

Resurrection Faith and Fear

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Job 19:19-27 NIV

All my intimate friends detest me;
those I love have turned against me.
I am nothing but skin and bones;
I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth.
Have pity on me, my friends, have pity,
for the hand of God has struck me.
Why do you pursue me as God does?
Will you never get enough of my flesh?
Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,
that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!
I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes — I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 51-58 NIV

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. . . .

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Mark 16:1-8 RSV

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; — it was very large.

And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.”

And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid (Mark 16:8).

The end of the Gospel According to Mark has long puzzled biblical scholars. Actually, there are two different endings for Mark, chapter 16. The traditional ending is the longer one, printed in our Bibles as verses 9-20. It describes several appearances of the risen Christ, and how he told his followers of the signs that would accompany their preaching: casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, handling serpents, being kept safe from poisons, laying hands on the sick for their recovery. Some ancient manuscripts have that ending, while others have a different, and much briefer, ending that simply relates how the risen Jesus sent his disciples out with the message of salvation.

But the oldest and most trustworthy manuscripts have neither of these endings. They simply end with the words we have read: “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” Scholars are convinced that these words weren’t the original ending, either. Something has dropped out, for in the Greek the last word of this verse is a word that, grammatically, is never used at the end of a sentence.

What happened? We should recall that the earliest Christians lived under persecution from both Jewish and Roman authorities. Sometimes they were on the run, enduring the most difficult of conditions. It wasn’t easy to preserve their precious manuscripts, such as the Gospel the apostle Mark had written for them. The earliest New Testament writings were rolls of parchment, and as the manuscript was rolled up the last page would have been on the outside. It could very easily have been damaged or lost during difficult conditions of travel, or flight from pursuing enemies. Whatever Mark originally wrote, it appears to have been lost in transit. Instead, the story he tells ends strangely: “And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” Later on, scribes did their best to repair the damage by adding the two endings we now have for chapter 16, basing their work on things they already knew from the other Gospels.

That’s a theory, anyway. And I mention it for one reason: that last verse of Mark’s original Gospel, verse 8, speaks to us of a powerful truth. “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” Our observance of Easter is a joyful time, as we celebrate our Lord’s victory over sin and death. What joy we have, in knowing that our Redeemer lives — as Job says — and that we can see God’s power at work in us to bring new life today and hope for tomorrow! But Mark 16:8 reminds us that there’s *another side to resurrection* — the *astonishing* side, the *trembling* side, the *fearful* side!

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundational event of our faith. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, if Christ has not been raised then our faith is in vain and we’re still “dead,” trapped in our sin. The resurrection proves who Jesus really is: not just another teacher or good man, but the Messiah through whom God the Father is reconciling the world to himself. As Peter proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:23,24,36). It’s the resurrection that vindicates Jesus, and demonstrates without a doubt that he is the Son of God, the Lord, the Christ.

So the resurrection is basic to our faith. But perhaps for that very reason it has lost its grip on us. We’re so used to preaching the resurrection, and singing the resurrection, and teaching it, and speaking and writing about it, that maybe we’ve *lost our sense of astonishment* about the

resurrection. We find comfort in it, but we don't *tremble* over it as did those women who were the first to learn of it — going to the tomb early that morning to anoint the body of Jesus, slipping out before dawn lest hostile eyes should see these dispirited followers of the would-be Messiah and report their strange doings to the authorities.

“Who will roll away the stone for us?” they asked one another, knowing that the massive monolith that covered the entrance to the sepulcher was far too ponderous for them to shove it back in its track. And then — the open doorway, and the young messenger in dazzling white, and the words: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here!” In amazement and trepidation they flee from the tomb, hardly remembering the message they've been told to carry to the disciples — to go to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee! “And they said nothing to any one, *for they were afraid.*”

Can we be *casual* about the resurrection — nonchalant and unimpressed and unmoved — when by the mighty power of the Creator, a Man who had endured the shame and humiliation of death on the cross has been *raised from the dead*, and so revealed to be the Son of God, our Lord and Christ? Can we say, “Ho hum, another Easter's come and gone, and life goes on as before.” In the presence of such mystery — in the face of that which defies all our understanding and runs counter to all that we know about how the world works — shall we not *fear* to hear the story told once again? Shall we not tremble and be astonished that God should so reveal himself, breaking upon the human scene with such fearsome majesty and despoiling the enemies of his righteous way? Shall we not throw ourselves at the feet of this Christ, for whom it was impossible that death should hold him, and plead for mercy? For we are but weak and sinful wretches in the face of such holy and awesome Power.

If God is God, and can do what the Gospels tell us he did, can we afford to be careless about serving him? Can we afford to be casual about entering his presence to extol his worth and render unto him the reverence that is his due? The Scripture says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Shall I not live wisely, in that *fear of the Lord* that is the other side to Christ's glorious resurrection? Will I occupy myself with trivialities, investing my life in things of no eternal consequence, when this awesome God has called me to a higher plane of living? Will I persist in doing those things that bring no honor to the Lord — hurting others with my careless tongue, shirking my responsibilities to family and friends and employers, living only for myself and the mean pleasures I glean from life? Will I withhold my steady commitment from the church of Jesus Christ, preferring the convenience of not being regularly involved in the one organization that lifts up the name of Jesus and proclaims him as risen Lord? *How shall I live*, if not in holy resurrection fear before a God who brings life out of death?

The resurrection of Christ is a rebellion against my sinful indifference to the purposes of God. In the Greek of the New Testament, the very word for “resurrection” is a word of rebellion. The word *anastasis* means an *uprising*, taking a stand against repressive powers. A similar word was used for revolts and revolutions. The resurrection is Jesus' *revolt* against my indifference to the ways of God, my self-protective “business-as-usual” life style. It's his *revolt* against a complacent, self-congratulatory religion that pats me on the back for being just a little bit spiritual, having just a *twinge* of godliness. I'm comfortable, I don't want to change. But now I learn that God has broken into my world in a way I can't fathom, and raised his Christ from the dead, and given him authority over all things *including my life*. There's been a revolution, and the tables are turned. I clutch my self-serving lifestyle, hoping to hang onto it a bit longer — but the crucified One has risen from the dead, and I *fear* what might happen to me if I hold out on him.

There's only one way to get rid of that fear, and that's to *turn it into faith*. Yes, strangely, resurrection fear is the basis for resurrection faith. “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,” wrote the apostle Paul, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians

15:20). A God who can accomplish this awesome deed is a God I can trust to dispel the darkness of my life, and set me free from that which binds me and weighs me down. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can forgive my sin and cleanse me for a new and wholesome life. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can heal my sick body and strengthen me for his service. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can restore broken communication with loved ones, and change the pattern of my relationships with other people. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can provide for my needs and those of my family, making a way where there is no way. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can open closed doors, and make the rough places plain, and transform the bitter into the sweet. The God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead can take the little that I have to offer him and fashion it into a worthy vessel for his glory.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow;
Because He lives, all fear is gone.*

When I learn to follow the God I fear, my fear turns to faith. But *first I must fear him*, in his mysterious life-giving power, trembling in astonishment before the great deed he has done at the empty tomb. Then, falling at the feet of the risen Lord Jesus, I let his love sweep over me, and “all fear is gone.” My foolish, petty concerns don’t matter any more; what matters is *his glory and his life*. Dying to myself, I’m reborn into him and made over into his likeness. As Paul puts it, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by *faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Or, in the words of Charles Wesley:

*Made like him, like him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies!*

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