

Why the Resurrection of Jesus Makes a Difference

Acts 3:12-19

Luke 24:36-48

1 John 3:1-7



When I was in my teens and early twenties, Evangelicals were not known for writing great systematic theology. What they were known for was apologetics, which fit in with their focus on evangelism. My first introduction to the realm of Christian thought was in the field of apologetics. I read everything I could get my hands on by writers like C. S. Lewis, but also by writers I'm sure most of you have never heard of. When I first started reading real Systematic Theologians, it was largely because of their apologetic value. I liked Thomas Aquinas because of his Five Ways to demonstrate the existence of God. I liked Wolfhart Pannenberg because of his arguments for the resurrection of Jesus. I was rather proud of my abilities as an apologist and was convinced that I could prove that Christianity was true based on irrefutable arguments for the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

One summer I was working one of those temporary jobs you get to pay your way through school and I got to know a young man my own age who had grown up Episcopalian, had been an acolyte

when he was a teenager, and was now an atheist. I was trying to convince him that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was fairly solid, and he blurted out "What if someone could come up with a good argument that John F. Kennedy had risen from the dead? What difference would it make?" As you can imagine, my apologetic arguments had no influence whatsoever on this guy, and after the job ended, we lost track of one another, and I never saw him again.

I teach a course in Christian Apologetics here at Trinity, but my approach is now very different from what it was then. Karl Barth is supposed to have said somewhere that the best apologetics is good systematic theology, and I have come to agree. The problem with the apologetic approach that I first studied as a teenager is that it makes no real connection to the central subject matter of Christian faith. These days I am not particularly interested in the question of whether someone can make a rational argument for the existence of a first cause of the universe. I am much more interested in the question of whether the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ and who raised him from the dead exists. It's not that I think that the traditional philosophical and historical arguments don't work. They are probably as valid as they ever were. However, I also think that young man who compared my apologetic arguments for the resurrection of Jesus to the case for the resurrection of John F. Kennedy had a point. The most important question is not whether there is a strong historical argument that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be alive three days after he was crucified. The really important question is whether the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ the Son of God raised him from the dead.

This is, of course, the approach that the New Testament writings take to the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament does not simply assert that there are good historical reasons to believe that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be mysteriously alive three days after having been

crucified, but that the God who created the entire universe, the God who delivered the nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt and spoke to them over and over again through prophets and priests, that this God has raised this man from the dead, that this God is the Father of this Jesus who is his eternal Son become a human being, and this is remarkably good news for Jews and Gentiles alike because it has to do with the purpose and destiny of the entire creation. And that makes a huge difference!

So what difference does it make if Jesus of Nazareth really rose from the dead? Why would we care about a living Jesus more than a living John F. Kennedy? Let's look at this morning's lectionary readings.

First, the resurrection means that Jesus is the clue to all of history – past, present, and future – and to the future of the entire universe. The lectionary readings this morning begin by connecting the resurrection of Jesus to Israel's past. In Peter's sermon in Acts, he tells his listeners: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus," (Acts 3:13) and a little later "But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18). In the gospel passage in Luke, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and proclaims "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). So the resurrection of Jesus points back to the past of God's covenant with his people Israel. At the end of the Acts passage, Peter tells his hearers: "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25-26). The

resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to his people Israel.

But the resurrection of Jesus also points to the future, not simply of Israel, but of the entire universe. Peter's sermon not only looks to the past history of Israel, but looks forward to God's promise of Christ's return and the restoration of all creation: "that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:20-21).

And then the resurrection not only points back to the past of Israel, and to Jesus' future return, but to that distant past when, according to the book of Acts, God created the entire universe through the Son who would be incarnate as Jesus. Peter accuses his hearers: "you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15). The paradox in this passage was later echoed by the Anglican poet George Herbert, "Hark, how they cry aloud still, *Crucify. It is not fit he live a day*, they cry, Who cannot live less than eternally." (George Herbert, "The Sacrifice")

If this Jesus who was crucified was raised from the dead, if this risen Jesus is himself the Author of Life, then the resurrection of Jesus provides the clue to all of history and the purpose and meaning of the very universe. The resurrection of Jesus looks back to the history of Israel and the beginning of creation, but it also looks forward to the universality of the entire human race and to the future of all creation. Despair is the opposite of hope because it is the fear of non-being and purposelessness. The resurrection of Jesus leads to faith rather than despair because it is the overcoming of death and the threat of non-being. The resurrection of Jesus gives reason for hope because it says that there is a God who created the universe, and that the universe has a purpose and a future.

However, we live in a particularly hopeless time, an age of cynicism and distrust. This leads to the second reason why the resurrection of Jesus makes a difference. The good news of the resurrection is that when the risen Jesus Christ appears to his disciples, he speaks words of peace, not words of condemnation.

The resurrection is a corrective to the corrosive cynicism of our age. For the last couple of decades, we have been told that we are living in the era of post-modernity. Post-modernity was largely a reaction to the facile optimism of the era of modernity. The promises of equality and freedom that were supposed to be the inevitable consequences of modern Western democracies and modern economics never arrived. Modernity did not bring about a new world.

One of the wrenches in the tool box of post-modernity is the methodology of suspicion, distrust of those who promise to make things better. Post-modernity tells us to beware of those who claim to be high-minded. Power is about control, and promises to make things better are really disguised "grabs for power." What do those who make these promises hope to gain for themselves? Unfortunately, two decades of post-modernity has not made things better. Suspicion of those in power has only led to more suspicion. Just think of the gap between those who look forward to "Hope and change" and those who look backward to "Make America Great Again."

The resurrection of Jesus agrees with post-modernity in that it is not naïve about the corruption of power. Jesus was crucified by those who were in charge of things. Jewish religious leaders joined together with the puppet representative of the occupying Roman army to do away with a troublesome young prophet from Galilee. No doubt they thought they were making things better.

The followers of Jesus had every right to be cynical; they had every right to be disappointed, and they had every right to be

disillusioned. Their hopes had been disappointed. Jesus had failed in his mission. They were afraid for their own lives, that they could end up as Jesus did, on Roman crosses. Finally, they were disappointed in themselves. With the exception of a few women and the beloved disciple who stayed by the side of the mother of Jesus, Jesus' followers had fled and deserted the crucified Jesus in his hour of need. When push came to shove, even Simon Peter, the disciple who had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, denied three times that he knew him.

Yet the resurrection of Jesus goes beyond cynicism and distrust and fear in a way that post-modernity cannot. Notice the first words that the risen Jesus speaks to his discouraged and doubting disciples: "Peace be with you!" (Luke 24:36). When the disciples still doubted, when they were still afraid, the risen Jesus appeared and spoke to them: "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see" (Luke 24:38-39).

And what about the Jewish religious leaders themselves, those who had conspired with the help of Pontius Pilate to do away with Jesus? The apostle Peter pulls no punches in his sermon in this morning's lectionary reading: "[Y]ou denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:14-15). But Peter does not leave his hearers with a message of guilt and condemnation. Instead, Peter echoes the message of peace that Jesus spoke to his followers on Easter morning. Peter says to those he had just accused of murdering the Author of Life, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. . . . Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus . . ." (Acts 3:17, 19).

What difference does it make that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead? The difference is that the fear and doubt of Jesus' disciples, and even the unbelieving corruption of power by those who "killed the Author of life" leads not to condemnation and cynicism, but to something new, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is a word that post-modernity does not understand and cannot use because it is a word that can only be pronounced by the risen Jesus Christ. Only the "Author of life" can restore to life those who have been either the victims of or the willing accomplices of the power of death.

And that leads to the third and the final way that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes a difference. The resurrection of Jesus means forgiveness not only for first century Jews, Greeks and Romans, but for everyone who has ever lived, even for you and me. The resurrection of Jesus means that all sinful human beings, those who betrayed Jesus by helping to nail him to the cross, those who have deserted and denied Christ like Simon Peter, even we ourselves who have failed, deserted, and denied Jesus Christ in so many ways, are loved by the God who created the universe, the Father who raised his Son Jesus from the dead. In the First Letter of John, we hear the words this morning: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

That the Father has shown his love for us means that we who have received Jesus Christ's forgiveness, who have heard his words "Peace be with you!" have a future. The author of 1 John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). We have already seen that in his Acts sermon, Peter had preached that Jesus Christ would return to restore all things.

But the resurrection of Jesus also makes a difference for the present, in this time "between the times" of Jesus'

resurrection and his return. In his appearance at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus gives to his followers a mission, "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The risen Jesus said to his apostles, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). As Jesus' resurrection means that we ourselves have heard the message of forgiveness, "Peace be with you!", so, like those first witnesses gathered in that room, we have the privilege to share that word of peace and forgiveness to others. As those who were gathered in that upper room were witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, so we also are witnesses that Jesus has risen from the dead and that makes a real difference.

And so we find ourselves hearing the words of the risen Jesus Christ: "Peace be with you!" With the apostle Peter in his sermon, we find ourselves saying "We too are witnesses of these things." Like the apostles to whom Jesus appeared in the upper room, we too have received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and we too await that day when the risen Lord Jesus Christ will return and make all things new.

So, yes. The resurrection of Jesus Christ does indeed make a difference. If the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ has raised his raised Son from the dead, it is the most important event, not only in human history, but in the history of the universe. It makes all the difference in the world.