

THE MORNING THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Easter 2005
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Matt. 28:1-20

INTRODUCTION

I came across a report in one of our national newspapers that there are over 100 books in print that include the phrase, “That Changed the World.” Here are just a few titles:

- Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World
- El Nino: The Weather Phenomenon That Changed the World
- Model T Ford: The Car That Changed the World
- The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World

And, here’s my favorite,

- Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World
(*Really now*, can you “invent” a color?)

Do we have a little overstatement going on with these claims? This morning, we are celebrating the event that *really* changed our world– the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot overstate the importance of this event. It is the most important event in all of history– yes, even more important than the birth of Jesus (though of course His birth is the beginning that Easter climaxes).

Dr. Philip Eaton, president of Seattle Pacific University (my alma mater), mentions that last Easter morning he went out to pick up his newspapers. He scanned through *The New York Times* and realized there was not one word about Easter. And this is the paper that claims to provide for its readers “all the news that’s fit to print.” Somehow the fact that two billion Christians around the globe would shout and sing throughout this morning that Christ is risen was not considered news by them– or at least it wasn’t “fit to print.” He scanned *The Seattle Times*, and again, not one word about Easter. There are two billion Christians in the world who know Easter changed everything, yet Dr. Eaton observes, “there I was on Easter morning pushed to the margins by some mandate of our culture that wants to airbrush Easter out of existence.”

Let’s consider the difference that Easter makes to our world, and to our lives. Sometimes I think Christians aren’t even fully aware of what Easter means and miss sight of the fact it really did change the world forever. Too many of us are not living in the power of the resurrection. We believe in it, but fail to apply it so that our lives are stressed-out, fragmented, and we run on empty a good deal of the time.

Our Scripture this morning is Matthew’s account of the resurrection. Notice how it begins with a violent earthquake– literally an earth-shaking– and ends with the great commission. The “but how?” in the minds of the disciples as they receive their marching orders leads us to the ultimate proof of the resurrection in the resurrected disciples, for they become a people whom their

enemies describe as “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6, KJV). We of course realize they were turning it right side up.

READ Matt. 28

THE CROSS IS VICTORY

Easter means the cross was a victory, not a defeat. Without the resurrection, Jesus’ death on the cross would have been merely the tragic death of a martyr. Certainly His courage in suffering, His unflinching stand against evil, and His forgiving His enemies would be a source of inspiration and encouragement for us. But, that is not the central issue of the cross. It is the means of atonement and salvation for us. It is the only way our sins could be taken away. Paul, when He writes the earliest account of the resurrection (even before the Gospels were written), lists the essential facts in his sparse narrative,

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Cor 15:3-6)

“Christ died for our sins” puts it succinctly. Later on in that same chapter, as Paul expounds upon the implications of Christ’s resurrection, he says, *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins (17)*. The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead is proof that the atonement worked and our sins really are forgiven in Christ. Peter’s first sermons recorded in Acts at the birth of the church affirm this. The rest of the New Testament continues to affirm this truth. To summarize the message, we could say: Christ died for our sins on the cross; the fact that He rose from the dead is proof that God accepted His sacrifice for our sins; and we now can receive forgiveness of our sins by placing our trust in Christ.

In the cross is also the solution to the problem of evil and injustice in the whole world. The crucifixion was the only way God could salvage the mess humans had made out of things. A few weeks ago in our Colossians series, I preached on that powerful description in Col 2:13-15:

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Those are strong words: disarming the powers of evil and darkness and the spiritual authorities that are responsible for the horrible evil in our world, triumphing over them on the cross.

We’ve seen evil’s ugliness in the terrible school slayings this past week in Red Lake, Minnesota, leaving ten people dead. We see the awful results of hatred and anger every night in the news from Iraq. Terrorism casts its dark shadow across much of our national life. And here in our county, doesn’t it seem like in the last few months there’s been a lot more violence and murders? And of course there is the ongoing scourge of drugs, alcohol, broken relationships, and immoral behavior. We need a Savior!

The triumph of the cross is the beginning of the end for all that is wrong in our world. The devil

and evil people do their best to destroy the greatest person who ever walked the face of the earth— Jesus, the Son of God. Through the darkness and suffering of the cross, God brings resurrection, life that is perfect, untouchable by evil. It reveals God’s plan of redemption for all who will make Him their Lord and Savior.

Over 100 years ago a tornado almost completely demolished a little town in Minnesota. Many were killed and many more severely injured. A British surgeon and his two physician sons worked around the clock for days, giving skilled medical aid. Their selflessness and the excellence of their work made a huge impression on the tornado victims. The doctor and his sons were offered considerable financial backing if they would stay and build a hospital, provided they took charge. The three doctors agreed. The town was Rochester, Minnesota and the doctors were William W., William J., and Charles Mayo. The clinic was simply called “The Mayo Clinic.” This hospital, not in a major city or connected with a major university, has become a world renowned center of healing.

In that story I see an illustration of what the cross is about. On the cross, Jesus takes our sin-wrecked lives and provides the means of healing. His resurrection is the power that recreates our lives into something beautiful and a blessing beyond our imagining. The cross, a scene of terrible injustice and suffering has been transformed into a place offering healing for the world.

THIS WORLD MATTERS

But, Easter means more than our salvation from sin so we can go to heaven. It is a powerful affirmation that this world matters and the problems we face in this world matter. God has entered into this world in Christ and is working within the material framework of our world to bring about His kingdom of love and justice. That’s why Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Easter transforms life for us in the here and now, and through us it changes our world.

Notice the impetus in the Scriptural account. There is movement here. Listen again to Matt 28:6-8, the words of the angel:

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

The point is, Jesus wasn’t resurrected just to prove He is the Son of God, the redeemer for our sins, and then go to heaven. He is active, going ahead of the disciples to Galilee— real geography, real places on planet earth. The Great Commission given on a mountain in Galilee is to make disciples of all nations on this earth. In essence Jesus is saying, “Be satisfied that I really am alive in a physical body. I have been raised from the dead. Then get going. Spread the word to others you meet, out in the streets of your city and everywhere on earth.” There is energy, movement.

But these early disciples are not to accomplish this assignment merely by inspiration drawn from the resurrection. Jesus says He is going before them. Then the marvelous promise that ends this Gospel, *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (20). The answer to how that happens is contained in the beginning of the book of Acts— in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Now, if you've been paying attention at all in reading the Gospel, this commission at the end leaves you wondering. There are just eleven disciples— the number itself limps, no longer the robust twelve. It is a poignant reminder that one has betrayed Jesus. A few days earlier, Peter, who seemed to see himself as the leader of the disciples, folded under pressure and denied Jesus three times. It appears only John was at the crucifixion, the rest had gone into hiding. And throughout their three years with Jesus, none of them ever seemed to really "get it." They often seem inept, clueless. And here, at this scene of the Great Commission, we read, *When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted* (17). Whether just some of the eleven doubted or they all had some doubts is not clear. Either reading is possible from the Greek. At any rate, this hardly inspires our confidence in the ones in whose hands is left this spreading the kingdom of God on earth. The disciples need a resurrection!

That resurrection we see on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. With the infusion of the Holy Spirit into the gathered disciples, there is no longer any doubt about how this going to happen. They are empowered and unstoppable by any earthly authority of power. The works of Jesus continue through them. While the full name of the book of Acts is The Acts of the Apostles, it really could be more accurately titled, The Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles. The apostles are no longer the men they were. They are transformed, resurrected, operating in a power not their own: the power of the Holy Spirit, which is synonymous with the presence of Jesus.

Most of us in the church understand we are to be obeying the Great Commission and doing the works of Jesus in our world. But where we often get off the rails is in just how this is to be done. We don't do it. God does it through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our problem is, we've been seduced by this world's thinking that life is sustained human will and activity. When we operate in our human strength, we become exhausted and there is little joy. As Craig Barnes puts it, we talk about "my faith," "my walk with Christ," "my mission," and "my needs." That all changes when we understand Jesus is not just the one who tells us what to do and shows us what to do, but is actually the One who is alive and at work in this world. Then it is always His mission we are participating in, empowered by Him. The question we then ask is not, "Can I do it?" but "Can Jesus do it?"

Becoming a Christian is not about turning over a new leaf, becoming more religious, and more motivated to do good. Those are human endeavors. Christianity is about miraculous transformation: selfish people becoming unselfish; immoral people getting self-control; cruel people becoming kind; and sour people becoming sweet. That is the power of the resurrection.

However, the resurrection also means those transformations within us are not just to bless our own personal lives. It is a blessing, to be sure, and warms our hearts with that relationship we enjoy with Jesus, for we are designed for fellowship with God. But we are transformed to become agents of God's transformation in the world we live in. We work with Him in His power to end injustice, combat evil, heal broken lives, spread His love, and proclaim His kingdom.

I've read that in the Russian Orthodox church, at the end of worship the priest shouts to the people, "Christ is risen!" And the people's response is shouted back, "He is risen indeed!" It was at that very moment, Malcom Muggeridge became a Christian. Malcom Muggeridge was a well-known British journalist, and is the one largely responsible for the "discovery" of Mother Teresa to the world. But before he was a Christian, Muggeridge was in the old Soviet Union, doing a story on the Communist party and the dying of religion in the early 1950s. He interviewed many people, including those in the Kremlin. Then, before he left he decided to attend a Russian Orthodox church on Easter. The church was packed. As the service ended, the priest shouted, "Christ is risen!" The people responded with a deafening, "He is risen indeed!" Muggeridge said, as he looked out on those faces, he realized in that moment that they were right and Stalin was wrong. The obvious joy of their faith and the vitality of their faith amidst the cruel persecution of the Soviet regime tipped Muggeridge over the edge and he invited Christ to be his Lord and Savior.

CONCLUSION

Philip Yancey tells about a German prison camp in World War II where, unbeknownst to the guards, the Americans had built a makeshift radio out of cobbled together parts they'd managed to come up with. As things unraveled in Germany at the end of the war, communications between the German high command and their units also badly broke down. These Americans, on their secret radio receiver, heard the news that the German high command had surrendered, but the German guards didn't know it yet.

For three days the prisoners were celebrating, utterly transformed from what they had been. The German guards were totally confused as to what was going on. The prisoners sang, waved at the guards, laughed at the German shepherd dogs, and shared jokes over meals. The fourth day they awoke to find all the Germans had fled, leaving the gates unlocked. The Germans had finally gotten the word that it was over.

As believers, we have a spiritual receiving set. We are privy to information this world doesn't understand. We know what happened on Easter.

- What happened on the cross means Christ has triumphed over sin, evil and all the powers of darkness, and it's only a matter of time before that is fully manifest.
- Christ's resurrection means our resurrection right now when we believe in Him, so our lives can be transformed, and we can walk "in newness of life."
- It means God is at work in this world, in the material of our lives— our homes, families, communities, and world— to bring forth His kingdom of love and righteousness.
- And we know that we too, when our lives are over here, will enjoy the resurrection of

eternal life. As Christ was raised, so we are promised resurrection.

But, we need to keep tuned in. For those German prisoners, nothing looked different and their conditions hadn't changed for those three days. But, they knew what was coming, and that made all the difference. We keep our receivers tuned in through prayer, Scripture, spiritual reading, and worship with God's people. When we know what is *really* happening, in spite of how things may look, our hearts will overflow with joy even amidst the darkness. For Christ is risen! And that makes all the difference.

Let's end our worship as the Russian Orthodox church does. Remember, your response is, "He is risen indeed!" And say it in a way that will convert someone, even as Muggeridge was.

CHRIST IS RISEN!