

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION

The events of Holy Week took place in the spring because Jewish Passover takes place in the springtime. Jesus could not bring His challenge of being God's Messiah to His nation except by coming to the temple in Jerusalem at Passover time. But this does not mean that Easter is some tweety-tweet little celebration of springtime or lilies, kids hunting Easter eggs, or women in fresh spring clothes. That's just how our culture tries to treat Easter in most places, in an effort to keep things tame and civilized and up on the surface of life, where it cannot do much damage.

To this day – maybe not here, but in most places – the vast majority of those who come to Holy Week services come only on Easter morning. The Resurrection of our Lord is not seen or understood in the context of the rest of the events of Holy Week. Therefore it cannot be understood with any depth or true significance. “He is risen!” *You mean out of nowhere? Why? And for what? To make us believe, you say? Believe what? So we will know that there is an afterlife?* From at least fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born, every religious Jew has known there is an afterlife. So have most of the adherents of the other great religions of the world. Have we never heard of Enoch or Elijah or Samuel – or even of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration?

Well, then, to make us believe that Jesus is the only true “Son of God.” As a matter of fact, Jesus would disagree with that – not that we pay much attention to what He thinks or says. But even if we do come to believe that, what has it got to do with anything going on in our lives today? There are some really good answers to such questions, but from my perspective most people today do not know them and do not spend very much time thinking about them.

For many Christians, the real issue is this: if we believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, then we will not get thrown into Hell at the end of our life here. I consider that to be pure gibberish – even less significant than the lilies and the Easter bunnies. It does not match the Message or the teachings of the New Testament, unless we warp and twist them through the lens of beliefs that were developed hundreds of years afterward. It does not match with the God that Jesus came to reveal to us and to reconcile us with. It does not fit

with the Christian Gospel, or with its concepts and proclamations about love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy, or with its huge emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So what can a preacher talk about on an Easter morning? If I know ahead of time that most people will reduce everything I try to say to a silly, insignificant little aphorism, is it even faithful to preach on Easter? Maybe we should just wait until next Sunday and try to get back to more sincere and honest worship. On the other hand, most people did not catch on at first to the preaching of Jesus, or of Peter or Paul or John Cotton or Jonathan Edwards or any of the others, so why would I expect it to be easily understood in *our* time?

So here we go again, for those who want to try for the larger picture. First of all, Easter is not the culmination of Jesus' mission and ministry on earth – Pentecost is. Jesus' real mission is not to keep us out of Hell. His real mission is to get us into a relationship with the Holy Spirit so that we too can live a New Life under the guidance, protection, love, and support of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is our Resurrected Lord. Easter is important, but it is even more important to know that we are also invited into this New Life, and that it is still going on today. If Easter is the celebration of an event that took place two thousand years ago and that's all there is to it, then no matter how big the message, it took place too long ago to change or convert very many people today.

Under the tyranny of a twenty-minute sermon, it is nearly impossible to get Easter out of its “stand-alone dead hole.” But if you decide to be receptive enough and willing enough to break past some of the usual borders, we can at least move in that direction.

PALM SUNDAY is absolutely essential to the story. If Jesus had not given us a chance to declare Him our true and rightful Leader, then we would always pretend that we would have welcomed Him and served His Kingdom gladly – if only we had been given the chance to do so. On Palm Sunday, it starts to head in that direction for many. But when the authorities and leaders get serious, the crowds of supporters soon melt away. It is the way of our world, and we all know it. Opinions and even convictions are one thing; having to face Roman steel is a different matter. Even so, we have to face the realities of Palm Sunday in the context of Jesus' story, or we cannot understand what is going on.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

MAUNDY THURSDAY is complex. It is full of the love-bonds between Jesus and His disciples, despite the fact that none of them will stand with Him or die with Him when it comes down to it. The awareness of the coming crucifixion is palpable, but the core command is: *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* It is a foretaste of the coming relationship between the disciples and the Resurrected Jesus – the Holy Spirit. They *must* remember Jesus, or they will not know how to trust or understand the presence of the Holy Spirit. To humans, the Holy Spirit seems nebulous at first, at least in comparison to the flesh-and-blood presence of Jesus of Nazareth. But if the followers remember the mind and heart and purpose of Jesus, they will know the mind and heart and purpose of the Holy Spirit. Maundy Thursday is the transition between life with the physical Jesus and Life with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

But the byplay and the juxtaposition between GOOD FRIDAY and Easter is in some ways the most difficult to understand and face. Jesus died alone and deserted. We want to think – we try to hope – that somehow this was a mistake: that we did not know He was the true King. And on some levels, that may be true. But the “dialogue” is exceedingly troublesome.

And here is the first big glitch. Our culture pays a lot of lip service to religious-sounding theories and precepts, but when it comes down to it, the humans are still in charge. It is *our* love and *our* doing good that is being talked about. We can make a difference, we can save the world – if we just all get together and try hard enough. What has that got to do with God, or God’s Messiah? So for the most part, our culture and our society do not expect any dialogue to be going on between God and us humans, not even in and around the amazing events of Holy Week. Even the people who care typically think about Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and even Easter from a merely human perspective. They do not really believe that there is a true and caring God on the other side of what is going on. They do not hear the dialogue.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus declares Himself the true Messiah and insists on being crowned. Five days later, we do crown Him. Only, it is with a crown of thorns. Derision, mocking, torture. We not only reject the True King, we kill Him as a criminal without one shred of compassion, respect, or justice. It is hard to claim that this is confusion or miscommunication. The “dialogue” from our side is harsh, yet terribly clear. But what if there really *is* the Omnipotent God on the other side of this dialogue?

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

I do know that there are people who spend so little time listening for the influence of the Holy Spirit that they think there is nobody on the other end of the dialogue. For them, all of Holy Week and Easter is a one-sided event that only humans are participating in. Talk about self-centered and blindsided. I suspect and hope that most of *you* know better. But that also makes Holy Week incredibly more difficult.

What *is* our side of Good Friday? Jesus, the true Messiah – God’s anointed – died forsaken and all alone. Some women like to remind me that the women followers of Jesus were present at the crucifixion, but I am not impressed. The women were in no danger. Besides, I hear nothing about the women trying to protest or interfere. On the other hand, any man trying to protest or interfere with the crucifixion or even identified as a “follower of Jesus” was very likely to end up dead himself. The truth is, nobody tried to defend or stand with Jesus at the end. The terrible trilogy still rings in our ears: betrayed, denied, deserted. Jesus died all alone. We prayed and begged God to send the Messiah for seven hundred years. We said we were ready; we said it was our only hope. But when Messiah came, the support was minimal and then faded away entirely. You think there is no dialogue – no “conversation” – going on between us and God? Nobody survives the significance of Good Friday unscathed, though many do try to pretend that they never think about it.

Many of us have no such pretense. So it becomes increasingly difficult to escape the dialogue going on between Good Friday and Easter – between God and us humans. God does not step in. The Son of God is tortured and murdered in the most excruciating manner humans had yet devised. It is almost beyond belief that the Prime Directive holds fast: God does not intervene. God does not save his own Son from our evil. Jesus is the Savior who does not get saved.

Do we imagine that because God is patient, God is also passive? We see the drama from the earth-side of the story, but God’s agony and anger on the other side must have been beyond comprehension. I suspect that the entire universe has never come closer to total annihilation. I am a father, though far from omnipotent, but you will never convince me that God is having an easy time of it on Good Friday. God will not go negative. God will not break all the principles by which God creates and works for our redemption. God will not go over to “The Dark Side,” no matter how many fundamentalists try to tell us that’s the only true Christian theology.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

So do we conclude that God makes no response or reply? That God has no reaction or objection to what we did to Jesus? Call it that way if you want to – call it that way if you can. To me, the Resurrection is not passive or wimpy or unclear. The Resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the most contained, the quietest, the most powerful disagreement our universe has ever heard. Well, in our language, the Resurrection is the most profound “fuck you!” ever uttered. Of course, you have to know yourself to be among those who betray, deny, and forsake Him in order to hear it. But if we do know that about ourselves – if we recognize and admit that we are the sinners that Jesus has come to save – then this does not lead us into anger. It leads us into profound and utter repentance. “Oh my God, what have I done – and what have I failed to do?”

It is imperative for us to remember that God’s response is not “Go to Hell” – never, ever. “HE IS RISEN!” is God’s reply. It is a response that supports and vindicates Jesus to the nines, and that shows the truth of our rejection and lack of support for the Messiah in a light so bright and so devastating that we cannot endure it – a light that breaks our hearts, if we have any hearts to break.

And so, to every half-believer; to every atheist and agnostic; to every half-hearted, pretend member in the church down through all the years: Easter is God’s reply. “*This is my beloved Son – trust in Him.*” Only, the dialogue is also there: “You killed my Son, and you think it’s all over? You think you won? Do you actually imagine that death can hold Him? You think that you will never have to deal with Him or be troubled by His influence in your world ever again? Who do you think you are?! He is risen! NOW what are you going to do with Him?”

This is not about spring and lilies. This is about God throwing down a spiritual gauntlet beyond all comprehension: the greatest confrontation between God and us humans our world has ever known.

To be sure, God still does not break the precepts and principles by which God’s Kingdom operates. But Jesus is back. Do we think we can kill His Holy Spirit? Try to stop what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road. Try to get all the champions of faith for the last two thousand years to stop being aware of the spiritual dimensions all around them, and convince them to go back to living for bread or money or sex alone.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

In the Resurrection of Jesus, God says to us: “You did your best to ignore me and to get me out of your lives, but you lost! I still will not force or coerce you to let me be part of your time or your life here on earth. But all around you, despite everything you do to mock, deride, deny, and turn away, there will be others who do not turn away. Generation after generation the evidence will mount, and the light of the Resurrection and the presence of the Holy Spirit will confront you. If you choose to stay isolated and alone, it will be by your own choice – not because it is the TRUTH. And your relationship with ME, and all it promises and implies, will be waiting for you and staring at you from that empty Cross – and from the lives of all those who have found and lived a very different LIFE through all the years since. He is risen! Try laughing this one off.”

Every single day that any of us lives by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we claim and reveal which side of this confrontation we are on. Do we side with the God who loves and comes for us? Or do we side with a world without purpose or meaning beyond the whims of the current moment?

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I do not love Easter or lilies or spring, but I love the Resurrection. I believe in the Resurrection with all my heart and mind. I do not believe in the Resurrection because it makes me feel good. As a matter of fact, it scares me far more than the fires of Hell ever could. But that’s only me being worried about trying to live up to all the promises and potential being set before me. I do know, like all of you do, that the Resurrection is not a fact. We are the Christian *Faith* – not the Christian Fact. Only, I seem to know more clearly than some of the people around me that facts do not carry any meaning in our world. Meaning is always subjective – something we overlay *onto* the facts. It is a fact that I have a daughter named Willene and a son named Brennan. But it is not a fact that their lives have significance or meaning. It is not a fact that I consider them to be very special people, or that I believe in them, or that I am incredibly proud of them. It is not a fact that I love them. There may be evidence to support such things, but none of it is provable. Meaning and truth are always a subjective evaluation that we overlay *onto* the facts. And it’s the meaning that we add onto the facts that makes life worth living.

Just so with the Resurrection. We cannot prove it. If we could, it would only prove that we are playing fast and loose with the principles of logic and reason. But we end up living by the evidence.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

And there is evidence of the Resurrection beyond anything we can dispute very well. It comes in the lives of those who have followed Jesus since the Resurrection. We all have a list of such names, if we are not intentionally blind, deaf, and dumb. None of them are perfect people. But then, neither are any of the atheists or agnostics. On my list of the people who live for the Resurrected Jesus, past and present, there are many impressive people who live for the values I care about, and in a manner that I very greatly respect and admire. Jesus is always the common denominator – the thread of influence that causes them to live in ways that are different and impressive to me, often unlike what I see driving the lives of a lot of the people around me. That is what I mean by “evidence.” For me, evidence is far stronger than facts. Evidence is far greater than facts because evidence points to many things that facts cannot even imagine.

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One more comment – important to me; perhaps not to many of you. I am very aware that the Resurrected Jesus only appears to those people who are willing and ready in some way to receive the revelation of His living presence. That is clear and obvious in the New Testament, but I consider it to be clear and obvious in all subsequent church history, down to the present day.

In other words, the presence of the Holy Spirit and of the Kingdom in our midst is only known to those who are willing to receive it and believe in it and live for it. At first that put me off. It seemed suspicious – like perhaps a product of wishful thinking, or a delusional fantasy for the gullible or the immature. But there are too many of us. And the quality of Life that is lived by those who trust the Resurrected Jesus is more courageous, more noble, more generous, more focused, more disciplined, and more committed than the lives of most of the people we know. Oh yes, I know some nominal Christians who do not fit these comments, but they are also not on my list of those who bear witness to the Resurrection.

But what I am leading up to is this: one more time Jesus surprises me with His calm, patient, unhurried approaches to building the real church and nurturing the Kingdom of God. I am always in such a big hurry. In weak moments, I start to be afraid that if things do not happen faster, I will lose my hope or forget my deeper trust in God. So I want the whole world to get converted while I am watching, so we can get past all the pain and trouble and turmoil.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

I always want Jesus to “hurry up.” I think it would have been a wonderful idea for Jesus to appear as the Resurrected Lord to Caiaphas and King Herod and Pilate. And He should have appeared to the Roman soldiers who had just crucified Him. And while He was at it, why not appear to Caesar and to all the rulers all over the world? And if Jesus really lives, why not appear to all the rulers of all the nations in *our* time? God knows, we could certainly use the changes. Isn't that what the true Messiah – according to human definitions and expectations – ought to be doing?

Ah yes, Easter by my definitions and my expectations. Wouldn't that be wonderful! No more of this patient, faithful, prayerful, day-in-and-day-out kind of devotion-and-commitment-and-gratitude-to-God kind of crap. Let's get on with it – make it happen.

Of course, it would *not* be wonderful. All the principles of free will and authentic conversion would be broken and gone forever. Nobody could really or truly change, grow, awaken, or choose Jesus or THE FATHER in love or in gratitude. Back to the puppet show we all long for and pray for. Back to the meaningless utopia that only Satan would find appealing.

So we are stuck with God's True Messiah: far wiser, more patient, more loving, more forgiving than we can fathom – but we do get glimpses. And when we do, it brings us to an Easter beyond all our words; beyond all our praise; beyond all our efforts and desires to say Thank You. “Ah, Great Lord, our lives are Yours. May it be for us as You will. Amen.”