Christ constitutes God's promise that our present embodied lives will someday be even more real and solid as they are granted an incorruptible physicality."

What we were saying before it's a different kind of body we're given, but it is a body.

He continues: "Resurrection is body-and earth-affirming because the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine. Resurrection is the defining event of God's new creation, and so the early Christians believed that God would someday do for the cosmos what God had already done for Jesus Christ."

So, remember our story. God created the world, and it was good. We messed it up. God continued to try and restore this relationship with us and with covenants and finally did so through Jesus Christ. Then through the resurrection, we still have this messed up broken world, and death still reigns. But through the resurrection, God launches that new creation to begin to put it back the way it was to be before.

Have you ever noticed that Mary Magdalene at the tomb mistakes Jesus for the gardener? That's not a simple detail that's there for no reason. That reminds us that this is a new beginning, just like the Garden of Eden was a new beginning. This is the new creation. The Scripture says that "In Christ, all things are made new...." Not just all people, it's not just that we're given a new life. It's just that all things, all of the cosmos, all of creation is made new again.

Well, you might say, "I don't see it. The world is still broken. It's been 2000 years, and there are still all the problems and the brokenness and pain, and all death and grief. It's still all here."

Romans 8 gives us a little bit of a different image to help us understand this. It says it's like we're in labor pains right now, giving birth to this new creation, that we're groaning in labor. And that God is sort of holding everything back until the right time. So those of us who are here, what are we supposed to be doing? We're getting ready for the new creation. We're putting the child locks on the kitchen cabinets, we're putting the plugs in the electrical outlets, we're putting the crib together, and we're painting the nursery. We're getting the house ready for the new creation. So on that day when it's fulfilled, everything will be made new. That's the work we're called today. That's who we're called to be.

I've been visiting with people a lot over the last few weeks about a lot of the challenges in the world around us. It's clear they're still there. We've talked about racism, not just how prevalent it is, but how do you fix it? What's the right answer? Obviously, we've talked about disease over the last months. But before that, there were other issues, and they're still here. There's sex trafficking, and we've been through this "me-too" revelation where we understand about sexual harassment and about the disparities between men and women in the workplace. We've learned about gun violence, and we've talked about the decline of the family and the rising rate of divorce. You could go on and on with all the challenges and brokenness around us. And it just seems that what happens is that here's the issue du jour, and next month there'll be another issue du jour.

It's like that phrase in "Dumb and Dumber" where he asks, "What's the soup du jour?" "It's the soup of the day," And he says, "Well, I'll have some of that." It's kind of like we approach it that way. But if you're not careful, what happens is that you become jaded and cynical. Or you get full of despair.

But what we understand is that all of these single individual issues have one key root, and that's sin. That's the core issue. So, our job right now is as the new creation is coming to pass is that those things need to go away. They are going to be fixed in the new creation that is coming. And in the meantime, we go about our business doing the best we can to put the pieces together.

We don't despair because we know the end game, that the new creation is coming.

In the resurrection death is defeated, and sin is defeated.

I don't know if you're an Astros fan and if you were in the old days back when the Astros were in the National League, Billy Wagner was our closer. You'd get to that point where coming into the ninth inning you'd hear the Metallica song "Enter Sandman" and here would come Billy Wagner trotting in from the bullpen. And you'd cheer, "Here he comes! Here he comes!" The game is not over, but, in your mind, you know, "The game's over because Billy Wagner is coming in!"

That's where we are right now, friends. We know that one day the game is over, and we've been promised the end already. That in the resurrection the new creation is coming. And we get to be a part of it.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks that you have placed in our hearts a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And that you are holding for us this inheritance that is undefiled and unfading and imperishable that we will get to experience ourselves on that last day. And so, while we walk this planet, God, we pray that you would show us how to do our part to prepare for, to be a sign of, an instrument of that new creation that you began in the resurrection. And live as a people of hope. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*