

Luke 24:1-12; Easter April 21, 2019
1 Peter 1:1-5

Greater Hope

The greatest thing found on Easter wasn't a basket or some eggs... It was an empty tomb. Of course, an empty tomb doesn't prove resurrection. Yet the Bible makes it quite clear that He rose physically – the tomb was empty, no body, no bones ever found (even to this day). And His appearance to many sure proved His resurrection. ...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands... says the apostle John (1 Jn. 1:1). His resurrection is the hinge of history on which hangs the fate of humanity.

What do I mean by that? I mean this: since the dawn of time humans have been trying to make sense of life. That's what religion is. They've devised rituals based upon folktales, mythological heroes and heroines, representations of the metaphysical and untamed powers, local and national deities designed to understand death, tribalism and race as somehow giving immortality, and even secular, utopian ideologies (like socialism/communism or anarchism). In the name of all humanity, these "isms" purport to bring good to all, even if individuals are crushed in the process.

But Jesus was not religion, Jesus was and is history! Of Him you can speak of time, place, his birth, his life, miracles, death and resurrection ... and powerfully changed lives. In Jesus Christ and His resurrection God entered time. Because of Him we can know that we are not alone in this vast universe. We are not relegated to creating stories to explain the inexplicable, for God's story has intersected our stories. He has entered our stories, giving us meaning and purpose to life, and bringing us living hope.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, we wouldn't know about Him, and even less about who God is and who we are. But in fact, He did rise from death. Still, how can the resurrection of Jesus do anything for you or me? It happened a long time ago, far, far away. Well, first off let's acknowledge a simple truth:

Life Is Tough

We all know, or will soon know, that life is hard ... though we all wish or think it should be easy. It's been that way since the dawn of history, when humans turned away from their Creator, trusting instead in themselves alone to make life what it cannot be without God. That is why brokenness and pain and hardship permeate human life and history. And what awaits us at the end? When humans choose to turn from the One who said, "Let there be light," they find themselves facing darkness ... an unending darkness.

Death Defeated

But there is an alternative to this sad picture. It is Jesus' resurrection intersecting our stories. Not only does it vindicate His life and teachings, His resurrection also soundly defeats the inevitability of death. Turning away from God, separation from our Creator that leads to a dark path, was defeated in its bid to be the defining principle of our lives. That's why we repeat these words: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life, John 3:16.

Author C. S. Lewis put it this way, “He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death.”¹ The darkness and loneliness of death, including – hear me now - including the little deaths that we all experience on a regular basis in every instance of broken relationships, broken promises, broken hope, and every misdeed or lie that we commit ... all the things that leave emotional and spiritual scars and even Death with a capital “D” that awaits us in the grave ... all of that is defeated by Christ’s resurrection. He is the conduit of life.

Resurrection Doubted

A recent survey (2016 Rasmussen) shows that almost three-quarters of Americans believe in the resurrection. But if you ask them why it matters not many could give an answer that has much to do with the teaching of the Bible or the Christian faith. Most Americans have a general (if vague) belief in some kind of life after death – not much different from many other cultures before us. They have a vague belief in life after death, even while doubting the physical resurrection of Jesus.

But why should it be so difficult to believe that God can raise the dead? He created life, which itself is a miracle, really. The whole of creation and the known universe is a wonder to behold! When you consider the complexity of just our human bodies, it is a mind-boggling miracle how it all functions in harmony! And when it doesn’t, we so painfully notice.

The Bible speaks of Christ’s rising from the dead as the first event of its kind in the history of the universe. But not the last. The resurrection of Jesus was not just one miracle (though that would be astounding enough) rather, it was the decisive beginning of God’s final redemption of all things. God’s new creation began with the resurrection of Jesus. That is what St. Paul is talking about when he writes: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The old creation (Adam and Eve), the old human nature, we know is flawed and fatal. The new creation, heralded in Christ’s resurrection, brings into being all that God originally intended. All the brokenness and evil, all despair and guilt that comes from all your broken relationships, weaknesses, faults, and sin, are embedded in your old nature. With Christ you can have a new nature.

Do you believe that people can be made new? How about you?

Living Hope

St. Peter, one of those who was actually with Jesus before and after His death and resurrection, wrote this: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 1 Peter 1:3.

Take a look at your own life: honest people will admit that life isn’t what it should be, or what they had hoped it would be ... because people mess up. Really honest people admit that they are just as much a part of the problem as anyone else. This is what the Bible calls sin and it brings death, including all those little deaths we experience regularly. That’s what Jesus took with Him to the cross – all of it, for everyone. When He rose from the tomb, He left our sin and death behind, in the grave, where it belongs. And this can be yours

today: The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, Romans 6:10-11. That's living hope!

"Amazing Grace," was at one time deemed the most popular Christian hymn in America. John Newton was the captain of a slave trading ship, until his heart was pierced by the word of God, revealing to him the monstrous sin he was committing. "Amazing Grace" is his testimony to what Jesus did for him, "a wretch" as he put it. He left the slave trade (meaning he repented of it) and found new life, through the healing power of the Holy Spirit. That's why he wrote: "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see."² He was living in hope because Christ had resurrected him from a life full of death.

It still happens today. Some years ago, a friend of mine and his wife became "empty nesters." At a time when most people look to retirement, they took in two foster kids ... kids from troubled homes. Then they adopted them, and life was not without its difficulties. Those two kids today are successful, healthy young adults. Living hope in Christ's resurrection, through this man and his wife, brought life to two kids who otherwise were headed down a dark path.

There are others in this congregation who are similarly giving life to children whom they have adopted. They are examples of living hope in Jesus. I thank God for them. Maybe you know other stories. It could be your story: maybe the grievous loss of a loved one, maybe you or someone close to you has experienced the pain of a divorce; it could be you're trapped in some besetting sin or addiction of substance or sex or anger; maybe your health has crashed, or an injury has sidelined you; it could be a loved one, a child or spouse, who has gone astray into a destructive life. You know what it is ... it's right there, in those hurts, that Jesus' resurrection intersects your story, your life. He's inviting you out of victimhood and bitterness, which our old nature so easily slides into, and instead, bringing you into His victory over it all, healing your wounds and giving you joy. That's a living hope! When you attach yourself to Him ... right there, deeply, in that very place of death ... you will begin to rise with Him. "Made like Him, like Him we rise, Ours the cross, the grave, the skies." Yeah, His resurrection is a big deal!

Glorious Victory

Resurrection is not some vague, esoteric notion ... it's personal connection with a personal God. Eternal life is not a gift from God, eternal life is the gift of God... God with us. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his, Romans 6:5.

Before us is the greatest opportunity on earth. Don't miss it! Thank God His resurrection is gloriously and majestically true! He's our living hope!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*.

² John Newton "Amazing Grace," 1799.