

Risen One

John 20: 1-18; I Corinthians 15: 1-11

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I. Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, my daughter, Julia, and I were watching the second *Hunger Games* movie, *Catching Fire*, and there's a point in the movie which Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the story, is about to enter the arena for a fight to the death, and her mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, pulls her aside and says to her, "Katniss, remember who the real enemy is." What he means in the context of the story is that the real enemy is not the other contestants in the arena that she's going to be fighting. The real enemy is the system that has created this contest to the death.

In our Passion narrative, it can be easy to lose sight of who the real enemy is because Easter is not the story of one man who got raised from the dead. It is the story of God's victory over a system of sin and death that had the world in its bondage. It's a system of oppression and violence that kills Jesus and the resurrection is about God turning that system on its head and triumphing over all of the forces of death and oppression.

For the early Christian community, the resurrection was the central affirmation that changed their understanding of the whole world. The early Christians did not gather because they had a new idea of spirituality nor did they have a different new moral code that they were going to follow. They came together because of the announcement that God had done something new in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Something had happened that made the whole world different.

All this Lent we had been exploring who Jesus is. We've been looking at a lot of the titles and terms that the early church used to describe their experience of Jesus. And we come today to the end of that series as we look at the supreme title for Christ which is the Risen One.

II. Before we talk about Jesus' resurrection, we need to understand what resurrection meant to the early Christians

But before we talk about Jesus' resurrection, I want to talk just a minute about what the world of Jesus' day understood by resurrection.

The Jewish community in Jesus' day like our community now had a variety of beliefs about what happened after death. There were people who believed that nothing happened after death. This is one of the fights that Jesus has with the Sadducees. They just believed when you died, you died. That was it.

There were other folks who believed that after one died, your spirit moved on into a life with God and you hear hints of that in the scripture text when, for example, Saul has the witch call up Samuel's spirit to ask him to foretell the future. Or in the book of Acts when Peter is imprisoned and the church is praying for him and the angel lets Peter out of prison and Peter goes to the church and knocks on the door, everybody says, "They must've killed Peter because there's his ghost," or Jesus on the cross talking to the bandit beside him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." So, there's this running idea of a spirit that goes on after the body has died. But then there are those who believe that at the end of time, everyone would be fully and bodily physically resurrected from the dead. Now theologically the importance of a bodily resurrection is that as opposed to the Greek idea that we're body and spirit and you can tease those two out, in Jewish understanding, all of who we are, body, mind, and spirit is all inextricably bound together. And so, if God is going to provide us with eternal life, it has to be all of who we are. It is a great and wondrous affirmation of our physical creation and the gift of that and the gift of all of our physical created order and an affirmation of the holiness of that and that God will redeem all of that.

But resurrection is not just about a resuscitated body but a renewed body. Jesus' being raised from the dead is not like Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead bed Lazarus just was given life again, he was going to die in the normal course of nature. But the resurrection is about a new life, a new body that has continuity with our current body but is renewed and recreated in the glory of the final days.

The Prophet Daniel says, "Many of those who sleep in dust of the earth shall awake and those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sun and lead many to righteousness, like stars forever and forever." So, in the post-resurrection pictures of Jesus, you see Jesus doing things that no human can do: appearing in the middle of a locked room, moving over vast distances in a blink of an eye, being unrecognizable as he was to Mary in our lesson today.

But perhaps most important is to understand that the resurrection was to happen all at once at the end of time. All of those who believed in the resurrection, the Pharisees are among those, believed that life would continue as it always has until that end moment when God would usher in the new kingdom and then everyone who was dead would rise again to new and glorious bodies.

But what the early church realized was that in the resurrection of Jesus, that new age, the age in which God's will would triumph and reign overall had been initiated but what was unexpected was the old age had not ended yet. They had expected the old age to come to a sharp end, resurrection happens and then everybody lives in God's glorious new kingdom, and what they understood in Jesus is that those two times were now co-existing, that the new age had been initiated through the resurrection of Jesus but the old age of sin and death was continuing until that final day when God would come again, which is why Paul refers to Jesus as "the first fruits of the new age." Jürgen Moltmann writes that Christ was not resurrected up into heaven but ahead into the future. Christ becomes for us the promise of what the future looks like.

III. The famous German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg -- who died a few months ago -- said in an interview that, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live." I want to unpack that a little bit because there's some meat there.

The first thing to look at of course is what is this evidence that Pannenberg is talking about? And of course, one piece of that evidence is the Gospel narratives and Paul's writing about that event of the Resurrection, that the early church clearly understood themselves to have been in the presence of the resurrected Christ as these stories tell it.

But perhaps more importantly is the witness of what happened to the early church after the resurrection, because frankly messiahs were a dime a dozen in Jesus' day. Messiah's were popping up all the time. In 70 C.E., about the time that the Gospel of Mark was being written, a man by the name of Simon bar Giora claimed to be the Messiah and led a huge revolt against the Romans in which he was executed and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. A few years later in 135, just after the Gospel of John was written, a new messiah arose, his name was Simon bar Kokhba. He also led a huge rebellion against the Romans, was also killed and Jerusalem burned to the ground. Other prophets and messiahs came and went during that period and routinely they died violently as Jesus did, and their movements either died with them or transformed to be led by another leader.

Jesus' movement did neither. Jesus' movement got stronger and stronger and stronger. Within days of his execution, it was bursting with excitement of the news of the resurrection. Within weeks, it was announcing that this resurrected one was indeed the Messiah and within a handful of years, it was proclaiming across the Mediterranean basin to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus was Lord of the World. Clearly they had encountered Jesus in a way that made them believe that he was alive and transformed into his resurrection body. Now, that doesn't mean that the writers of the New Testament didn't clothe their story in symbolism and metaphor or that every word of their narrative is literally true. They were writers. They were theologians. They were telling a story in a way that would teach us about that. But there's no evidence that Jewish literature of this time ever used the word "resurrection" as a metaphor to denote anything that was non-concrete. The early church understood that in Jesus' death and life, that the fulfillment of scripture had taken place, that Israel's long night of exile was ended, that the sins that had kept Israel enslaved had been forgiven and that a dawn of a new day had begun.

Now skeptics will argue that the fact that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection differ is a sign that they are not historical documents or stories, and I would argue actually that the exact opposite is true. If the early church wanted to manufacture a story about the resurrection of their Messiah, they would've at least told a story that was consistent, right? The variations that we see in the Gospel narratives -- how many

women were there, which of the disciples came -- are examples of what every trial lawyer and judge knows, that eyewitnesses to any event often have very different recollections of what the details of that event looked like. The discrepancies in the Gospels actually show us that those witnesses are not colluding with each other. They're stories that the different disciples told in their communities and that eventually got re-written and pulled together in the canon of sacred scripture and they had different recollections of this event but the event they all knew to be true.

Bishop N.T. Wright tells us, "If nothing happened to the body of Jesus, I cannot see why any of his explicit or implicit claims should be regarded as true. What is more as a historian, I cannot see why anyone would have continued to belong to his movement and to regard him as the Messiah." So, that's the evidence that Pannenberg is talking about.

His first point about why that's difficult for us is that it's a very unusual event. You will often hear people in today's dialogue about the resurrection say that Christ's resurrection seems to fly in the face of what we understand about the nature of the world through science. But I'm not sure that's entirely correct. Most scientists will tell you that our understanding of the world is constantly evolving and growing as we learn more and more about the nature of the universe and that science as a lens to understand the world is an incredibly valuable one but it measures certain kinds of things. It measures regular events that are ideally replicable through experiments that are replicable, and that's a very important and valuable field of knowledge, but there's all kinds of other knowledge in the world that doesn't get categorized in that way. All we can reasonably say from a scientific standpoint is that the resurrection, we don't understand how the resurrection might have happened and that's where we have to leave it.

Which brings us to Pannenberg's second point, and I think on some level the more important point, which is if the resurrection is true, it means that we all have to live differently, because if Jesus is Lord, then Rome is not, then systems of violence and oppression are not, conventional wisdom is not. If Jesus is Lord, then all of the would-be lords of our life are not lords anymore. Money and power, status, security, all of these take a second backseat to the lordship of Christ. And what that means is in a world that is torn by violence and oppression and inequality and prejudice and hatred, our work is of infinite value because God has invited us to work in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to bring about the new kingdom.

Violence and oppression and inequality and prejudice and hatred still exist and sometimes they seem very, very powerful but the good news of Easter morning is that they have been defeated, that as powerful as they seem many days when we open the newspaper, their hold on us has been broken and a new world is breaking into being, a world made possible through the power of the resurrection and that we are invited to join and be part of. The point of the resurrection is that death does not have the last word. God has the last word and it is a word of life. For all its pains and struggles, the resurrection means that life here is of infinite worth and value and beauty, and the

kingdom of God, a kingdom, a reign of justice and freedom and peace and love is breaking into the world and we get to be part of helping that happen.

Now if you're not a regular with us here, I want to suggest that this living out of this new kingdom is something that is meant to be done in community, this is where learn how to do it, this is where we join our efforts to making that kingdom living real. So, I want to encourage you to come back and join us, to be partners with us as we seek to create a new reality in our city and in our world. The resurrection means that all of our acts of justice and mercy, all of our work, all of our passion for beauty and truth, all of the work to build a loving community of kindness and forgiveness, all of these matter and they matter forever.

IV. Conclusion

In the *Hunger Games*, Haymitch tells Katniss to remember who the real enemy is because it's easy to get distracted by the struggles in our lives that seem so important in the moment and to lose focus on the work that really calls us. The real enemy is death and it has been overcome today and forever.

Amen.