

What we will do in this sermon is meditate on Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Rather than focus on one text, I thought it would be edifying to reflect more broadly on the NT teaching on Jesus' resurrection and its meaning. The resurrection of Jesus had a wide range of aspects and implications and I thought it would be good to do a topical meditation on at least some of what the NT teaches.

The resurrection of Jesus is so important for Christianity that if it did not happen there would be no Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15:17 Paul wrote, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins." So, the doctrine of the resurrection is a central and an essential doctrine. If Jesus had not risen from the dead the way the Bible says that he did, our sins are not forgiven, life is meaningless, there is no hope beyond this life, we can't trust anything that the Bible says because it clearly teaches that Jesus rose from the dead.

So, the Bible gives quite a bit evidence concerning the truth of a literal bodily resurrection. The stories in each of the gospels describe an open empty tomb. The tomb of Jesus had been guarded by soldiers to keep anyone from stealing Jesus' body. No one had a motive to steal Jesus' dead body. The authorities did all that they could to make sure that that did not happen. The followers of Jesus had no motivation because if Jesus was dead and stayed dead, he had been a liar and a fraud, and they had better get back to being good Jews and waiting for the real Messiah.

But on Sunday morning, the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, the tomb was empty, Jesus' body was not there, and a number of Jesus' followers were saying that angels had told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. And then the reports started coming in that different people had seen Jesus alive. Acts 1:3 says that "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Later on, Paul would write that the risen Jesus had "appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom [were still alive when Paul wrote those words]" (1 Corinthians 15:5-6).

Now if we believe that the Bible is the word of God we do not need to be convinced of the truthfulness of Jesus' resurrection. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead because the Bible says that he did, and the Holy Spirit has given us faith in the truthfulness of the word of God.

But these evidences are there and they can confirm our belief that Jesus really and truly and physically was raised from the dead and that he showed himself in his resurrected body to a large number of people before he ascended into heaven.

For Bible-believing people the resurrection itself is not that surprising. If we believe all that the Bible tells us about God, we know that he is able to raise people from the dead. What is much more wonderful about the resurrection than its factuality is its meaning. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and that was an amazing miracle, but it did not change anything except for Lazarus and his sisters. Jesus' resurrection changed

everything. Jesus' resurrection is the hope of the world. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, death would be the end for all of us. There would be no realistic hope for anything beyond death. But because Jesus did rise from the dead, we who believe in Jesus experience salvation in the here and now and we look forward to physical life with God in the new heavens and new earth for all eternity.

Now one of the wonderful biblical perspectives on the resurrection of Jesus is that it was really the beginning of the new creation. The Bible teaches that after this age is over, God is going to make all things new in a renewed creation. That new creation began with Jesus' resurrection. The end-time new creation began when Jesus rose from the dead.

Paul especially speaks in terms of two ages, this present evil age, and the coming age of salvation. In Ephesians 1:21 he uses the phrase, "not only in this age but also in the one to come." So, time is divided between this age and the coming age. But with the resurrection of Jesus, the coming age has begun before this present evil age is ended. That means that there is an overlap during this period between the present evil age and the age to come. And Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the age to come – the end-time age of salvation which will last forever.

This is where the language of firstfruits finds its significance. In 1 Corinthians 15:20,22,23 Paul writes "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Verse 22-23, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."

This language of firstfruits is about the beginning of the harvest and the full harvest that comes later, but it is one harvest. That is in-line with the idea of the final age of salvation beginning in the present while we anticipate its fullness in the future.

This is a wonderful way of thinking about the present time for believers. When we are saved, we share in Jesus' resurrection. Ephesians 2:5 describes believers as having been "made ... alive together with Christ." When we are born again, Christ shares his resurrection life with us. That is the same life that John speaks of when he uses the term "eternal life." That term means literally – the life of the age to come. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the age to come and when we share in that resurrection life, we too are experiencing the life of the age to come. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:11, believers are described as those "on whom the end of the ages has come." He makes the same point when he says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come."

This does not mean that we are only in the age to come. We still are in the present evil age and that is why we will struggle with sin and trouble. But the resurrection of Jesus and our participation in it means that we are already down participating in the end-time new creation. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new reality that will come in its fullness at the end of the age, and we participate in that.

Now I just mentioned that believers share in the resurrection life of Christ to make the point that we participate in the new creation already during this present evil age. We participate in eternal life – the life of the age to come. I want to say a little more about that and what it means for us right now.

The background to this idea is that apart from Christ we are dead in sin. Ephesians 2:1 says of the Ephesian Christians that they “were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [they] once walked ....” That is true of everyone who is not a believer in Jesus. They are all dead in trespasses and sin. They are not dead physically. But they are dead spiritually. That is the natural condition of all of us. We are dead spiritually. What that means is that we are dead to God. We are dead to life as it was meant to be lived. We are dead in sin in the sense that we are slaves of sin. We are alive physically, but we do not experience fullness of life because fullness of life means living in a loving relationship with God and living a life in harmony with God’s will.

And salvation means that we are made alive together with Christ. Ephesians 2:4-5 says to the Ephesian Christians, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ....”

This is one of the implications of the resurrection of Jesus. We who believe share in that resurrection life of Christ. We are made alive together with him. Jesus calls this abundant life. In John 10:10 he says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Romans 6:4 refers to this as “newness of life.” And one of the big points that Romans 6 makes is that believers share both in Christ’s death and his resurrection with the result that they are dead to sin and alive to God. Romans 6:11, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

This life is the life of obedience to God. It is life lived to the glory of God. The life of sin is a life of slavery to sin. Sin is destructive. Romans 6:23 says that “the wages of sin is death.” Life is being set free from the slavery to sin. It is the power to turn from sin and live lives of obedience to God. The Bible everywhere teaches that the life of obedience to God’s law is truly the good life. It is pleasing to God. It is fruitful and satisfying. There is joy in living to the glory of God. It is living as we were designed to live. We never are completely free from sin as long as we are in this life, but there is a beginning and that beginning is the direct result of being raised together with Christ.

This belongs to our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a celebration of the life that he shares with us that frees us from the slavery to sin and enables us to begin to live life as it was meant to be lived. The Bible has a lot to say about how God wants us to live, and it makes it clear that living that way is not an oppressive burden, but freedom from the oppressive burden of sin. It is the life of delighting in the worship of God. It is the life of peace of conscience. It is the life of love and harmony. It is the life of enduring fruitfulness.

And so, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, let us consider whether we are enthusiastic about living the life that Jesus shares with us. There is an obvious problem if we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection while we are not

very excited to live the resurrection life that Jesus shares with us. May our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus stir us up to live the life that is made possible by Jesus' resurrection.

But regardless of how enthusiastically we live the life that Jesus shares with us, we will always fall short. There will always be sin. There will always be guilt. And there is great comfort in Jesus' resurrection for the pain that believers feel for remaining sin. We know that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin. Well, the resurrection of Jesus means that God has accepted the penalty that Jesus paid by his suffering and death. The penalty for sin is death. The result of Jesus paying that penalty completely is Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is God saying that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins in full.

In Romans 4:25 Paul teaches us that Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." The word "justification" means to be declared righteous. It means that those who believe in Jesus are declared righteous before the law of God. That means the forgiveness of all our sins, but it means more than that. It also means that Jesus' perfect life is credited to us so that in God's sight it is not only that our sins are forgiven, but also as if we have lived a fully obedient life. God views us as if we have never sinned and he views us as having lived a life of perfect obedience. All of our obligations to God have been fully met in justification.

The answer of the WSC to the question, "What is justification?" includes both of these aspects of justification. "Justification is the act of God's free grace by which He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight. He does so only because He counts the righteousness of Christ as ours. Justification is received by faith alone."

The resurrection of Christ from the dead assures us that Jesus fully paid the penalty for all our sins and fully lived the life of obedience in our place. He was "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." Paul makes this same point in a round-about way in 1 Corinthians 15 when he says that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, our faith would be futile, and we would still be in our sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17). That means that since Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, our faith is not futile, and we are no longer in our sins if we are trusting in Jesus.

What a reason for celebration that is! We know what it is to feel guilty. Guilt can be a terrible burden. The more clearly we understand the seriousness of our sins, the greater we feel the burden of guilt, unless that burden is removed through faith in Christ for our justification. If we are justified, we are declared not guilty because Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins and we are declared perfectly righteous because Jesus has lived a perfect life in our place. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign that Jesus has satisfied for all our requirements before God's law as far as our status before God is concerned. We still must obey out of thankfulness and because obedience is one of the great blessings of salvation, but as far as our status before

God is concerned, we have the same status as Christ himself. Christ's status becomes our status through faith in him. When God says that he is well pleased with Jesus – that is exactly what he says about us.

If we understand that we can have peace because we have peace with God. Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Because there is objectively peace with God on the basis of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can subjectively experience peace in our hearts because we know that in Christ God is pleased with us and the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate sign of that. God raised him from the dead because he was satisfied with the penalty that Jesus' paid on our behalf.

So, Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. Believers share in the resurrection life of Christ and Jesus' resurrection is the sign that God has accepted his death as the payment for our sins.

Next, we will consider Jesus' resurrection as his victory over death. Way back at the beginning God had told Adam that if he disobeyed God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die. The penalty for sin is death. The fact that everyone must die is because of sin. And if there is no salvation, physical death leads to eternal death.

Death is an awful reality. There is so much about life that is precious, and it is so sad to know that we must all one-day die. The greatest losses that we face in life are the loss of loved ones. Unless we are suicidal, we have a strong desire to live. We have this massive medical system to help us to heal when we get sick or injured and it has done a great job of extending our life expectancy. And we all make use of it to extend our lives if we are faced with life-threatening illness. Life is precious. Death is held off as long as possible. There are exceptions, of course, but mostly people want to live as long as possible.

But death comes to us all. Our time on earth is short. Our lives are lived in the shadow of death and there is a profound sadness in that. But we who believe in Jesus believe that Jesus has overcome death and that means that we will live forever with God in the new heavens and the new earth. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our hope for eternal life and the resurrection of our bodies.

Paul speaks of Jesus' resurrection as the firstfruits. 1 Corinthians 15:23, "Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." In 2 Corinthians 4:14 Paul writes, "[H]e who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence." In Philippians 3:20-21 Paul writes, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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 John 11:25-26, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

That is our hope as believers in Jesus. His resurrection is the fruit fruits of our resurrection. Physical death is not the end. Our souls go immediately to heaven to be with Jesus and our bodies wait in the grave until Jesus returns and raises us from the dead and grants to us our resurrection bodies. The fact that Jesus' body rose from the dead, and he will raise our bodies from the dead is God's affirmation of the physicality of the new creation. We will live forever in a physical world with physical bodies. We do not know all the details, of course, but we do know that we will serve Jesus forever in a physical creation with physical bodies.

And so, we live in the shadow of death with hope. Death is not the end. Jesus has overcome death so that the end of all things will not be death, but eternal life for all who have been raised with Christ. As Peter writes of the followers of Jesus, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...."

What a blessing to have this hope! It is significant that so many people who are not Christians have some kind of hope for beyond this life. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has put eternity into man's heart...." We know deep down that there is more to our existence than this life alone. Some people manage to convince themselves that they cease to exist after they die, but the belief in something beyond this life is very persistent.

Sadly, most of that hope is misplaced because it is not based on God's revelation given to us in the Bible. But we who believe in Jesus have a solid hope – a hope that is based on the word of God – a hope that is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. There is still a sadness surrounding death. But that sadness is tempered with hope because death is not the last word. As Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 1:10, Jesus has "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." We grieve in the face of death and we grieve as we feel our lives slipping away but we do not grieve as others do who have no hope. We grieve with hope because of the resurrection of Jesus and all that it means for us both for this life and for the life to come.

Hope is a big topic for the Christian life. That is because we have a glorious future that is rooted in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In Romans 15:13 Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Paul prays that we may abound in hope. He prays that we may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a good thing to abound in hope. We should pray for that. But it also comes through dwelling upon the future that God has in store for us.

What a wonderful thing it is to have hope! There is certainly lots going on which tempts us to be discouraged. There are so many things going on in the world around us that are disturbing. There is the passing of time and the approach of the end of our lives here on earth. There is the sadness of loved ones who have been taken from us and the knowledge that others will be taken from us or we from them.

But the resurrection of Jesus is the basis of hope for all who are trusting in him. We grieve, but we also hope because death has been overcome. Jesus has won the victory over death by experiencing the death that we deserve so that we might have the life that he deserves.

So, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. It is the beginning of the new creation. We are raised together with Christ so that we are dead to sin and alive to God. Jesus was raised for our justification. And by his death and resurrection Jesus has overcome death so that we live in hope of one day being raised from the dead ourselves.

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