

We are here to talk about resurrection. It seems obvious enough, especially for a kid who grew up in church, that I would understand the connection between Easter and resurrection, but I missed it for years. I didn't really understand what the big deal was about resurrection. Yes, Jesus came back from the dead, of course, but I didn't catch the radical nature of resurrection.

You see, resurrection has a sort of bravado to it, an energy, a power, a life unto itself. Resurrection is the essence and centrality of all we believe. In resurrection, we find the pulse of this life, the tempo, and the rhythm to a new song that is happening right in the midst of an old one. Resurrection is about a new world being born right in the midst of this place. Resurrection is God's response to a broken world, a world where death seems inevitable.

But I would imagine you may be sitting there and thinking, that's great and all, but what do you do with: Ukraine—Bucha and Kyiv, Covid—six million+ dead from a global pandemic, the Brooklyn Shooting—an act of violent cowardice, Increasing Mental Health Crisis—this headline from a month ago in the Washington Post "A Cry for Help' - CDC warns of a steep Decline in Teen Mental Health." Where the article details the rising numbers of depression and suicidal ideation among young people. The unintended consequences of technologies and the havoc they are playing out in our world. Is it just me, or does it feel like we are living right in the middle of a Black Mirror episode?

For so many years, we have been sold the secular myth that we could create our own utopia if we just give ourselves enough time, technology, money, and freedom. But the problem is, what I believe is happening right now, is that this myth is being exposed for the parody that it is

I don't think I'm alone in feeling like the world is falling apart at the seams. There are very real human questions that rise to the surface, that take seriously the brokenness of this place that we call home. And for whatever reason, the general sense when I talk to people is that it is a deeper idea than simply why do bad things happen? It feels like the simmering brokenness of our world is reaching a boiling point, and more and more people are asking deep questions.

Ultimately what we are faced with is deep questions about this life with easy solutions and answers no longer medicating that deep ache within all of us. Hence why we may all be asking, is the world ultimately a cold, rigid, dead place destined for destruction? Does death have the last word? Is it actually overwhelmed by darkness? And are those seemingly small insignificant moments of light simply blips of the radar of a history bent toward death? Are they simply momentary interruptions to a

meaningless existence? Do pandemics, racism, war, death, disease, do these all get the last word

And so we place our hope in the next innovation, the next Hollywood blockbuster, the next politician, the next promotion, the next social advance, or whatever your "next" is. But this only leads us to let down after let down, disappointment after disappointment. And then, in our despair and angst over all that has failed, we turn to some sort of nihilism. The belief that all is meaningless, that nothing matters, and so why should we care about anything anyway. Because in a world that feels cold and without resurrection, that is the only probable response.

These are the questions that resurrection provokes; these are the very human responses to a world riddled with death. But cynicism is the easy route, pessimism the escape hatch that leads to nowhere. It's far easier to be cynical; it's far easier to grow apathetic and comfortable with the broken. But is there another option other than nihilism or meaningless despair? There is another story.

We are longing for another story, a story to make sense of all of the human experience and to help us make sense of what is happening in the world and where this all is headed. Because we are all searching for a meta-story to make sense of this mess we call life. Do I have good news for you?! Enter the story of resurrection.

Living in the Overlap of Two Worlds

To understand that story, we have to understand that the biblical authors and the ancient Jewish people understood history as divided between two ages or stages. This Present Age and The Age to Come. A quick word about both.

This Present Age

This was the entire story of humanity from Genesis 3 when sin entered the story to the New Testament (and our time as well) present day. It was life after the Garden of Eden, and life after sin had been injected into God's good creation. This age is marked by brokenness, sin, and evil. Meaning all that is wrong. It is marked by: human evil—violence, oppression, injustice, racism, abuse, etc., natural evil—hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, pandemics, etc., and spiritual evil—that beyond all evil, there was a spiritual or immaterial evil that was causing havoc, deceiving, and dragging down God's good creation.

For the New Testament writers, this age is decaying, given into entropy and disorder. It is passing away and ultimately dying off, but for now, the present age seems to persist in a way that our lives feel its effects. We experience broken relationships, cancer, pandemics, unjust power systems, abuse, etc. We all feel the ache of a world that isn't quite right.

We feel that in the world around us, and we also feel that in our own story—both cosmically and personally. This present age is, since Genesis 3, marked by death. On the flip side

The Age to Come

The age to come was the hope of the New Testament, which was a point out in the future that was marked by the exact opposite of the present age: justice—God’s setting all things right, ending vicious cycles of injustice and oppression, righting all wrongs, goodness, and beauty—all that is good is permeating creation. Goodness and beauty rule supreme. And shalom—no more evil, no more sickness, no more death—wholeness, harmony, everything in creation has its proper place!

It is the place where, when history reaches its God intended climax and shalom or peace is restored; all things will come under this beautiful Coming Age when all of creation is restored and reconciled back to God. It is a renewed creation and a renewed way of being in the world. The very rule and reign of God would be ascended to, and all of creation would submit to his authority bringing about a cosmic reality of God’s good creation, what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God.

It isn’t going to be some distant, disembodied thing, but rather it is about the restoration of this very earth, this very planet. Restored, renewed, reconciled, healed, all of that happening right in the midst of this place.

Now, what does all this have to do with Easter? Resurrection is the story of God dragging that future age to come into the present. It is the story of Jesus entering death itself to vanquish it and open up the possibility of that new age here and now. You see, resurrection is as much, if not more, about this life as it is about the future. It is about the possibility of life after death, but it is also very much about the possibility of life before death.

Resurrection is an act of rebellion against the ache of a broken world; it is rebellion against the nihilism of the status quo. Resurrection is the inauguration of God’s New Creation (the Age to Come) right in the middle of the old, and we then live in the tension between those two worlds. We feel the ache of one world dying off and another being born in the midst of the old. This tension brings what Paul will call great frustration to ourselves and the created order.

The Easter Story

Now, as we look at John chapter 20, remember that for a good Jewish reader, everything means something else. Let me provide a little window into the Gospel of John. First, remember that the gospels are essentially different accounts of the story of Jesus. Consider them like four biographies of the life of Jesus. And if you’ve read the Gospel of John before, you’ll know that John is the artsy disciple. His writing and account are filled with symbolism, depth, and allusions to other parts of scripture. John is a literary genius, and so much of that is missed on the surface. But I want to highlight a few things as we read the text.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the

entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” John 20:1-2

John opens his account of the resurrection with Mary heading off to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark. We know from the other gospel accounts that she was there with spices to most likely finish the burial process that was started before the Sabbath day. You see, for Mary, Jesus was utterly dead—fully gone. And in her grief, she was going to the grave, not expectant of the resurrection, but rather expectant to find a dead Jesus still dead. She was coming under the assumption of Jesus’ death, and I would imagine finishing the burial process was part of her grieving process.

Thus far, resurrection is not on the radar for Mary or the disciples. The assumption is that Jesus is dead, their grief is unanswered, the hope that Jesus was the Messiah is dashed, and they are descending into the realization that nothing is different. Nothing has changed. It is merely the same thing. I would imagine there is a despair that has set in, and now to make matters worse, the assumption is that the grave had been robbed. Verses 3-10 detail the other disciples going to the tomb to witness the same thing. Skip down to verse 11.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” John 20:11-15a

There is something so profound beneath the surface that Mary Magdalene is the first person to whom Jesus appears. There is nothing in her story up until this point that would mark her as important or significant. Her being a woman and the first reports of Jesus’ resurrection coming from a woman would have been astonishing and actually grounds for disbelief. But nonetheless, Jesus appears first to her in a profound way.

The picture is Mary at the tomb, looking in and coming to grips with the devastation that Jesus is not only dead but now his body is gone and not able to receive the proper respect or burial. All the hopes they had were dashed; all of the anticipation and potential of the age to come failed. The idea of the Messiah having been Jesus was all for naught. For whatever reason, Jesus calls out to Mary, and she turns but doesn’t recognize Jesus, and Jesus asks, “*Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?*”

The term “woman” here would have been one of endearment, a term that is different from the way we can sometimes understand it today. The question itself is one of care for Mary, concern for her grief, something Jesus would very much have entered into.

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her. John 20:15b-18

Hold onto that note of her mistake in thinking Jesus was the gardener; that will be important later. She explains her concern, and Jesus calls her by name, “Mary,” and then it all rushes to Mary’s consciousness. He is risen! Imagine the elation, imagine the surprise, imagine the joy! All of it rushes to Mary, and Jesus tells her to go off and tell the others. And here, Mary becomes the first preacher to ever deliver an Easter sermon. She rushes to the disciples and declares, “I have seen the Lord!”

The Age to Come Has Arrived

Now, as I mentioned at the beginning of our discussion in John, John is an artistic writer, and for a good Jew, everything means something else. As we mentioned earlier, the hope that was beneath the surface for all associated with Jesus was that this “Age to come,” the “New Creation,” would arrive and begin to dispel the present age.

What we don’t notice as clearly as would a Jewish reader of the text is that this section is littered with references to the creation account in Genesis, which is connected to “the present age.” But all of the references are, not so subtly, making known that a new creation is breaking in.

First, early in John’s gospel, he records Jesus doing a miraculous sign of turning water into wine at a wedding. And in that account, he references it as the “first sign.” Later in the story, Jesus heals a nobleman’s son, and John calls that the second sign. At some point, John stops numbering the signs, but if you count them all up, you end up with the following list.

The Seven Signs of John

John 2:1-11 - Turning Water into Wine

John 4:46-54 - Healing the Nobleman’s Son

John 5:1-15 - Healing the Lame Man

John 6:1-15 - Feeding the Multitude

John 6:15-25 - Jesus Walks on Water

John 9 - Healing the Blind Man

John 11 - Raising Lazarus from the Dead

Now seven is a number most associated in the Jewish imagination with the creation story. It is the number of completion and fullness. The story of the resurrection would imply that Jesus’ resurrection is the 8th sign. What is going on there?

Well, if seven is associated with the seven days of creation in the old creation, then an eighth sign would be the first day of a new creation! Notice at the beginning of the section that John records Mary came on the “first day of the week.” Mary mistook Jesus for a “gardener.” For a 1st-century Jew, this would have been a clear allusion to the creation story.

All of this points to the reality that Jesus’ resurrection has inaugurated a new creation right in the midst of the old. It is a marker that there is something that God is doing by breaking into this present world, but it is a new age. The age to come has broken into this life, and the age to come is available to us all now, through the work of Jesus the Christ.

The resurrection declares that there is new possibility right here and right now. Resurrection means it is the 8th day, it is a Monday, but it is a different type of Monday. This is radically deep in its hope for the here and now.

Listen to the way New Testament scholar N.T. Wright puts it in his book, *Simply Jesus*.

Here, then, is the message of Easter, or at least the beginning of that message. The resurrection of Jesus doesn’t mean, “It’s all right. We’re going to heaven now.” No, the life of heaven has been born on this earth. It doesn’t mean, “So there is a life after death.” Well, there is, but Easter says much, much more than that. It speaks of a life that is neither ghostly nor unreal, but solid and definite and practical. The Easter stories come at the end of the four gospels, but they are not about an end. They are about a beginning. The beginning of God’s new world. The beginning of the Kingdom. God is now in charge, on earth as in heaven. And God’s “being-in-charge” is focused on Jesus himself being king and Lord. The title on the cross was true after all. The resurrection proves it.

Resurrection is about a new creation breaking into the old; it is about a new kind of week. It is about the life of the age to come rushing into the present. Resurrection is Jesus pulling all of the future into the moment that he rises out of the grave. You see, the story we are living in isn’t about some far-off place at some far-off time; it is about here and now! This earth, this ground, this creation restored and renewed. Resurrection is about the joy that is bursting into this life.

This has all sorts of implications for us today. If this story of Easter is about the opportunity of new creation here and now, then it gives a different outlook to everything. What do you do with your sin? What do you do with that broken relationship? What do you do with Ukraine? And frustration? And brokenness?

The resurrection means that we are living in the overlap between a world that is dying off and a new one that is being born right here in the midst of this one. It means that yes, God’s new world has begun in the resurrection, but there is still coming a day off on the horizon when the old world will be entirely done away with, and as Paul in Colossians would say, Christ is “All in all.”

And so now, we get foretastes of this coming age. We see resurrection in the sunrise, in the laughter of a child. We see resurrection in relationships restored and justice prevailing. We see resurrection in every meal we eat as the death of that plant or animal brings about life. We see resurrection in a thousand places if we have eyes to see it. Because the reality is that God's new world has been born into this one.

But we also experience that ache we talked about at the beginning

Romans 8 - The Groaning of Creation

To close, I want to look at a brief section of a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Romans. Paul is one of, if not the first, to write about all of the implications of the resurrection, and here in this section, you see him riffing off of this tension that we see between a world that is dying off and a new one being born.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. Romans 8:18-21

Paul is in full recognition of the fact that the sting of the present age is one that is still felt and felt acutely. So much so that Paul says he feels the "present sufferings." The Christian story, our story, doesn't skirt the reality of our world or, as Paul would say, our "present sufferings."

In fact, our story has something to say about the pain that you are experiencing. Not trivializing it or dismissing it, but for Paul, the context of the resurrection and Jesus' work of ushering in the age to come right into the present, there is a context in which we can understand our sufferings in a different light with a different perspective.

Notice verse 19, "*For the creation waits in eager expectation...*" This is the condition of our world, waiting in eager expectation that what Jesus began and inaugurated in the resurrection on the first Easter morning will be fully ushered in, in the future.

In short, the freedom and autonomy that God had given to humanity had been turned into a power that was bent inward. Humans rebelled and used their power for their own purposes, and in consequence, the entire world was corrupted; each individual and all of creation has been subjected to frustration.

But in that tension, Paul is declaring, "*creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.*" And so we are living in the knowledge of the age to come having broken in, but yet, we experience the weight and frustration of the present age. But we now suffer under it with an eager expectation. Read what German Theologian Jurgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* says about this tension.

The raising of Christ is not merely a consolation to him in a life that is full of distress and doomed to die, but it is also God's contradiction of suffering and death...Hope finds in Christ not only a

consolation in suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise against suffering... Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is but begins to suffer under it, to contradict it.

We begin to suffer under the present age because, in doing so, we are contradicting it. Because our endurance is one in which we know there is coming a new creation right here and right now. This world is dying off. It is subject to decay, and a new one is being made right in this same place.

This is what Paul is alluding to in 1 Corinthians 7:31b - "*For this world in its present form is passing away.*" The Greek word there for "in its present form" is actually one word, and is it the word "schema" where we derive our word "schematic." Meaning, Paul knows that the schematic of how this current world is operating is passing away. There is a new schematic, the Kingdom of God, that is breaking in and reordering, restoring, and reconciling the world back into the "age to come" that will usher in all sorts of new life. This isn't about the end of the world, but the end of "a" world and the beginning of a new one, right here.

Read the metaphor that Paul gives to what the creation and we ourselves are experiencing in this frustration.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. Romans 8:22-25

For Paul, we are living in the time between the times. We are living in the overlap of a dying world and a new one being born right here and now. There is a world that is dying off, this present age, marked by violence, sin, brokenness, lying, greed, all of it. But there is also another world, what Paul called "the age to come," what Jesus calls "The Kingdom of God," and what John in Revelation would call "the new creation" that is being born right here. It is breaking in, and it is rushing into the present.

This is why Paul uses this metaphor of childbirth and labor. Because listen, I haven't given birth, but I've been in the room, and it is painful! It hurts. It is agony, but it is filled with joy and anticipation. Because we also know that labor pains are temporary. They are not permanent or without aim. I want to point out three implications of Paul's words here about resurrection.

Romans 8:18-21 - Resurrection is the answer to a dying world

Notice that Paul does not skirt the idea of suffering, but rather, he recognizes that the present suffering is only temporary. Because we all feel it, we all feel the ache and hurt of a broken world. And resurrection is the answer to this dying world. When will the pain end? The violence, the injustice, all of it; when will it end? The resurrection reminds us that it will, in fact, end. This is what the modern western world cannot figure out. What do you do with suffering, and when will it end? Without

some sort of comprehensive story about the pain and hurt, there is nowhere for that pain to go but toward nihilism.

Our story of resurrection means there is coming a day when the labor pains stop, and the new world enters the scene. We thought we could create a utopia. With every technological invention, we find some glimmer of hope, but ultimately it cannot heal what is most deeply broken, namely the human heart.

We mitigate the pain; we alleviate the suffering; this is the work we do, but until resurrection, we will not be able to stomp out entirely the evil that pervades the present age. Resurrection is the answer to a dying world. Creation will, in fact, be liberated from decay. That doesn't mean that we don't actively involve ourselves in working in the world. It actually gives purpose and meaning to all of that work in a way that makes more cohesive sense. You see, our groaning is not a groaning over the past, but it is a groaning in hope for the future.

Romans 8:22-23 - Resurrection is about new creation being born on two levels—cosmically and personally.

Cosmically, notice verse 22, *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning..."* All of it, creation itself, is aching for liberation—earthquakes, pandemics, and hurricanes, all of it is longing for the world to be made right. And so, resurrection is the story of the cosmos. It is the story that God is writing to bring back his creation into the order and shalom that pervaded the opening chapters of the Bible. It is the story that God is writing across the entire cosmos.

Personally, notice verse 23, *"...Not only so, but we ourselves..."* It is also the story that God is writing within each of us. The story is intimately personal; it is about the work that God is doing in every single one of us. It is God breaking into our lives with New Creation. It is our own lives renovated, reconciled, and renewed. Our own lives are ones that are being reborn. We all are dying to ourselves and being resurrected to new life.

Romans 8:24-25 - Resurrection is an invitation to a new story

Lastly, resurrection is an invitation to a new story. The invitation before us all is to enter into this resurrection story. It is the invitation to admit our failure, our contribution to the broken world, to confess our sins and metaphorically die to ourselves so that we can somehow attain the resurrection to new life. It is to die to the life of ours that is marked by the present age and then step into the new life offered by God.

What is so beautiful about this story of resurrection is that in every baptism, we see this take place. Every baptism marks the new life, the death to self, and the resurrection entering the story. Every resurrection is the marker of a new world, a glimpse of the new creation right in the midst of the old. Paul wrote this,

So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:" 2 Corinthians 5:16-18

You see, what the resurrection offers above all, is the invitation for all of us to live into a different story. It is a story where we come to Jesus, repent, meaning rethink everything in light of Jesus as Lord, and take on a new order of life that is marked by the availability of the age to come here and now

We repent and walk away from a life that is marked by all of the trap-pings and failings of the sin that marks this present age. It is the recognition that our life has been caught in the present age, and we are broken down into cycles of living that lead toward a sort of nihilism where we desire something more.

Paul says that if "anyone" is in Christ, New Creation has come!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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