

THE TRUTHS BEHIND THE RESURRECTION

ACTS 2:14-41

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Time has a way of erasing things from my memory, but there are some memories that have remained as strong as the very day they happened. For instance, in my mind, I can still see my son taking his first step and hear him laugh with delight as he discovered that he had the ability to walk from one point to another without anyone supporting him. And I still remember the day I discovered that I could swim. I was so excited when I jumped into the water without any floatation device, and discovered that I did not sink to the bottom of the pool.

Discovering something for the first time leaves an impression that is hard to erase from the mind. It is an experience that is hard to forget. I think this is especially true when we discover a certain truth for the first time. By far, the strongest memory I have of discovering a new truth came when I was a sophomore in college. I discovered a truth that revolutionized my life, and I can still picture myself in the dining room of my home declaring my discovery to my father.

For years I had gone to church on Saturday nights and confessed my sins to a priest. And each time I would confess the same sins. I was in a rut of doing the same wrong thing week after week. Then I discovered that, by calling out to God in my moment of temptation, I could receive the strength I needed to overcome the temptation and resist the sin. After making this discovery, I became confident that I could get out of my rut. I could improve in my ability to obey God.

Now I could have known this truth before my sophomore year in college, because the truth about sanctification was recorded in the Bible long before I was born. But my personal discovery of this ancient truth didn't come until I was twenty years old. It was a discovery that changed me forever, and I will never forget it.

Today we are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today I want us to think beyond the miracle of the resurrection to the truth that lies behind the miracle. The purpose of any miracle is to help people discover truth. Miracles that fail to reveal truth have no true value. It does us little good to celebrate Easter without celebrating the truth behind the miracle. What's the use of singing "He Arose" if the words of this song do not connect our minds to a particular truth? What is the truth behind the miracle of Christ's resurrection? Let's use some time

to answer this question.

On the morning of the day Jesus rose from the dead, two of Christ's disciples, John and Peter, entered the empty tomb where the dead body of Christ had been lain. They had run there as soon as they heard the news that the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. What they saw when they entered the tomb was the grave clothes that had been wrapped around the dead body of Jesus. The body of Jesus had been wrapped up in the traditional mummy-fashion. But when Jesus rose from the dead, He did not take His grave clothes with Him. His resurrected body came out of those clothes without disturbing them. Imagine how Peter and John must have felt to see the legs and arms and head of what looked like a person wrapped up like a mummy lying on a stone slab. And then to come closer and see the cloth that had covered the face of the body had been removed, neatly folded, and placed to the side by itself. Picture John and Peter looking where the face of Jesus used to be and seeing nothing but a gaping hole. And then, peering into that empty cavity, they would have seen that the grave-clothes had become nothing but an empty shell. Everything on the outside—arms, legs, head, and torso—still perfectly in tact and undisturbed, but no body inside. If the body and grave clothes had both been removed, one could guess that someone from the outside had taken the body away. Even if the grave clothes were left in an untidy heap, one might still conclude that someone had taken the body and decided to leave the grave clothes behind. But what Peter and John saw when they entered the tomb was humanly impossible. It is humanly impossible to remove the body without undoing the grave clothes. It was a miracle.

JOHN 20:8 said that when John saw this, he believed. We know that the event also had an impact on Peter. We know he also believed. Although I can't be exactly sure when the lights flashed on in Peter's mind, I am certain that the miracle of the resurrection helped Peter discover an ancient truth. And I am also sure that his discovery of this ancient truth changed his life forever.

Some time between the moment when Peter saw the mummy-like shell made out of grave clothes minus the body and forty days later when Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter made a great discovery. And, on the day of Pentecost, Peter shared his discovery with the world. I wish I were there to hear him. I'm sure there must have been a great amount of excitement in his voice. My son was excited when he learned how to walk. I was excited when, as a sophomore in college, I learned the truth about sanctification. And I am sure Peter was excited when he shared, for the first time, the truth behind the miracle of the resurrection.

What Peter shared can be considered as the first sermon preached on the first day of the New Testament church. The text for his sermon was PSALM 16. The

sermon itself it recorded in ACTS 2:14-36.

The sermon was delivered to a group of people who had seen the Holy Spirit being poured out on the followers of Jesus Christ. As people listened to the followers share testimony, they were amazed. Even though there were many different language groups present, everyone could understand what was being said. As the crowds of people stood, wondering what was going on, some people began to mock the disciples. Whenever something wonderful is happening, you will often find those who will try to spoil the beauty of the event. In this case, some people began saying the disciples of Christ were drunk.

It was that accusation which caused the apostle Peter to stand up and preach. He began by telling the crowd that everything they saw happening was predicted long ago by the prophets of the Old Testament, so they shouldn't be surprised (ACTS 2:16-21).

And then, beginning in ACTS 2:22, Peter began to share the great discovery he had made. Peter said, "Men of Israel, listen to this." And then he shared with them five points about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a five-point sermon.

The first point is found in verse 22, and it is a review of Christ's earthly ministry. "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know."

The second point of the sermon is found in verse 23, and it deals with the death of Jesus Christ. "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

The third and central point of the sermon is recorded in verses 24 through 32. It talks about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is within this section of scripture that Peter reveals his great discovery.

The fourth and fifth points of the sermon are found in verses 33 and 34. They are the ascension of Jesus into heaven and His exultation to the right hand of the Father. Being exalted to such a high position gave Him absolute authority over heaven and earth. As a result of the exultation, the Holy Spirit can be poured out on those who believe.

So, by using a few brief words, Peter was able to touch upon every aspect

of Christ's mission: His early ministry, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and His exultation. All these are mentioned in this brief message. The resurrection stands in the middle as a pivotal event. It proves what took place in Christ's ministry and death resulted in His ascension and exultation.

During the period of time that Jesus Christ walked this earth and taught and performed miracles, and during the hours Jesus Christ hung on the cross there was something absolutely amazing taking place that Peter observed. It was the fact that Jesus never sinned. Peter and the other disciples observed this fact, but they didn't know what it meant at the time. It never dawned on them that it is impossible for a person without sin to die.

Peter could have understood this truth, because it was written about in the ancient Old Testament scriptures. People didn't see it; or, if they had seen it, they had forgotten all about it. But now, after the resurrection and because of the resurrection, the lights came on in Peter's mind, and he discovered the ancient truth: Victory over sin guarantees victory over death.

This magnificent truth was recorded in the sixteenth Psalm long before Peter discovered its reality. And after Peter did discover this truth, we find him shouting out the secret. In ACTS 2:24 Peter said, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him."

It is like he was saying, "See, it was impossible all along for Jesus to be held in death's power. From the beginning of time there has been a law that cannot be broken, and it is this: Where there is no sin, there can be no death. Therefore resurrection was guaranteed all along. We could have known this, but we missed it. It was impossible for Jesus to be held in death's power."

Even before Jesus went to the cross, He was full of confidence and joy, because He knew that death could not hold Him. Before He died, He told His disciples that He was going to be killed, and He also told them that He was going to rise again on the third day.

But that didn't make the disciples happy. For them, the resurrection was not a certain thing. I believe they were confident that Jesus was the Messiah. I think they understood and believed that He had come from God. I don't think that they would have argued the fact that Jesus lived a sinless life. They had learned enough from the three years they spent with Jesus to believe in these things. And with that knowledge, they should have been confident that the power of death could not hold Jesus. But they had forgotten or were unaware of the great truth that where

there is no sin, there can be no death.

However things changed after the resurrection. When Peter preached his first sermon, it was like a bolt of lightning had hit him. He now understood perfectly why Jesus had been so full of confidence and joy even when He knew what was going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. It is because He had been victorious over His struggle with sin. He was victorious in three ways. Consider for a moment Christ's triple triumph over sin.

The first victory is revealed in the first sentence of ACTS 2:25. There we read these words: "I saw the Lord always before me." Reading from Psalm 16:8, it sounds like this, "I have set the Lord always before me." I like the way it reads in the New American Standard translation. There, ACTS 2:25 says, "I was always beholding the Lord in my presence." These words reveal Christ's victory over sin that originates from within a person.

Here we notice that Jesus calls His heavenly Father by the name "Lord". Now no one calls anyone Lord unless he has become subject to that person's authority. When God became a man, God the Son, Jesus Christ, placed Himself under the authority of God the Father. The moment Jesus gave up His sovereignty to become a servant, He created within Himself the possibility of disobedience. If a certain person is not under authority, then it is impossible for that person to disobey. So when Jesus placed Himself under authority, He created for Himself the possibility of disobedience.

The best way to understand sin that originates from within a person is to think back to the time when there was no sin in this universe. There was a time when the only spiritual beings that existed apart from God were the angels. In the book of Jude we read that some of the angels did not keep their proper domain, but abandoned their proper abode." When that happened, there was nothing in their environment to tempt them. The sin of pride originated from within those angels. Everyone who has raised children knows that the sin of pride can originate from within a person regardless of how good the environment is. Even when our children are at a very young age we can see it.

But Jesus had a complete victory over sin that originates from within a person. His parents never observed the rebellious streak in Him that we see in our own children even at a very young age. And the reason why is because He was always beholding the Lord in His presence. This was Christ's first victory. It was the victory over sin as originating from within.

But this was not His only victory. In the phrase that follows we hear Christ

proclaim, "Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." Or, as the New American Standard says, "He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken."

This language suggests that it is possible for a man to be shaken from outside influences. It is a possibility that we are all aware of. But in the light of that possibility we read the words from this Messianic Psalm, "He is at my right hand that I may not be shaken." Just like the first affirmation, this is also a declaration of victory over sin. In the first statement Jesus says, "I have not moved." Now, in the second He says, "I have not been moved."

Jesus is sometimes referred to as the second Adam. In the case of the first Adam, we are aware that outside influences of evil caused him to sin. Before Adam sinned, he was not handicapped by a nature given to sin. There was no original sin present in the first Adam. When I speak of original sin, I am talking about that condition whereby a separation between God and man exists.

Prior to Adam's sin, that condition did not exist. Jesus is the only person in history who has had the opportunity to stand in the same position Adam stood before Adam sinned, because Jesus was conceived and born without original sin. That is why He is referred to as the second Adam. Now, whereas the first Adam failed, the second Adam did not. The first Adam was shaken by evil influences in His environment. The second Adam was not shaken. And the reason was that He walked with God. He maintained perfect fellowship with God. Because His devotional life was perfect, His victory over the attacks of evil from outside of Himself was perfect and complete. Therefore, there was no reason for Him to fear death.

And so we move on to the final victory over sin that comes as a result of the first two victories. Because He did not move and because He was not moved, there was created for Him another possibility. It was the possibility of assuming the responsibility of the sins of others, to die vicariously. In accordance to the will of God, only in one who had not sinned could such a possibility be created.

That is why Jesus was glad—not just because He had won a double victory over sin—He was glad, because this double victory over sin created the possibility of dying in the place of others who had failed to win a victory over sin. ACTS 2:26 says, "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices." HEBREWS 12:2 says, "For the joy that was set before Him, Jesus endured the cross."

But as Jesus went to the cross, He not only went with a glad heart, He also went with a heart full of hope. He knew well the ancient truth. Where there is no sin, there can be no permanent death. And even dying vicariously for others could

not change this truth. Thus, in ACTS 2:26-27, we hear Christ proclaim, “My body also will live in hope, because You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will the Holy One see decay.” According to God’s order of things, when there is no sin, there cannot be death. And even in the case of vicarious death, there must be resurrection.

And so the gospel accounts declare that, on the first day of the week following His death, the soul of our Lord was not abandoned to hell, nor did the body see decay, because the two were re-united in resurrection. And for forty days he appeared off and on to His disciples. The joy that radiated from our Lord during those days following His resurrection must have been magnificent. Prior to His death, it was the joy that comes from anticipation. After the resurrection it was the joy that comes from fulfillment. Because of His triple triumph over sin and death, the way of life has now been revealed, and our Lord’s joy is made full.

When Peter quoted these words from the Old Testament, I believe he was revealing the greatest discovery of His life. Defeat of sin guarantees the defeat of death which guarantees resurrection. It was impossible for the power of death to hold Jesus!

But how does all this relate to us? Jesus never rebelled against heaven’s authority. He never moved from His proper place. But we have rebelled. Jesus was never shaken by outside influences. But we have been shaken. He took the sins of mankind upon Himself. We cannot do that. How can we relate to this great truth? How can we share in the joy of our Lord?

To answer this question, we must return to the larger context of Peter’s message. We must look at the resurrection in light of Christ’s total mission. We must see that the whole purpose of Christ’s mission—His earthly ministry, His death, His ascension, and His exultation—is to bestow grace.

The main purpose of His earthy ministry was not to show us how to live as much as it was to show us that He was the source of life needed to live.

And the same thing is true with the cross. He was not trying to show us how to die vicariously; rather, through His vicarious death, He was making available to us the only means of salvation. This was the ultimate in grace.

Even His ascension and exultation were for our sakes, because from His exalted position, Christ provides for us power for living. He gives us His Holy Spirit and eventually enables our bodies to be raised from the dead and to live with Him forever in Paradise. So everything about Christ’s mission is intended for us.

It seems to me that Peter wants us to see that the resurrection not only proves that it was impossible for Jesus to experience permanent death, but it also proves that He was victorious in His whole mission of bestowing grace to us. We rejoice in the fact that Christ won a triple victory over sin, because without that victory, His mission would have failed. The resurrection is proof that His mission did not fail. Grace that saves people through faith is now available to all men.

In suggesting to his listeners how they should respond to his message, Peter did not tell them that they should work hard to imitate Jesus so that they, too, could defeat sin. Rather, in verse 38 he implored them to repent and be baptized, so that they could receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

And, indeed, that day about three thousand people did repent. They repented and were baptized, because the truth Peter shared with them pierced their hearts.

Does it pierce our hearts? What’s the difference between that group of people and most of us? Why were they so moved by this truth when so many people today are not?

The difference has to be desire. I would have never been excited about discovering how to swim if I had no desire to swim. I would not have been excited about the truth concerning sanctification unless I desired to improve in my obedience to God. And a person will not be excited about the truth behind the resurrection unless the thing they desire the most is salvation from sin and death. Those three thousand people were cut to the heart when they heard the truth, because they desired the very things proven by the miracle of Jesus being raised from the dead. That is the main difference between them and many people who live in our generation.

We can and must share the truth, but we cannot create the desire. Only God can do that. For many, the desire will only be created after some kind of disaster rips away our selfish prides.

Consider yourself blessed if these truths that brought so much excitement to Peter’s heart also touch your heart on this Easter day. Rejoice and be glad. They really are the most profound and the most marvelous truths about the Christian faith.

After receiving the truths revealed through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, consider your own response. Do you find yourself rejoicing with greater hunger than ever before to experience the victory over sin and death? Or, do you find yourself numb (or perhaps even disturbed) in light of these revealed truths?