

“The Firstfruits of *Our* Resurrection”

Easter Sunday

March 23, 2008

Texts: Psalm 118:14-29 / Acts 10:34-43 / Colossians 3:1-4 / John 20:1-18

Biblical scholar and converted Jew Geza Vermes has stated in his recent book, aptly entitled *The Resurrection* (2008) that, prior to the last few centuries BC, Jewish tradition held “the inevitability of death and a permanent Sheol entailing a reduced, joyless, and as it were Godless existence in a dreamless sleep” and was “accepted as mankind’s inexorable heritage” (p. 134). Anglican scholar and theologian John Polkinghorne has agreed saying that “Beyond death there [was for the Jew] only the shadowy domain of Sheol, in which pale shades [of souls] remain like fading carbon copies in a forgotten filing cabinet” (2002, p. 55). I can tell you truly that if we still believed that we would not be here this Easter Sunday morning. I certainly would not have arisen at 4:00 a.m. to prepare myself for the Easter sunrise service at Grace Chapel. I would probably still be in bed! But, instead, I stand before you and boldly proclaim,

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

[The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!]

Throughout most of their history, “the people of Israel centered their hopes on justice, prosperity and honored old age, attained in the course of the life of this world. Hope for the future lay in the continuance of the nation and the family” (2002, p. 54) not in the individual. There really was very little hope that there was any life other than this present earthly one.

Then, in the century or so before Christ, Jewish scholars and Rabbis, especially those who were Pharisees, began to rediscover the importance of two major passages from the OT. The first was in Isaiah, chapter 26, verse 19,

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.

You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

*For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth will give birth to the dead.*

The other passage was from Daniel, chapter 12, verse 2,

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

These explicit passages, along with the wonderful story of the Valley of Dry Bones in the 37th chapter of Ezekiel, as well as the death of thousands of martyrs and the questions surrounding the justice of their deaths during the Maccabean revolt in the second century BC, saw a new birth in understanding of an afterlife. All of this was happening at just the time when Christ came to the earth. Again, God's timing is impeccable. He has already prepared the hearts and minds of the Jews for His teaching and example.

So it is that we believe that Jesus of Nazareth, born some 2000 years ago and murdered on a cross some 1970 years ago, is still alive. That He is living with His Father, God – the supreme Creator of the Universe – in a heavenly existence, waiting patiently for the completion of the world and the continuous remaking of this world into a heavenly kingdom with all of His followers – that's you and me, living together into eternity in a state of bliss with Him. Alleluia!

We must first understand that this resurrection was NOT a resuscitation. Recall that although Lazarus was brought back from the dead after 4 days, he still eventually died again. Recall also that Jairus' daughter, though brought back to life, also died again. What we are talking about here is Resurrection. Resurrection is from death to eternal life...life forever.

The word for resurrection in the NT is *anastasis* and is found 44x in the NT. And It is always used of a bodily resurrection. Jesus Himself promises to the disciples in John's Gospel, chapter 6, verse 54, "**54** Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and **I will raise him up on the last day.**"

Although the risen Christ can appear out of nowhere and walk through walls, He also has definite substance, a bodily existence, for He asks Thomas in Luke's Gospel (chapter 24), "**39** See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And just a few verses later Luke says, "**42** They gave [Jesus] a piece of broiled fish, **43** and he took it and ate before them." Can a ghost or disembodied soul eat broiled fish?

St. Paul attests to the Resurrection in both his correspondence to the Church in Corinth and the Church in Philippi. In Philippians, chapter 3 he says,

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...**10** that I may know him and the power of [Jesus'] resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead...**20** But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who **will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body**, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

In St. Paul's second letter to the Church at Corinth he gives us beautiful imagery of the resurrection (5:1),

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

And, then, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, one of the great expositions of the Resurrection, St. Paul says,

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? **13** But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. **14** And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. **15** We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. **16** For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. **17** And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. **19** If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. **20** But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. **21** For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. **22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Secondly, we must never forget what a great reversal Christ's resurrection was. The one final thing that any emperor, any ruler, any nation could require of you was your life. Every ruler, included the great Caesar in Rome, had the power of life and death over his subjects. What Jesus does is completely remove that threat. By defeating death on the cross he gives a great raspberry to every despotic ruler, every tyrant, every murderer, who ever lived. This life is not the end. Death is simply a pathway to a fuller life with Christ in Paradise and the promise of a future with Him on the New Earth.

Thirdly, we must not forget that Christ's resurrection 2000 years ago **inaugurated** the new beginning promised to us. We do not have to wait until we die or until the New Heavens and New Earth to experience the joy and power of new life in Christ. As Bishop N.T. Wright has said so forcefully,

“Those of you who are going to preach on Easter Sunday, please note that the resurrection stories in the Gospels do not [first and foremost] say Jesus is raised, therefore we're going to heaven or therefore we're going to be raised. They say Jesus is raised, therefore God's new creation has begun and we've got a job to do” (2006; p. 21)

We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ today, this day, Easter day, because when He rose from the dead nearly 2000 years ago everything changed. The way we interact with one another, the way we think, the way we speak, all of this changed. Beginning with the way we treat one another. If Christ is risen and He died for our sins, and He died so that we might have a new life, a transformed life, then we must enter in with Him in his death and resurrection in all of our relationships. First, we must submit to the “costly suffering and death of forgiveness if there is going to be a

resurrection in your heart” (Keller, 2008; p. 190). Nobody can be written off. Nobody is not important in God’s eyes. We do not confront anyone in this life in order to hurt, to gain payback, or to cajole, but simply for them to come to new life in Christ through our sacrificial love.

As senior Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Timothy Keller has said,
To refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death. Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the life-long living death of bitterness and cynicism (Keller, p. 189).

So the Great Feast of Easter is not just about Christ’s Resurrection as a firstfruits of our Resurrection on the Last Day, the day of His Second coming, it is also a resurrection of our lives today through a new way of living. We must say with Christ that our old selves are dead. No longer will I take revenge on those who have hurt me. No longer will I seek to make the stinging remark or get what is rightfully mine. Instead I will seek first what is best for others. No longer will I hold the grudge against someone about some supposed wrongdoing. Because in so doing these things we fail to attest to the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for just these sins and then was risen again in Glory!

Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen Indeed!

Resurrection in the Early Church

“For Christ loved man, He became man, and He shielded man from death” – Cyprian (c. 250 AD)

“Even if anyone is laboring under a defect of body, yet if he is an observer of the doctrines of delivered by Christ, He will raise him up at His second advent perfectly sound. He will make him immortal, incorruptible, and free from grief – Justin Martyr (c. 160 AD)

“In truth, Christ has even called the flesh to resurrection. He promises everlasting life to it...Why did He rise in the flesh in which He suffered, unless it was to demonstrate the resurrection of the flesh? – Justin Martyr (160 AD)

“Having been born, I will exist again. Death will exist no longer, and it will be seen no longer. Similarly, there was a time that I did not exist; yet, afterwards I was born. So even though fire may destroy all traces of my flesh, the earth still receives the vaporized matter. And though [my body] may be dispersed through rivers and seas, or torn in pieces by wild beasts, I am laid up in the storehouse of a wealthy Lord” – Tatian (c. 160 AD)

“Surely it was much more difficult and incredible [to have originally created man out of nothing]...than to re-integrate again that which had been created and then afterwards decomposed into earth” – Irenaeus (c. 180 AD)

“God is quite capable of remaking what He once made” – Tertullian (c. 197 AD)

“God would be unjust if He were to exclude from reward the flesh that is associated in good works. God would be idle if He were to exempt it from punishment – when it has been an accomplice in evil deeds” (Tertullian (c. 210 AD)

“It is the body that dies; the soul is immortal. So, then, if the soul is immortal, and the body is the corpse, then those who say that there is not a resurrection of the flesh deny any resurrection at all” – Methodius (c. 290 AD)