

Easter Now and Not Yet

Christmas, the celebration of the Incarnation! When Jesus was born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus, no one could have predicted a new religion was about to take over the world. But this is exactly what happened. This is the good news! After Christmas comes Easter, the celebration of the triumph of life over death. The tomb in which Jesus had been buried was empty. He had been raised from the dead. He appeared to His disciples and other followers. They saw, met, and even dined with the risen Saviour.

The Resurrection: The Heart of the Gospel

The resurrection was a world-shaking event. It was the beginning of a new era for the world, the decisive turning-point for the human race. It gives new perspectives on basic questions we all ask at one time or another. Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? How shall we live? It is no wonder that the resurrection of Jesus is the greatest news-worthy and hope-giving event ever. Everything gets meaning with the resurrection. Apart from the resurrection, would Christianity have become the world's foremost religion? Isn't the resurrection at the heart of Christianity? Is it not indispensable for the living of our lives with purpose and hope? I am convinced it would be hard to overestimate the importance for the church and human existence, whether we affirm or deny the resurrection. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is at the very heart of the Gospel. Only with the resurrection, the secret of Jesus' birth and death is revealed. Without this miracle all the words and deeds of Jesus would be meaningless.

Without this Easter perspective, our life between birth and death is without a purpose. All we could say then is: "Let's eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we'll die." But from the perspective of the resurrection, followers of Jesus can say, "tomorrow we'll die means liberation, the entry into a new world with God." If the bodily resurrection of Jesus is denied then the Gospel is denied. The heart of the gospel has not changed. The resurrection turned fleeing apostles into heroes of the Christian faith. The apostles and believers of the early Christian church were so overwhelmingly convinced that Jesus had been resurrected that they were willing to die for their testimony, as tradition tells us many of them did. The first Easter even led to a change in an age-old practice – a change in a day of worship and rest. For the early church, the resurrection determined the day of worship. It is hard to imagine how any Jew would tamper with something so sacred as the Sabbath. Certainly the disciples would not have done it on their own initiative. In *Worship Reformed according to Scripture*, Hugh Oliphant Old points out that if the first Christians worshipped on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, it was because they believed that Jesus, by His resurrection, had brought in the final age. And Oliphant comments, "It is in a very real sense Jesus himself who, fulfilling the old Sabbath, established the Lord's Day."

False Hope?

But is the Church not giving false hope by proclaiming the resurrection as fact? We may say, "Each time we think life is improving, we get confronted again with hatred and violence. And is

death not the victor? Can we still believe in the victory over death and hope for the future considering the holocaust, the death toll caused by the Tsunami and terrorism, the Darfur crisis, which has cost untold suffering?" Is it not difficult to tell others that according to Scripture, there is an open grave, a risen Lord, and a glorious Hope in store for all who believe the Gospel? But we can't stay focussed on what we see around us. The resurrection gives us true hope. The world was changed two thousand years ago because the outlook of the disciples changed. Their outlook after Christ's death was one of pessimism, defeat and gloom. The crucifixion had dashed their hope for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. All they could see was the horrible fact of death. They huddled behind locked doors and refused to believe the report of the women who had seen the angels (Luke 24:11). But what a difference one day can make. They saw and met the risen Lord on the first day of the week. Not death but life had the last word. The Church father and martyr Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 110 AD) was so convinced that Jesus was alive that he testified: "Just let me get to Jesus Christ. Nothing on this wide earth matters to me anymore. The kingdoms of this world are entirely meaningless. I am at the point where I would rather die for Jesus Christ than rule over the whole earth. He alone is the one I seek – the one who died for us! It is Jesus that I long for – the one who rose again from the dead!"

The Growth of the Church

The resurrection is not myth but fact. It is historically verifiable. The Easter event so convinced and empowered the disciples of Jesus that their testimony with its results gave rise to the Christian church and the contents of the New Testament. The Gospel proclaimed by the Church spread rapidly throughout the Roman empire, creating an overflowing torrent of influential consequences that extend through the centuries to the present day. As the church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, puts it:

"One of the most amazing and significant facts of history is that within five centuries of its birth, Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the Roman empire and even the support of the Roman state."

If the resurrection had not happened, there would not have been a history of Christians martyrs. The history of Christianity is a story of martyrs who so knew that power of the resurrection that they gave their lives for the gospel. And for the sake of the risen Lord thousands of Christians are martyred in our time. Christianity is a story about missionaries who left home and comfort to penetrate unreached lands with the gospel. These courageous believers had their perspectives changed.

The Second Coming

When we celebrate Easter, we do more than look back to the empty tomb in Jerusalem's garden of the Resurrection. We sing that hell has been defeated and death destroyed.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!
Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!

But we also look forward to the future. The Gospel sounds a note of triumphalism, the conviction that the will of God cannot ultimately be defeated and that victory over evil and death has already been won. The apostle Paul wrote: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he (Jesus) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). Because of Easter the final victory is surely to come. For now, we live amid a strife of darkness and light, falsehood and truth, death and life. This world remains a field where the wheat and the tare have been sown side by side, and so they must grow till the harvest comes (Matt.13:38f.). Until then, as Paul says, all creation languishes in anguished anticipation of the day when the Lord returns in glory (Rom. 8:18-22). Paul points to the future in 1 Corinthians 15, the wonderful chapter on the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection. As Jesus came the first time, so He will come again. In other words, Jesus' resurrection is not the end, but the beginning of the end. The new beginning will be the new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells.

When we understand Easter from the perspective of Christ's second coming, we can sing of hope and expectation. Today death has not been destroyed and the powers of evil have not been totally defeated, but Jesus has risen, ascended, and shall return. His kingdom is coming for all who believe in Him. Death will not be anymore, and all our tears will be wiped away. This we believe. This is our hope. We anticipate a glorious future. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus is at work in history and is near us. We often feel that we live in a world without any windows open to the future. But we have reason for living, for hope. We may expect Jesus and his Kingdom. The powers of death and hell are still here, but we deny the resurrection of Jesus if we refuse to believe that God gives us living hope.

The Bible reveals an amazing scope of history. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. At the end of history there will come a new heaven and earth. And in the midst of history is Jesus Christ, His birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. Christians are now pilgrims travelling toward the heavenly city. In the words of the church father, John Chrysostom (AD 347-407), "If you're a Christian, you don't have a city on earth. God Himself is 'the designer and builder' of our city (Heb. 11:10). Even if we were to possess the whole world, we would still be 'foreigners and travellers' in every land (Heb. 11:13). Our names are engraved in heaven. Our citizenship is there."

Practical Christianity

But how meaningful is our Easter hope for daily living? Years ago a British TV-singer was asked why she no longer believed the Christian faith she had been taught at her boarding school. She replied, "What I learned there has nothing to do with real life." But the Christian faith has everything to do with real life. For us the world is no longer a lost and hopeless world, surrendered to fate. We don't have to write it off. It is the world in which Jesus has risen from the dead and therefore will be completely renewed. To say on Easter morning "Christ is risen," or "Jesus is Lord," is to hear and to obey a command. Obedience takes us to places we would not go and to people we would not choose, and link us to causes we might not join otherwise. We are now under new management. We go out and make disciples, teach and heal, to be our Lord's agents of forgiveness, reconciliation, and love in this world. Already at the very beginning of the early church, Christian apologist Justin Martyr (c.100-165) demonstrated the truth of the Christian faith by showing the kind of lives it produced. In the

early church era, many pagans believed Christians were immoral reprobates. So Justin attempted to reveal what Christianity was really all about. He testified, "We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts now dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live in conformity to the good precepts of Christ." And in our twenty-first century, multitudes throughout the world, including Christianity's greatest critics, are indebted to the gospel for its respect for human life and dignity, the expansion of human freedom, the spread of democracy, concern for the oppressed and the poor, racial equality, the promotion of universal education, the rise and support of science, medical advances and the establishment of hospitals.

The Easter message is not an illusion. It really happened. Jesus is not in the tomb. We live and die. Jesus dies and lives. We either believe it or we don't. There is no middle way. To Him we belong. He goes before us into the future. The Lord has truly risen. And our resurrection will truly happen. God will be all in all. Our time is dangerous and evil. But the day of the Lord will come, and we shall see Him as He is. Jesus is Conqueror over death and the forces of hell! Thanks be to God!

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