

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 27, 2016
Easter: Thy Kingdom Come
Rev. John Crow

Acts 10:34-38
Psalm 118:19-29
Colossians 3:1-4
Luke 24:1-10

Jesus' death and resurrection maintains God's holiness, sin's vileness, and God's goodness, which is to say, His hope in Creation. If God wasn't good, He would not have created. It was only out of His goodness that He created all things, to share in His joy. And because of His goodness, He gave humanity free will, so that we were not forced to love and obey God, but were free to do so or not. When mankind chose in his free will not to obey God, the magnitude of sin's devastation became apparent. Sin leads inevitably to death. It is a spiritual poison affecting the mind, body, and soul. Sin corrupts all it touches. But God is holy, which is the opposite of sin. He is moral perfection. Moral perfection cannot stand sin. Just as light and dark cannot occupy the same space, neither can God allow sin to exist anywhere, ever, without its natural consequence of death. So now we find ourselves in an impossible situation: Created by a God who is good, yet corrupted by sin so that we are doomed to die and face eternal separation from the holy God who loves us and yet created us knowing we would sin. History would be the greatest of tragedies, were it not for Easter. But Easter, also known as the

Kingdom of Heaven conquering the world, doesn't stand alone. It is the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry, but is also followed by the empowering of the Holy Spirit starting at Pentecost. In light of these events, Jesus' death and resurrection turns the tragedy of history into a happy ending; and not just any happy ending, but into the perfect ending: *and they all lived happily ever after.*

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As the ministry of Jesus progressed, He continually revealed His messiahship with a variety of evidence. His many miracles, His authoritative teaching, and credible testimony of the fact all pointed to the conclusion that He was the long-awaited Messiah. Yet even His own disciples lacked faith. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him. Thomas didn't believe reports of Jesus' resurrection until he saw the risen Christ. None of the disciples believed the report by the women returning from the garden. As essential as it was, it was not the crucifixion of Christ that proved His messiahship, but rather His resurrection. Let's look at this fact in more detail.

The disciples were familiar with the many stories of miracles happening in the history of their people, so while the miracles Jesus performed were amazing, they did not prove He was the Messiah. They also knew how the prophets had received the word of God himself, and spoke with great authority. So again, Jesus teaching with authority was not proof that He was the Messiah. Nor was His (typically veiled) claim to be the Messiah. Even though Jesus earned the respect of many,

including some of his rivals, which makes his testimony quite credible, claiming to be the Messiah was beyond belief for most. Others had come and gone who had claimed to be the savior of the people, but were proven not to be. John the Baptist also testified to Jesus being God's chosen one. In fact, how about God himself? God spoke audibly twice on behalf of His son, but even that failed to withstand the disciples' own onslaught of doubt. It was His resurrection on Easter morning that proved beyond all doubt that this Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, was in fact God's chosen Messiah.

The resurrection proved it not only because it had never happened before (apart from when Jesus raised the dead), but also because it fulfilled prophecy. Isaiah prophesied over 700 years before Christ, writing in verse 12 of chapter 53, "He poured out himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many." Who would be capable of bearing the sins of others? No mere man could do that. We lack the holiness to make up for our own sins, let alone the sins of others! Isaiah was clearly referring to the work of the Messiah, that He would die for our sins. And not just die, but die violently and publicly disgraced. Yet even Isaiah did not prophesy that the Messiah would rise from the dead. Jesus prophesied to His disciples more directly regarding His death and resurrection. Among other times, it is recorded in Luke 9:22 that Jesus told his disciples that he would, "be killed, and be raised up on the third day."

Add to this fulfillment of prophecy of a unique event, the fact that the disciples weren't left to testify to it themselves, but were told by an angel. Matthew chapter 28 records that there were Roman guards who saw the angel, and were bribed to keep it quiet. The Lucan account which we just read includes a detail that the other accounts leave out: the angel reminds the women in verses six and seven of Jesus' words where He told them he would die and be raised on the third day. Luke included this detail to make it clear to his readers that the death and resurrection were no surprise to Jesus. In fact, they shouldn't have been a surprise to the disciples. Yet Mark and Luke specifically record that when the women told the disciples what they had seen at the tomb, the disciples didn't believe it. This is hardly a flattering description of those who were to lead the fledgling religious movement we now know as Christianity, which is a good argument for its truth. If someone in the ancient world was wanting to invent a religion, they probably would have made the leaders seem more heroic and faithful, and they definitely wouldn't have had the first testimony of the Savior being raised from the dead coming from women.

Jesus' resurrection not only proves that He is the Messiah, but it also reveals what kind of messiah He is. A messiah who came merely to bring political freedom and independence would have no reason to die for the people. A messiah who came merely for the nation of Israel would not have concerned himself with

gentiles or Roman soldiers. A messiah whose aims were merely temporal fails to solve the impossible problem I mentioned earlier of uniting a sinful people with their holy God. The death and resurrection proves that Jesus came for reasons far greater, far more expansive, and far more lasting than political ones. He paid the price for our eternal freedom! He didn't come to rule, but to serve. This is why the disciples had such trouble believing the reports that Jesus was alive: when He turned out not to be the kind of messiah they thought He was, they assumed he wasn't the Messiah at all. It turns out their understanding of what the Messiah was doing was far less significant than reality. Jesus' resurrection proves that death has been defeated and the price of our sin has been overwhelmingly paid. Not just the sins of the Jews, but of all people. Grace is freely available to all who believe. Until their eyes were opened, the disciples couldn't see that all God's works recorded in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, were leading up to this moment. Salvation for the Hebrews had always been on credit. And as we know, anything on credit must eventually be paid.

Jesus' resurrection also proves that a bodily resurrection awaits us who believe. If Jesus had returned as merely a ghost, similar to Obi-wan Kenobi in later Star Wars movies, then could we honestly say that death had been defeated? Death—the ultimate weapon of the enemy—would still leave its permanent mark on us. When Jesus left the tomb empty, He made it very clear that death has lost its sting.

For those of us who follow Christ, we are no longer subject to death as a penalty of sin. Yes, we still physically die, but what awaits us after death is even better than what we have now. We can look forward to eternal life in physical bodies, and not just any bodies—incorruptible ones! We won't grow sick, or age, or suffer pain. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what happens when someone dies, and is no longer subject to time, but I am confident in saying that Lois Lindbloom, our recently departed saint, is very much enjoying her new and improved body.

The words of Jesus and the angels recorded in all four gospels makes one last point very clear: The Kingdom of Heaven has just invaded, but there is still more to be done. If God had decided to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven in full immediately after Easter, there would have been no need to retreat to Galilee, or await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Of course, I'm talking here about something that didn't happen, so we can only hypothesize about what might have happened, but what is clear is that Jesus spent his time between Easter and His ascension preparing his followers for the work ahead. And this is key: because of what Jesus accomplished, and His sending the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, *everything* is changed! Salvation is not merely something we have to look forward to when we die, it is a reality we are living in, if only partially, right now. We are living in the *Now and the Not Yet* of the Kingdom. Jesus made it possible, and showed us the

way, and we are to be living out the reality of His Kingdom every day we live, until we get to experience it fully.

There is a second piece to living out our Kingdom-reality that is absolutely vital. As NT Wright points out, God has allowed believers “to be part of the means by which God makes this [Kingdom-reality] happen” (*Surprised By Hope*, 200). In other words, we are not merely spectators or beneficiaries. We should be—no, we get to be—helping in God’s plan to redeem all of Creation. We can’t keep the story of Easter to ourselves. It demands to be heard and lived. As Pastor Thelander said last week, we are an Easter people. We need daily to make the Kingdom reality our reality. The world doesn’t understand this yet. Perhaps if we were better Kingdom ambassadors, that would change.

It is impossible to hear about the death and resurrection of Christ, and not to take sides. Easter is the continental divide of our souls: either you stand on one side, and follow the river of life into eternity, or you stand on the other, rejecting the claim of Jesus on your heart, and follow the river of sin and self to death. There is no other choice. As today’s reading in Colossians says, we are dead to the world. There is no going back. Needless to say, Easter makes some uncomfortable; even Christians. Some would like to accept the Messiahship of Christ, and escape from the world. “Let them get what they deserve,” they think. This is just, but it is justice without mercy. If Christ loves us so much that He was

willing to die for us, how can we as His followers, not share that love with others? And we can never love enough. We will never reach a day in this life when we have accomplished all that God asks, and you or I get to coast for the rest of our lives. So while Christ paid the price for our sins, He at the same time raised the bar to impossible heights, but forgives us for not reaching it.

We are about to partake of the Eucharist. It is an ancient tradition with roots in the Jewish Passover, which Jesus reinterpreted as a means of grace whereby His followers partake of the unmerited forgiveness offered through Christ's own blood. Like Easter, the Eucharist leaves no one on the sidelines. Either you accept your utter dependence on Christ by consuming the elements, or you choose not to. There is no middle ground. But God is patient. We all have our own paths to take, and some are longer than others, with extra detours. Those of us who are farther along than others need to remember this and be gracious. We are all works in progress, and need to allow the Word of God to transform our lives while we continue to be Kingdom-builders living in the *Now and the Not Yet*. The story of Easter is essentially this:

The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.
Hallelujah!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.