

First Words of the Resurrection

John 20:11-18
Easter Sunday; March 27, 2005
Bethany Church
Wesley J. Gabel

Our nation has been on a death watch. The conflict between life and death for Terri Schaivo has unfolded with her family, the courts, and branches of government. Then, a 17-year-old high school junior in Red Lake, Minnesota, calling himself the angel of death, took 10 lives.

We face the struggle between life and death! Is Easter relevant? Is Easter just another religious observance where we pause and then go back to our same confusion and burdens? Is Easter a pipedream of hope, an engagement in “Pollyanna” verbiage to comfort us in our difficulties? Does Easter give us help?

I ask these questions because I know some folks get dragged into Easter services, and they aren't really sure they believe in this “Jesus-thing”. If you are one that got dragged to worship, if you are the “draggee”, I want to say “thank you”. Good work, you pleased your family, and I'm glad you are here; and maybe, just maybe, if there is reality and practicality to Easter, you'll see it this time.

I know there is compelling historical evidence that legitimizes belief in the resurrection of Jesus. However, if that is all there was, I'm not sure I would believe. My belief in the resurrection comes more from its effect and validation in lives than from a review of historical evidence. What led me to believe? I saw what Christ's resurrection power did in people's lives. Listen to the Apostle Paul's words:

I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future he has promised to those he called... I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.
(Ephesians 1:18-20, NLT)

Resurrection power is more than the gift that one day changes perishable bodies into imperishable. It is a power that overcomes death's hold on us today so we can live an entirely different type of life. New Testament people didn't believe in the resurrection because the first witnesses were so persuasive or because the historical proofs were so compelling. The Apostle Paul, who as Rabbi Saul suppressed belief in the resurrection, summarized it this way:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, NIV)

People believed Paul's message because resurrection power was evident right in their midst. That is why Rabbi Saul converted and became the Apostle Paul. That is what wins hearts and changes entire communities today. Around 200 communities recently experienced profound changes as Christ's resurrection power brought life in their midst. Listen now to the story of Almolonga, Guatemala. Check the fact sheet in the bulletin as you watch the video. (The video)

Viewing the story of Almolonga might amaze you or even leave you skeptical, yet that kind of change, along with the historical proofs, confirmed my belief in the risen Christ. A prayer, regularly on the lips of thousands of believers, goes back to 150 A.D. Here is part of it:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful and kindle in them the fire of Your love. Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

God put that prayer on so many lips because resurrection power brings life, it creates new people and it renews the very earth on which they stand. That is why the first words of the resurrection are awesome. A trumpet didn't sound and angels descend. No, a single woman,

who had once been tormented by seven demons, maybe even seven addictions, returned to the empty tomb to mourn the absence of Jesus. Feeling completely empty, she wept by the tomb. And the first word of the resurrection rang out. They came from angels who said, “Why are you crying?” Then they came from Jesus, “why are you crying?” and “who are you looking for?”

“Why are you crying, Mary Magdalene, when such a great thing is unfolding?” The first words of the resurrection were spoken to an individual. Resurrection power brings life to individuals and then through those individuals to others including their communities. That is because God loves us individually.

When Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus, she hung on him. She clung to the Jesus of the past, but Jesus pointed to the future. She had to let go so that Jesus would go on to fill her life with resurrection power. Do you have Jesus framed in some image of the past, and are you clinging to that? Jesus comes today in his Spirit with resurrection power. When we are done playing gods, and are hungry and desperate enough to seek him as he is rather than as he was, then those first words are so appropriate: “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”