

He Has Been Raised

Pastor Chip Fisher

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-10
Matthew 28:1-8

In 1930 Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin is said to have traveled from Moscow to Kiev to address a great assembly on the virtues of atheism. Bukharin should have known: he was a Communist leader back in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution; he was professor of economics and political science; he was editor of “Pravda” (Russian for “Truth”, tellingly) and a full member of the ruling Politburo. For a full hour Bukharin unleashed his prodigious intellect and his rhetorical skill to ridicule and demolish the mortal enemy of the Party, the Christian faith. There was a long, long silence. “Any questions?” he dared the listeners to ask him.

One lone figure slowly, quietly walked up to the platform, standing at the lectern above the speaker. He surveyed the crowd to the left and the right. Finally he shouted the ancient affirmation: “Christ is Risen!” As one, the crowd responded with the sound of thunder: “He is Risen Indeed!”

For two millennia that ancient refrain has endured while so many other systems have imploded: first the Roman Empire and its pagan philosophies and religions; and Leninism, Marxism, and Maoism in their turn; Fascism and Nazism and Falangism. The Whig and the Federalist Parties in our history; in time the Democrat and the Republican Parties, and your favorite and my favorite human endeavors, too, will wither as the grass in the field. The cross of Christ and the Empty Tomb will endure.

I fully believe that the Resurrection of Jesus is the most important Event in history, and for several reasons I’d like for each of us more fully to believe likewise.

We are living in an increasingly skeptical and anti-Christian epoch; by no means is it natural for our citizens, particularly those young and educated, to become disciples of Jesus or to believe the Resurrection is the central Event in history. (What percentage of the students nearby at UC Irvine are worshiping in some church any given Sunday?) “Objective materialism” wants to define as reality only what science can apprehend; “scientific humanism” (a term used by the late writer Walker Percy) is likewise the mistaken assumption that human existence can be explained in purely natural terms.

In 2007 the Jesus Seminar published “The Acts of Jesus,” the latest venture in their ongoing project to conform the Scriptures and the Christian faith to their prior worldview. John Dominic Crossan has written, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” Prominent scholar Marcus Borg does not see that the empty tomb is important to the Christian faith: “I think the Resurrection of Jesus really happened, but I have no idea if it involves anything happening to His corpse...so I would have no problem whatsoever with archaeologists finding the corpse of Jesus. For me that would not be a discrediting of the Christian faith or...tradition.” (Obviously the apostle Paul would not have fit in with the Jesus Seminar—he stuck to that old-fashioned notion that it was of primary importance, what “[he] in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”)

The apostle Paul didn’t play this modern game which removes the question of Jesus from the realm of basic evidence and experience. A “faith” which rests on no facts, needs no witnesses and no evidence has one advantage—it’s hard to disprove. It has one disadvantage—it doesn’t do anyone any good. There’s certainly not much to sing about on an Easter Sunday morning!

Paul knew nothing about a “spiritual” meaning without a historical cause; he would have had nothing to do with a Christian faith severed and sanitized from any supernatural Cause or effect. He would have seen our modernist worldview for what it is: a puny attempt to reduce Jesus and His Resurrection down to the dimensions of what we can rationally understand within our current worldview of scientific materialism. (Was it Voltaire who quipped, “God created mankind in His image, and mankind returned the favor”.)

(Some years ago the National Zoo in Washington upgraded into more spacious quarters, but the rhinoceros was confused. It now had a wide

open living space, but that poor rhino had lived in its cage so long it made a new imaginary cage in the exact dimension of its old one; it wore out the grass in the same oval shape corresponding to the space within the old bars—all within a small corner of its new living area. Maybe we should be skeptical of the confines of our current materialist worldview—as many of the finest scientists have been doing for a century. [Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Polkinghorne come to mind: they have certainly helped change our understanding of material reality...]

“I know that my Redeemer liveth!” Are we disciples crazy, or anti-intellectual, or merely stubborn and stupid? Several reasons allow me to trust with full confidence that Jesus is risen from having been dead (really dead) in the Tomb...

The Scriptures are uniform in their insistence on this unbelievable event. Many of you and I have been reading these two-thousand year old letters for some time now—and I have learned, on the whole, to trust them. The epistles (and gospels) testify to the central importance of the Resurrection: that Jesus did not stay dead; that He appeared in some bodily form after His execution and burial to all sorts of different people. They were scared, they were not expecting this to happen, they were caught flat-footed in unflattering postures (for example hiding together behind closed doors) but their lives were then changed forever anyway. This was not mass hallucination, grief-induced wish-fulfillment, not the beloved but oh-so dead Jesus living on in their memory. (These are all modern excuses for an imagination too stunted to accept the obvious reality.) NT Wright explains, “They knew as well as we do that things like that just don’t happen. When people died they stayed dead in first-century Palestine just as much as in the technological twenty-first century... Yet they say, loud and clear that that was what happened. He had gone through death and out the other side, into a new mode of human existence.”

Paul writes to the Corinthian Church he is merely telling them what he already told them, which is what had been passed on to him not 20 years after the fact of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. Not every detail in the faith is equally important, but Paul wanted them to know this was paramount: “Jesus was put to death to redeem us from our sins, and was buried and then He was raised alive on the third day, just as the Scriptures had told He would be.” “If you don’t believe me, go ask Peter or one of the twelve apostles or any of the more than 500 to whom Jesus appeared. Most of them are still alive; go ahead and ask! This is really important

that you get this: it changes the world forever!”

In addition to the Bible, I also trust many faithful friends of Jesus I have known whose lives have reflected truthfulness and integrity. People who have lived as if Jesus were in fact raised from the dead and as if His promises are trustworthy and true; people whose lives have turned out much more richly than had they lived as others do who have no hope. (How we live our lives matter a great deal; people are watching us all the time to match up our words to the consistency of our actions.) Friends in former churches; friends when I was an undergraduate; friends in Seminary and various former mentors who have known the risen Jesus thru His Spirit—a few have been visited by Him in a supernatural way—and then have lived accordingly.

I am no apostle Paul, and I cannot boast of mystical experiences of the risen Christ. (However, notice how Mary Magdalene, who had been forgiven much and who loved Jesus greatly, was the first witness to His empty tomb; it is she to whom Jesus appears in our lesson. Jesus has a way of coming to those who love Him most and who admit they need Him most—like Mary—or even those who passionately stand against Him, like Paul. Passive indifference isn’t likely to part the curtains of heaven.) By the grace of God Jesus did come to Paul; by His grace the Spirit comes to you and me when we pray. We are not at the mercy only of faithful Bible heroes back then, or faithful sisters and brothers in Christ today. “God hears the prayers of the faithful;” “God is near to all who call upon His name;” “...when we resolve to do His will we will know...” Communion with the Holy Spirit of God, by His grace, is a privilege God extends to all His adopted children.

(From time to time someone will tell me, “I’d really like to believe in God—but I can’t quite.” I can empathize: for years I couldn’t quite, either. Then I did. But it had little to do with evidence and everything to do with pride. I did not want to become accountable to anyone else, even God. I did not want anyone interfering in running my life. I did not want to admit I maybe needed a Savior, the painful evidence of my psyche and my ruined relationships to the contrary. Believing in God, trusting in God begins with prayer—as ruthlessly honest prayer as I can manage. “A broken and contrite heart God will not despise.” God is very able, and most willing, to answer the honest cries of our heart. Ask Mary Magdalene; ask Paul; ask just about anyone sitting around you. Better yet, ask Jesus. (He’s still alive, you know.)

We have a great deal of historical evidence outside the Bible for the Resurrection of Jesus. How

else to explain the behavior of Peter or Paul or the first apostles? Peter shamefully denied His Lord; the apostles deserted Jesus when He needed them most. Following His crucifixion they were afraid to be seen in public. How to explain their turnaround into giants of the faith—Peter preaching boldly to the very authorities from whom he had been hiding? Paul converted from persecuting Jesus' people to traveling over 10,000 perilous miles to encourage and multiply His Church? Eleven of the twelve, excluding Judas, choosing martyrdom at the end of missionary careers? The Holy Spirit, of course, got into them at Pentecost—but the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth—and no one would go freely to die for a cause he knew to be fraudulent. The resurrected Christ in fact did appear to them, did instruct them, did inspire them—and did change their lives!

I've told you some of the reasons I trust that Jesus was raised from the dead. Let's transition now to why I believe this is the most important Event shaping human history. This theme has to do with the questions of suffering and evil, of life's meaning, and of death.

Many of you were here for our Good Friday Worship Service. We all know a tortured, crucified, humiliated Messiah who is still dead is not much good to anyone. (How the hopes of His disciples had been raised; they had dared to believe that with this Jesus it would be different. But the Roman civic leaders and the Jerusalem religious leaders decided He had gone too far—and put a brutal end to His ministry and to His life. What of His promises of the Kingdom of God, in which rich and poor, male and female, born and unborn, leper and publican and priest are of equal infinite value? Wherein all have a fair chance, and are recognized as beloved by God? What of this God who is love?)

Had Jesus been crucified and remained in the tomb I think the effect would be worse than had He never come. Once again the same old lessons drummed into a weary world: "might makes right," "political power comes from the barrel of a gun." But all that was changed when God raised Jesus. Everything Jesus taught is vindicated; each act of love and service is valuable; human suffering is not for naught; injustice is not forever and the world is not fundamentally unfair. The power of evil and terror does not triumph over good—not in the End.

The Resurrection of Jesus changes all perspective. Edward F. Halpin entered Buchenwald with Patton's Third Army, and later reflected, "only the concept of eternity could explain the ambiguity between a loving God and the holocaust. For if life does not end with the grave, we should pity the prison

guard, not his victim." Jesus dead on the cross changes nothing. Jesus raised alive from the grave changes everything. We pity the powerful; we trust that God has all eternity to right the wrongs perpetrated upon the innocent. (As Heather reminded us Good Friday: suffering and injustice in this world do not indicate the absence of God: the Resurrection of Jesus in fact shows us God is not pleased or finished with a world in which the drug cartels gun down honest police, in which someone sitting in the passenger seat is killed by a car speeding thru a red light, in which the dishonest keep prospering...the Resurrection shows us that the power of God, in the end, always exceeds the present status quo and the powers of evil which conspired to crucify Jesus.) We do not wait passively until "the end"—we obey His will for our lives with renewed energy and conviction. We need not serve God timidly: the issue is no longer in doubt.

The Resurrection of Jesus provides the possibility of meaningful lives. If there is no God, or if God has no interest in or power over our lives or human history, then "what we see is what we get." What we get, increasingly among the young and those most affected by the current secular worldviews, is a world which feels entirely random and terminally boring. A thousand channels on TV and nothing to watch. Overflowing shelves packed to the sky at Costco and only more emptiness inside. "Whatever."

[You may have heard recent news report of Hillary Clinton's conversation with Mexican authorities in which she rightly acknowledged the part our North American addictions to illicit drugs contribute to the rampant climate of crime on both sides of the border. Did no one ask why, when our material standard of living is comparatively and historically so high, our national drug habit is commensurately high? What worldview is it which contributes to our addictions to street drugs or alcohol or prescription drugs or cigarettes or pornography or TV—or so many others, including yours and mine?]

A worldview without meaning. You live, you die, there's no real purpose. No Designer, no Author, no Justice, no Love. (A college newspaper offered a prize to the entrant submitting the best definition of life... "Life is a joke that isn't funny." "Life is the jail sentence we get for the crime of being born." "Life is a disease for which there is only one cure: death.")

These outlooks may sound unduly grim—I hope they do—but how would we, who trust in a good and loving Creator God, know the mindsets of those who have been taught all their lives there is no God and

there is therefore no purpose to life? A generation now has well learned that a random universe happened by total accident, over the billions of years, to yield some combination of atoms which eventually organized into “bios,” into material life...Nobody’s in charge, there is no beginning or end or point or goal to any of it. Somehow life happens, then you die and that’s it.

[I believe such a worldview helps explain the relative quality of the modern arts—painting, sculpture, fiction, poetry, music—now taken seriously by those “in the know.” Coherence or beauty or resolution or in some cases even a “happy ending” would, inevitably, betray a lack of artistic integrity according to the worldview of artists and intellectuals to whom God is non-existent, unimportant, or worse.]

God having come among us in Jesus, and He having been raised over the powers of evil and sin and death, shows us there is a purpose; we each have a meaningful part to play in an eternal Story far larger than our own isolated little personal drama in the vastness of the cosmos.

The resurrection of Jesus is the reason why we Christians celebrate a funeral service with joy—it’s not that we are ghoulish or given to make-believe; it’s not that we live in denial of death. It’s that our risen Lord has finally undone the power and permanence of death. (Maybe you’ve heard about the couple from Minneapolis who planned their Florida vacation in the dead of a frigid winter. The husband left a day early, checked in, and sent his wife an email. However he missed one letter in her address and ended up sending his message to an unsuspecting woman in Houston, who was just returning from the funeral service of her beloved husband. She turned on her email, and you can imagine her shock when she read this email from Florida: To: My beloved wife. Subject: I’ve arrived. Text: I’m sure you’re surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now. I’ve just arrived and I see that everything is prepared for your arrival tomorrow night. Looking forward to seeing you then. P.S. They’re right: it sure is bloody hot down here!)

The Light of Christ illumines the darkness of death; the power of Jesus unmasks the ultimate impotence of death. To have waited with and loved anyone who is slowly dying reminds us that death is certainly cruel. Against the life-force of flesh and blood, death is relentless, indiscriminating, and final. Yet Jesus, in the end, has shown even death to be a cheat and a counterfeit. Death has nothing to offer; death can try to condemn us (“but there is now no condemnation for

those who are in Christ Jesus”) and to carry us off. But death cannot take us away; our bodies will turn to dust in the end, back to the earth—so that nothing remains for death to keep hold over. Death can hold nothing.

Death retains any power to frighten us only insofar as we buy into the lies: that our body, our material flesh and blood, is all we are. Only insofar as we buy into the lie that death will separate us from our loved ones. Yet Jesus reassures us that death merely delivers us into His loving presence, in the company of those in Him who have gone before us. Death, in the end, has absolutely no power which is not a lie or a bluff. Yes, death will come for each of us—and death will be doing God’s bidding even then, escorting us into the heavenly Reunion God has prepared for those many brothers and sisters of the One who has brought love into eternity and death to naught.

There is no small mystery in what happens beyond the grave. We cannot understand all this completely. But in the meantime we have plenty to sing about!

Christ is risen.

Hallelujah!

1 Corinthians 15:1-10

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you continue to stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Matthew 28:1-8

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

