

The Meaning of the Resurrection

Luke 24:1-12; 1 Cor 15:12-26; 50-58

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Introduction

We're going to be talking about the resurrection today, since it's Easter Sunday. I don't typically tell jokes in my sermons, but I liked this one.

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven. One day, as He was relaxing in Heaven, He happened to notice a familiar-looking old man. Wondering if the old man was His father Joseph, Jesus asked him, "Did you, by any chance, ever have a son?"

"Yes," said the old man, "but he wasn't my biological son. He was born by a miracle, by the intervention of a magical being from the heavens."

"Very interesting," said Jesus. "Did this boy ever have to fight temptation?"

"Oh, yes, many times," answered the old man. "But he eventually won. Unfortunately, he heroically died at one point, but he came back to life shortly afterwards." Jesus couldn't believe it. Could this actually be His father?

"One last question," He said. "Were you a carpenter?"

"Why yes," replied the old man. "Yes I was."

Jesus rubbed His eyes and said, "Dad?"

The old man rubbed his eyes and said, "Pinocchio?"

Of course, we know Geppetto isn't in heaven, because he's a fictional character. But Jesus is, because he's real, and he's seated at the right hand of God the Father. I want to talk about what happened before he got there. But first, let's pray.

What happened on that first Easter?

As we saw in the reading from Luke, when the women go to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, the stone at the entrance has been rolled away. Jesus' body isn't there. Two men in dazzling clothes, whom we assume are angels, tell the women that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women run to tell the men, but the men don't believe them—except for Peter, who at least goes to check it out.

If you ever hear someone say that Jesus' disciples just made up the story of his resurrection, remember that they had just as much trouble believing it as people today would. The only thing that changed their minds was seeing Jesus alive again.

What is resurrection?

To explain what the resurrection is, let's first talk about what it is not. Resurrection is not resuscitation. When Jesus raised people like Lazarus from the dead, they came back to mortal life, this life that we live now. They would eventually have to die again. But when Jesus was raised, he was raised to eternal life, never to die again.

Resurrection is also not disembodied existence. We sometimes have the idea that resurrection means that our souls will live on after death. That wasn't the case for Jesus, though. He was raised in the same body in which he died. He still bore the scars of the crucifixion. But that body had been transformed; it had powers that it didn't have before. For example, Jesus could appear in the midst of a locked room or disappear from people's sight. When we are resurrected, we'll have bodies like his. We may have to spend some time as disembodied souls in heaven until Jesus returns. But that is not our final destiny. More on that in a minute.

Resurrection means the raising and perfecting of the body so that we will be perfected whole people in eternity. As the Apostles' Creed says, we believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. As believers, we're being shaped by the Holy Spirit even now to become more like Jesus. But our bodies aren't redeemed yet. When Jesus returns and we are resurrected, our bodies will be redeemed and we will have perfected resurrection bodies like his.

There's a reason the big Christian celebration is on Easter Sunday rather than on Good Friday. Without the resurrection, Jesus would be just another good man who suffered an unjust death at the hands of human beings. By raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicated him along with everything he said and did. As Paul says, if Jesus wasn't raised, then our faith is in vain, and we're still in our sins.

On the cross, Jesus dealt with sin; in the resurrection, he opened up eternal life. Fifty days later, on Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on everyone who believed in him. When we commit ourselves to him, Jesus shares his eternal life with us and gives us the Holy Spirit, who can change us into people like him who are able to live with him in eternity. We need to keep those three events together—cross, resurrection, and Holy Spirit—because all three are critical to our salvation. Without any one of them, we'd still be lost.

We're going to focus on Jesus' resurrection this morning and ask three questions:

- What does the resurrection mean for Jesus?
- What does it mean for us?
- What does it mean for the world?

What does Jesus' resurrection mean for Jesus?

First—this is the obvious meaning—it means that he's alive! There's a well-known Easter hymn that says, "You ask me how I know he lives; he lives within my heart!" That's true enough, but

Jesus isn't just alive in our hearts, like someone we remember after their death. He's alive for real, risen from the dead and ascended and seated at the Father's right hand.

Second, the resurrection means that Jesus is the Messiah, the one sent by God to redeem God's people. To the people in Jesus' day, the crucifixion seemed to prove that Jesus was not the Messiah. If he had been, he would not have died a painful, humiliating death. One of the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus said, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" – meaning that they must have been wrong. But the resurrection proved that Jesus was the Messiah after all. That's why we call him Jesus Christ, because "Christ" means Messiah or anointed one. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus, the sign that Jesus really was the Messiah and God's Son.

Third, the resurrection means that Jesus is still working on our behalf. He's actually not just relaxing in heaven! He intercedes for us with the Father. He's engaged in spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness. He's working to extend God's kingdom until his final victory, when even death will be destroyed. And he's coming back to finish that mission.

What does Jesus' resurrection mean for us?

First, it validates our faith. The resurrection was a historical event. Without the resurrection, there's no explanation for why a group of demoralized, defeated followers suddenly got the energy and commitment to turn the world upside down. Those early Christians were willing to die for their faith because they knew that Jesus was alive. We today don't have to take a blind leap of faith, because we have something to base our faith on. We know that God will keep his promises because some of those promises have already been fulfilled in Christ. So we can have confidence in our own journey with Jesus.

Second, Jesus' resurrection means that we're forgiven. We are not stuck in our sins – because Jesus has been raised. Jesus has been victorious over sin, Satan, and death. And the Holy Spirit enables us to share in that victory. So if we struggle with particular sins in our lives, we can have hope for change.

Third, Jesus' resurrection means that we will be raised also. Paul calls Jesus the "first fruits" of those who have died, meaning that his resurrection is just the beginning of the general resurrection that comes later. When Jesus returns, we'll be raised to eternal life with perfected resurrection bodies.

This means that our bodies are important. We should take care of them. What we do with our bodies matters, because God isn't just going to throw them away. He plans to redeem them. So anything we don't like about our bodies now—any limitation or frailty we have—will be overcome in the resurrection. Our loved ones will be raised also, and because they'll have bodies, we should recognize them. There are some people I plan to hug when I see them again!

Fourth, it means that the work we do for the Lord is not in vain. If people just die and stay dead, then anything we do for them dies with them. For that matter, anything we do for ourselves becomes meaningless when we die. But because of the resurrection, the things we do for other people or for ourselves or especially for Jesus are investments in eternity. And those investments pay really good dividends! So following Jesus and carrying on his ministry in the world are the most meaningful things we can do.

Finally, what does the resurrection of Jesus mean for the world?

When Jesus rose from the dead, a new age began. I don't mean the "new age" of magic crystals and astrology. The new age Jesus started is the age in which God's promises are being fulfilled. The Holy Spirit is in the world in power, offering hope and healing and eternal life. We get to partner with the Spirit in that work. This new reality isn't fully here yet; it won't be complete until Jesus returns. But we get glimpses of it whenever someone's life changes for the better.

The endpoint of this new age will be a whole new creation. We will see the new heavens and new earth the book of Revelation talks about. Just like our physical bodies, the physical universe will be redeemed. That means, like our physical bodies, how we treat nature is important. We need to be faithful stewards of it as God told us to do when humans were first created. In Romans 8, Paul says that the creation is groaning as if in labor pains until that day of redemption.

So this Easter, let's soak in the meaning of the resurrection. Jesus is risen, and someday we will be, too! When we celebrate Easter, we aren't just remembering a miracle that happened long ago. We're looking forward to our own destiny and to the transformation of the world. Hallelujah, and Amen!