

This Resurrection Thing

Series: *The Meaning of Jesus; Ephesians 2: 1-10*

(with apologies to Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright)

What is the heart of the Christian faith? What is the meaning of Jesus? What's faith all about when you boil it down to essentials? You can ask this question many different ways, but it comes down to the same question: What is the meaning on which faith rests?

Christian faith is faith in Jesus. If the journey of Christian faith is about anything, it is about death and rebirth. In Jesus, God made it clear that the relationship between the divine and the human is characterized by what we call love. This clarity came as the result of Jesus' life, his death, and what happened after his death.

We can see the love that God has for humanity by seeing the relationship Jesus had with God. It was as intimate as a loving parent and a loving child. God's total love for Jesus was revealed in Jesus' life and the way he loved, taught, and healed. Jesus' love for God was demonstrated in the way he valued what God valued and by his willingness to walk the path of martyrdom in order to remain true to God's call. Jesus relinquished himself, for love of God, to suffering and death. This is very different from saying God insisted on Jesus' death as the price of forgiving and accepting all the rest of us. This is the issue we call atonement and that's what we'll talk about next Sunday.

We see that love characterizes the relationship between the divine and the human by looking at Jesus' life and how he lived for love of God. The other place we see this truth is with what happened after Jesus' death – the *resurrection thing*. This is the subject for today.

The Bible passage that inspired this sermon is not from one of the gospels. It might well not even have been written by the apostle Paul, but rather by one of Paul's disciples. The key sentence in this passage is as follows:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

God's has made us alive together with Jesus, not a return to the life we now know, but transformation to a new quality and dimension of life, together with Jesus in God's very presence. This is called resurrection. As with so many aspects of faith, this idea of resurrection takes on a powerful and challenging dynamic when we understand it not only in terms of life after death, but in terms of life before death. What is the truth of resurrection here and now?

Today, we're going to take a look at *this resurrection thing* to try and understand it better, with the hope of deepening our celebration of resurrection when we gather to worship on Easter Sunday in three weeks. Let's begin with a brief game of New Testament Jeopardy. The answer is given and the question is sought.

The answer is *resurrection*. What is the question? You may be tempted to say, "What happened to Jesus?" The wouldn't be wrong, but it's not the question I seeking. The question I'm looking for is: "Why did Christianity arise and take the shape it did?" (from N. T. Wright).

The resurrection of Jesus is utterly central to Christianity. Resurrection was the reason for the survival and growth of Christianity. Christian faith is unthinkable without Easter. What happened at Easter is the reason for the survival and growth of Christianity in the years that followed.

So what is resurrection? What does this word mean? Resurrection means that Jesus was experienced by his followers during the days, weeks, and months after his death. It means that Jesus is still experienced by his followers.

The way the gospels describe that experience is unusual. In some ways, Jesus' presence with the disciples seems to be very much like his pre-Easter life. They describe the wounds of crucifixion still on his body. He is able to eat and drink with the disciples and they recognize his appearance, at least some of the time.

In some ways, though, there was a discontinuity with Jesus' physical life. On the road to Emmaus, his followers did not recognize his appearance. He was able to materialize out of thin air, pass through walls into locked rooms, and then disappear. Perhaps the best way to describe the relationship between the state of Jesus' existence before Easter and that afterward is with the image of the relationship between a seed and the plant into which it grows – or between a bud and a flower. There is connectedness, but there is also significant difference.

Jesus' followers experienced his presence with them after his death. Yet, this was not only the experience of their friend and teacher continuing to be with them. Resurrection means that Jesus was, and is, experienced as Lord. This is the big difference between resuscitation, brought back to human life, and resurrection, changed to a quality of life that can best be described as divine.

So, what would the word resurrection have meant to a first-century Jew? Centuries before Jesus' time, resurrection was a metaphor, an image of the renewal of Israel's fortunes at the coming of God's new age. Eventually, that metaphor became literal. Instead of the concrete return of Israel from exile, resurrection came to be understood as the "concrete re-embodiment of formerly dead persons". This might have been a new body from scratch or the reworking of an existing body. Ultimately, resurrection meant a new and embodied person, not a disembodied spirit. There was never any concept, however, that one person would be resurrected while everyone else, and all of creation, stayed the same.

With this background in mind, we can ask the crucial question: "What actually happened on that first Easter Sunday?" What might a video camera have captured or an objective witness seen? What might you and I have seen that morning? I have to tell that I don't know, not for sure. Using the evidence of the biblical accounts and a knowledge of first century Jewish and Christian culture, a couple of viable scenarios can be proposed.

N. T. Wright (*The Meaning of Jesus*, co-authored with Marcus Borg) makes a strong case for the physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus, as depicted in the gospel accounts. The empty tomb signifies the transformation of Jesus' corpse into a "new mode of physicality". By using the word resurrection, Jesus' followers would have meant to convey that Jesus had been physically dead and was now physically alive in a bodily life of some kind.

Wright tends to accept the gospel accounts as written, suggesting that differences in details between these accounts lend them credibility. Clearly, the witnesses were not in collusion. What they experienced was shocking and startling. What they understood was that, in this event of Jesus' resurrection, God's new age had begun.

Marcus Borg (*The Meaning of Jesus*, co-authored with N. T. Wright) offers a somewhat alternative view of Jesus' resurrection – different than Wright's, yet an equally compelling case. In Borg's view, the disposition of Jesus' corpse is unrelated to the truth of resurrection. Whether or not the tomb was empty, Jesus was raised. The use of the word resurrection would have indicated Jesus' entry into a new existence that did not necessarily involve his physical body that had been so abused in the act of crucifixion.

Borg cites the apostle Paul whose description of Jesus' resurrection (1st Cor. 15) does not mention an empty tomb. In addition, when Paul lists the various resurrection appearances, he includes Jesus' appearance to him on the road to Damascus. The description of this appearance in the book of Acts is not physical, but more like a vision. The implication is that Paul's experience is connected and similar to the other resurrection appearances.

Paul describes the differences between a physical body that is perishable and a spiritual body that is imperishable. The two are "as different as a plant is from a seed". There is a strong suggestion that the resurrected body is not a physical body.

Borg asks, "Could anyone have seen the events of Easter Sunday?" What would have been captured on videotape? In the Emmaus Road story, when the disciples finally recognized Jesus, he vanished from their sight. Then as now, followers of Jesus continued to experience him as a living reality after his death. Early on, these experiences included visions and apparitions of him. They indicated that Jesus was still here with his followers, but in a radically different way.

Borg and Wright both agree that it is the resurrection appearances of Jesus that generated the claims that "Jesus lives and is Lord." They agree that what happened to Jesus had inaugurated God's new age without getting rid of the present age. People still suffered oppression and misery. Evil rulers were still in place. Jesus' followers were living in a new age in the midst of the present age. This was a new concept. God's new thing had happened and in a way no one ever expected! Jesus had gone through death and out the other side

What did the biblical writers mean by using the word "resurrection"? They meant that Jesus lives, but more than that. This was not just the conquest of death and the promise of afterlife. They meant that Jesus is now Lord. His followers must have experienced Jesus as extraordinary during his lifetime. This led to their experience of him after his death as like God, having the qualities of God including ability to be experienced anywhere.

The description of Jesus at the right hand of God is a description of honor. Rome is not Lord. The domination system is not Lord. Only Jesus is Lord. The *powers that be* reject Jesus, but God validates him. His life and death signify the defeat of these powers. Their defeat is symbolized in the resurrection. The way Jesus lived and died discloses the way of transformation to new life and new birth. This is show to be the way to God, not the temple or the Torah. Jesus' reveals God's love for us in self-giving acts of life and death. The resurrection is the sign of the truth of that love revealed in Jesus.

What does "this resurrection thing" mean for us today? As Christians, we affirm the centrality of Jesus' resurrection to our faith. No matter how you or I choose to understand the historical event, resurrection is the central event of Christianity because it was the reason the Jesus faith survived more than just a few months or years after Jesus' death. The fact that Christian faith, unlike other messianic movements, developed and grew is powerful testimony to the validity of Jesus' resurrection.

Resurrection is the transition of the Jesus of history to the Jesus of our faith. It is how Jesus is still with us today. It is how we experience his presence in our lives now. We have to interpret the resurrection of Jesus anew in this generation. Each generation has this task.

Jesus' resurrection was the affirmation that God was doing a new thing. We have the opportunity and the challenge to reaffirm that truth anew in this generation, that the God of creation is the God who was before the big bang and will be after earth's sun burns itself out. In a universe that continues to expand, we affirm that time and space curve and shape our lives

within the reality of God. We affirm that God is still God even when earth and humanity one day cease to exist.

We affirm that the nature of God was revealed in shattering clarity in the life of Jesus and continues to be revealed through Jesus in our lives. We affirm that the path to newness of life lies through death, not through its denial. We affirm that God's new creation is a present reality today, even though the presence of evil continues to dominate so much of our world.

Because we affirm our faith in God through Jesus, we commit ourselves to confess by our words and our living, the reality of God's new age, God's very presence, here and now. This is the truth of resurrection. We take the values of God's new age as the values by which we will live as individuals and as a community of faith. We celebrate this in our worship. We testify to this in our living because Jesus lives in us.

We are people of good news, of hope, and of affirmation who are celebrating life. We are people committed to justice, peacemaking, and to sharing the good news of love, acceptance, and forgiveness. We act on our beliefs by building bridges of love to help transform this world into God's new age in Jesus' name.