

What Does It Mean That Jesus Is Alive?

1 Corinthians 15:17-26

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May 15, 2011

You will note in your bulletin that this is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. We are still in the season of the resurrection, and on Block Island you can readily believe it, because the leaves are still struggling to come out and the temperature has head to rise for more than one day. One of these days, nature will catch up to Easter, we hope. Easter itself was late this year, but spring is later still.

We could keep counting the Sundays of Easter from here on, I suppose, up to the 50th Sunday of Easter and then Palm Sunday again—because every Sunday is a celebration of Jesus being raised from the dead. Every Sunday is Resurrection Day. But it seems to me that we usually act as if one Sunday of Easter is quite enough. The flowers had to be removed quickly due to a funeral, and the sanctuary was back to ordinary time. Easter came and went and we throw out the eggs as quickly as we take out the Christmas tree. Maybe my sense of that is accentuated because I got on a plane and headed to Italy right after Easter.

In any case, my thought this morning is that it's worth thinking about the resurrection more than one day out of the year. Hardly anything matters more. As Paul says, if Christ was not raised from the dead, your faith is futile.

In John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen's friend John Wheelright, the narrator, says:

I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished – I am terrified that, this year, it won't happen; that, that year, it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.

"If you don't believe in Easter," Owen Meany said, "Don't kid yourself – don't call yourself a Christian."

Paul agrees with Owen, and a good many Easter sermons take the same tack—including some of my own. The resurrection is something you must believe happened; without it, the whole idea of Christianity becomes nonsensical. And the resurrection in these sermons serves as a kind of proof of everything else—Jesus' identity (which I can accept) and the authority of the Bible (which seems kind of backwards to me). It is very important to us that it really happened, but we rarely ask what the resurrection *means*.

Some of you have read C. S. Lewis' children's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or at least seen the movie. Aslan is the lion who is the rightful ruler of the land of Narnia, the son of the great King beyond the sea. Because of sin, however, the White Witch has taken over the country and put it under a curse so that in Narnia it is always winter and never Christmas. Four English children stumble into that world and one of them betrays the others when the Witch offers him candy and power. At the climax of the story, the Witch demands that the boy be punished for his betrayal. The penalty is death. Aslan the lion knows that there is only one way to save the human. Aslan offers his own life to the Witch, who is thrilled to make the exchange. She and all the forces of darkness humiliate the lion on the night of his death, place

him, shaved of his mane, on the Stone Table, where he is stabbed to death. The Witch and her followers leave the dead body of the lion on the table.

The two human girls, Susan and Lucy, have been watching all of this at a distance and now come to look at the body of Aslan to see if he is really dead. He is. They throw themselves on his body and weep until they have no tears left. It is all over. The battle between the forces of good and evil is lost.

But when dawn arrives, the girls are walking around trying to warm themselves, and they hear a sudden cracking sound. They turn around, and the Stone Table has cracked in half and Aslan's body is gone. Susan cries out, "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" A great voice behind their backs says, "Yes, it is more magic." They turn around and there, shining in the sunrise, larger than they have seen him before, shaking his mane, stands Aslan himself.

Later, when things have calmed down, Susan asks her question again: "What does it all mean?" Aslan replies: "It means that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

We ask with Susan, "What does it mean?" What does it mean that Jesus is alive? You could say that everything in the New Testament from the book of Acts to Revelation consists of answers to that question—the question of what the resurrection means about our relationship with God, and what it means about the way we should live. But let's start with a few hints from the verses we read from 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, we are still in our sins. But if Christ *has* been raised, it follows that we are *not* in our sins. We are no longer trapped in our sins; we are not prisoners to that human nature that we can't control, which keeps pushing us away from God and from what God intended for us. And there are two sides to that. First, we are no longer condemned for our sins. We have been forgiven. The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead means that God accepted the sacrifice that Jesus offered for us. This thing Jesus was trying to do for us *worked*. We have in fact been reconciled to God. So that's good news. But wait, there's more!

The other side of resurrection is that we have not only been forgiven, we have been made alive. As Lewis put it, "Death started working backwards." In the beginning of human history, the first man sinned and the whole human race in a sense died with him. Now at the end of human history—and Paul does see us now in the last chapter—the ultimate man, Jesus, was obedient to the Father in going to his death, and God has rewarded him by raising him to life—and in a sense the whole human race has been raised to life with him. The resurrection means that life has now broken into the realm of death. Another way the New Testament says it is that we have been transferred from the realm of death to the realm of life.

The early Jewish followers of Jesus shared the assumption of the Pharisees that at the end of time the God of justice and mercy would raise the dead and give life to the righteous. But that would only happen at the end of time when the Messiah came. But when these Jews saw that God had raised Jesus from the dead—that the resurrection had happened earlier than planned—they understood it to mean that the Messianic age had already begun. Jesus was just the first of many brothers and sisters to be raised from the dead; he was called the first fruit, the foretaste of

the final harvest. All of us who are “in Christ” by identifying with him in faith will also be raised from the dead.

But this is not *only* a promise for individual believers—that we as individuals will be raised to a new life after death. This is a promise that we are part of what God is doing in the world—what Paul sometimes refers to as the restoration of all things, or the reconciliation of everything to God, or the redemption of the whole creation. He also calls it the new creation. Jesus being raised from the dead is the beginning of the process which climaxes at the end of the book of Revelation in the coming of the new heaven and the new earth, when earth and heaven are one, and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven. The resurrection is a sign of the coming of God’s kingdom. The resurrection means that everything is changing, that God has won the victory over the forces of death and sin, and that the whole world that God loves is being changed into the world that he intended.

N. T. Wright, the Anglican scholar we have used a lot in our Bible studies, puts in this way:

The Resurrection is not an odd event within the world as it is but an utterly characteristic, prototypical, and foundational event within the world as it has begun to be. It is not an absurd event within the old world but the symbol and starting point of the new world.

The claim advanced in Christianity is of that magnitude: Jesus of Nazareth ushers in not simply a new religious possibility, not simply a new ethic or a new way of salvation, but a new creation.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians (5:7), “When you are in Christ, there is a new creation...everything has become new.” This Christ is the one pictured in the last chapter of the Bible saying “Look, I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:5).

Someday the whole world will be made new and we will have new bodies to live in that world. In the meantime, we are called to be part of the new creation and to live new lives. Paul sometimes says that we are putting on new selves. In Colossians 3:10 he says that we have already put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator. The life that we have already been given through faith in Christ—this life in me which is only a foretaste of my resurrection life—is already in the process of changing me into the image of Jesus and thereby restoring the image of God in my humanity. God made the first man in God’s image, but sin damaged or tarnished that image. But the ultimate man Jesus *was* the image of God in human flesh, and through his obedience in the cross Jesus made it possible for the image of God to be restored in each of us. Paul says that very thing later in 1 Corinthians 15, in verse 49: “Just as we *have* borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we *will* also bear the image of the man of heaven [Christ].” In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says that we “are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.”

The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of God keeping his promise to restore the whole world, to make it, as one of those NPR sponsors puts it, “a more just, verdant, and peaceful world.” Everything the prophets said about God making the world right again is going to come true, and the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of that. And we ourselves are becoming new people, kingdom-of-God people, who are suited to live in that world where heaven and earth are one. If we pray with our hearts “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth,” then we want to become new people who can live in that kingdom. The resurrection is our hope not only of being transformed with new bodies someday, but being transformed now, gradually, with new spirits, new hearts, so that we can be fully human, fully alive, and fully in tune with God.

This is what our life is about now—working toward that kingdom, living by kingdom values which Jesus taught, awakening others to the availability of real life through faith in Jesus. N. T. Wright, again, summed it up in a talk called “Resurrection and the Task of the Church”—

The work of the church is to implement the resurrection of Jesus and thereby to anticipate the final new creation... We are called to be people of new creation now in the power of the Spirit.

What would it mean for us on Block Island if we saw ourselves as implementing the resurrection of Jesus every day in this place, living by kingdom values in advance of the kingdom’s coming, participating in making everything new along with God’s Spirit? What would it mean for the church to be the advance guard of a world of peace and justice where the creation is restored? What would it mean to live as if love wins, as if death has no power, as if everything Jesus said is true?

The real issue with the resurrection is not whether we believe it. The real issue is whether we live it. It is not a doctrine to be understood as much as a new life to be lived.