

**“Easter for All”**

**“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”**

**Resurrection power for eternal life**

When St. Paul wrote those words two millennia ago, some of the first Christians believed Jesus was raised from the dead, but didn't believe that they too would be raised. Is there life after death for any of us?

Anyone who has lost a loved one knows what St. Paul means when he speaks of the finality of death as an enemy. Those who face an unwanted and frightening medical diagnosis know death as the ultimate threat. Sure, we may come to an acceptance of death and even count it a blessing when a loved one suffers. But death is still something we all want to avoid for as long as possible. This is where the promises of God make a difference. We are promised in Scripture that the resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of those who have died. Have you faith in this promise?

Faith is more than agreement with some proposition. The Bible speaks of faith as something that is active and powerful because faith means a proper relation to God. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then it is not just a matter of an erroneous idea, but a matter of faith that has lost its power. Faith in something that is *not* real, always brings disastrous consequences. Without faith in the resurrection we are still in our sins, those who have died in Christ have perished for good, and the struggles of everyday life are meaningless.

Now this world is engaged in a great struggle between good and evil, wherein sin seeks to enslave us and bring us down to the grave. Sin is a crafty power that tries to take control of our lives and entice us away from proper relationship with God our Maker. But sin's power was broken by Christ's death and resurrection.

Since Christ took into himself all that is human, then his resurrection and his power over sin and death will be shared with all who are human. Those who have trusted in Jesus are freed from sin's power sin can no longer lord it over believers because they have a new and stronger Lord. Therefore the resurrection of Jesus\* was a supernatural event of ultimate significance. Why? because it touches upon the very meaning of our existence in this life and beyond.

The message of Easter is simple and profound: death will not have the last word; God will win and death will be defeated. “If we know the love of Jesus, we have come to realize that nothing can separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:8). God will not allow death to eclipse what we are, or what our loved ones are, and the love that we have shared.

I heard a story once about a cemetery in Georgia for African-Americans. There was one white person buried there. This man's mother had died when he was still a baby. His father had hired a black woman named Mandy to take care of his son. This woman was a fine Christian lady who loved the child like her own. Through the years this loving surrogate mother would come into the child's room and wake him with the same words: “Wake up. God's mornin' is come.” Even when he would come home from college for brief visits she would still wake him in the same way.

Years later, after he had become a successful statesman, word came that Mandy had died. He set out immediately to attend her funeral. Standing by her grave in this cemetery he indicated to a friend that he wanted to be buried beside this kind, loving woman who behaved in every way like his real mother. “I'd like to think,” he said, “that on that Resurrection Day she would say to me again, 'Wake up, my boy, God's mornin' is come!'”

**Resurrection power for this life.**

Ironically, many people today may accept that there is life after death, but have difficulty believing that there is resurrection life before death. The Scripture's report about the resurrection of Jesus starts like this, "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb..." But for us the story might continue like this: And on the second day of the week, Joanna woke up with a migraine headache; Mary the mother of James had an extra load of laundry to get done because of all the soccer games played the day before; Peter got up and grumpily went back to work after the long weekend; and John went back to the oncologist to find out what the latest round of chemo had accomplished. It's on the second, and third, and all the days after Easter where we discover if the stone has really been rolled away, and new life has come for us.

Does His resurrection make any difference to us here and now? Yes, yes it does. People who believe that Christ won victory over death can indeed live as free people. Their faith has the power of the resurrected Lord, a power that can defeat oppression and tyranny, be it small or large, and give strength to live as free people.

Back in the 1980's Eastern Europe was under the iron grip of communism and Soviet Russia's dominance. But in Poland the Solidarity movement *proved that Jesus' way could be lived even under circumstances of Communist oppression and martial law. People said to one another, in effect, "Start doing the things that you think should be done, and start being what you think society should become. Do you believe in freedom of speech? Then speak freely. Do you love the truth? Then tell it. Do you believe in an open society? Then act in the open. Do you believe in a decent and humane society? Then behave decently and humanely."* This behavior actually caught on, leading to "an epidemic of freedom in a closed society." By acting as if Poland were already free, Solidarity created a free country. The "as if" ceased to be pretense and became actuality. Within ten years, Solidarity had taken over the government.<sup>1</sup>

The message of Easter is that God left his heaven to enter fully into the life of this real world – he came into the very thick of it – because God cares about your life *now*. Because Christ lives I know that new life is God's answer to brokenness, tragedy, oppression from within or out, or any evil that besets us. This faith has inspired countless thousands of people to bring improve life.

If one were to choose among the greatest benefactors of humanity, Louis Pasteur would certainly rank at the top. He invented a process in which liquids such as milk were heated to kill bacteria and molds, making milk safer to drink. This process was soon afterwards known as pasteurization. He solved the mysteries of rabies, anthrax, and cholera, and contributed to the development of numerous vaccines. He lived at a time when thousands of people died each year of rabies. On July 6, 1885, after working four years on a vaccine, he was preparing to test it on himself. It was then that a 9-year-old, Joseph Meister was bitten by a rabid dog. The boy's mother begged Pasteur to experiment on her son. Pasteur injected Joseph for ten days, and the boy lived. A decade later, of all the things Pasteur could have had etched on his crypt, he asked for three words: JOSEPH MEISTER LIVED.

"The message of the Resurrection is that this present world matters; that the problems and pains of this present world matter; that the living God has made a decisive bridgehead into this present world with his healing and all-conquering love, That's why we pray: "Thy kingdom come, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" Easter Day was the first great answer to that prayer."<sup>2</sup>

Christians daily proclaim: "Jesus Christ Lives!"

**Resurrection for all.**

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992), 265.

<sup>2</sup>N. T. Wright, "Why Easter Matters," *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997); as quoted in *Good News Magazine*, March/April 2003, (Wilmore, KY: Forum for Scriptural Christianity).

Okay, so Christ's resurrection is a promise of eternal life and a power for new life today. But is this promise really for you and me?

Not long after Christ's resurrection, the apostle Peter found himself in the home of a Roman centurion. Now remember, Peter was the strong willed, skeptical fisherman who had followed Jesus, then ran away when Jesus was arrested. But after he met the Risen Jesus Peter became a new man, filled with a confidence and faith that only the resurrection could give. So Peter is in the home of Cornelius, this Roman centurion, and he began to speak, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" [Fears him] means to reverence and trust him. Peter tells about all that had happened with Jesus, how he was crucified, "but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear to us who were chosen by God as witnesses"

Well, they couldn't just keep news like this to themselves. So they began telling others what had happened. [They opened their Bibles and suddenly why hadn't they seen it before? It looked as though words about who Jesus was and is were spread throughout the Bible. Everywhere they looked they saw something that made them think of him and what he had done, and what he was still doing among them. So they shared this with others too.] They even began telling it to people like Cornelius, who hadn't been part of the family [he wasn't a Jew or believer – but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Peter tells Cornelius and all the folks in his house who are gathered there that his story can become their story too. [That's how it is with the best stories anyway, isn't it? We finish by feeling as though the author had said something true about us as well as the folks in his story. That's the way Peter ends.] This story is for us as well.

Easter is a wonderful time – not only to celebrate Christ's triumph over death, but to remember that the story is for each of us, yet not just for us alone. Every one of us has at one time been in Cornelius's shoes. Perhaps some of us here today are in his shoes right now, on the outside of the story, wondering if we fit in.

To all of us, Peter's words are still true: [God shows no partiality ... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name.] You don't have to know all our church's customs, or be a perfect person, or come from certain places or certain families. God raised Jesus from the dead not just for those folks back there in Palestine in the first century. God raised Jesus for everyone down to our own times; not just for the folks in our neighborhoods, or our nation, or the folks we like more than others. That old enemy, sin, wants to divide us – by color, by race, by class, by pocketbook, by program. But we're not color! We're not class or race, or pocketbook, or program! We're the people God wants to raise up.

[The living God has in principle dealt with evil once and for all, and is now at work, by his own Spirit, to do for us and the whole world what he did for Jesus on that first Easter Day.]<sup>3</sup> Christ's power and resurrection is for you and for me, and anyone who trusts in him.

## Conclusion

The heart of the Christian experience is that God did not shun this tough world, but lived among us, and suffered and died for our sins, and rose from the dead to call you and me – personally – to join him in transforming this world.

Surely there is someone here today who has come hoping for a word that lets you know that there is hope for a new start, that your love for another is not broken by death, that you belong with God's own people. Well, here is that word: [in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, *the first fruits* of those who have died.]

Place your faith in the One who has power over death. Believe that Jesus truly rose from the dead *for you* and accept salvation in *his* name.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid

\*When Jesus was brought back from the grave it was in reality and in power. His resurrection was not a resuscitation, or hallucination, not group think, not just wishes or philosophy. The Bible clearly uses the language of space and time to describe this event, in quite specific terms. Jesus was raised on the *third* day. He left behind an empty tomb, with “the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.” The note of particularity is unmistakable in the un-perjured testimony of eyewitnesses: the Lord is risen - bodily, audibly, perceptibly, in the same concrete sense in which he lived and died. Our reticence to proclaim our faith in a risen Lord, our fear of criticism from those who do not believe, proves that we do not understand the awesome Lord who walks with us. The Christ we serve today is the living Lord of all creation.