

The Resurrection Changes Everything

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

Every now and then, something happens in life that is so significant, so momentous, that life can *literally* never be the same again. An event that changes your world so dramatically, that you now *have to* live differently than you had lived before. It would be out of joint, even inappropriate to go on living as though that event had not happened.

Sometimes it's personal. Getting married, for instance. Carissa and I got married almost fifteen years ago. How strange would it have been for us, after our wedding, to each go home to our own separate places where we had lived beforehand, and carry on with life as though the wedding hadn't happened? That wouldn't make sense. More than that, it would be wrong. Because marriage changes you. Because of that wedding we are now committed to each other in an exclusive and enduring way, to share all of life together. And so to live as though nothing has changed is to be out of step with our new reality. Life necessarily looks different on this side of that event.

Sometimes a dramatic change happens more globally. Think about the impact of new technologies. Try running a business without having a website today. Or something as simple as smartphones and texting. We all have that one friend or family member whom, when you text them a question, they call you back with an answer. It doesn't work that way! The world has changed, and communication works differently now that there's this thing called texting.

But once in a while, once in a *very rare* while, something happens that is so big, so significant and extraordinary that it affects life, not just at the personal level, or even the international level, but such the *entire cosmos* will never be the same. The very fabric of creation is altered, inviting us, sometimes forcing us to live differently than we otherwise would have, had that not happened.

The Bible tells us that there are four such cosmic events in history; three of them in the past, one yet to come.



The first was when God spoke everything into being, what we call *creation*. That changed things, going from nothing existing to something existing.



The second is when death entered the world, in what we call *the fall*—when God's creatures rebelled against him and brought upon themselves punishment for that rebellion.



The third is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when rebels were redeemed and death was defeated, what's often called *redemption*. That's what we celebrate today.



These three have already happened in history. The one yet to come is the end of the story, what the Bible calls a *new creation*, when all God's plans are brought to their glorious completion, and life is finally and forever how it should be.

And what I want to do this morning is to consider each of these world-altering events, to walk through the story they tell, the story of the Bible, so that we can understand the true significance of the third event—the one we’re all gathered together to celebrate this morning—the death and resurrection of Jesus. And I want to think especially about the resurrection—the fact that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead. He had been dead and buried, and he came alive again. And as a result of the resurrection, the world would never be the same. When Jesus stepped out of that tomb, the world was different than the one that put him on the cross.

So what difference does the resurrection make? How is the world after the resurrection different than before, and how should that change the way we live in it today?

But we have to start at the beginning of the story, with creation.

CREATION



This summer our children really want to plant a vegetable garden. They’ve already started growing flowers from seed in a little plastic greenhouse box in the basement, which we’ll eventually transplant outside. But that’s too small; they want a vegetable garden. Corn and beans and I don’t know what else they want to put in it.

And I get it; there’s something beautiful and creative about gardening. Watching something you planted come to life and grow and bear fruit. There’s also responsibility and authority. When you plant your own garden, you get to decide what to include in it. You get to decide what you do with your produce.

The book of Genesis tells us that when God created the world, he made something beautiful and good. A world brimming with life and glory. He simply spoke it into being. “Let there be light. . . Let the earth sprout vegetation . . . Let the waters swarm with living creatures” (Gen. 1:3, 11, 20). When we plant a garden, we have to start with something that already exists, and we’re just rearranging it. God created everything out of nothing. And because he created it, it belongs to him. He gets to decide what he puts in his world, and what others can and cannot do with it. He has authority to rule his creation; he is the Creator and King. And his creation was beautiful. Again and again we’re told how God saw that what he made was *good* (e.g. 1:4, 10, 12). He delighted in his creation.

But the crowning piece of his creation was humanity, people, the first of whom was called Adam. And what makes humanity so special and unique among God’s creation is that people are made in the image of God. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Gen. 1:26).

Unlike any other part of creation, God made people *in his image*. Which means we were made to be God’s children, who enjoy a loving relationship with him, reflect his character, and represent his rule on earth (cf. Gen. 1:28; 5:1-4). And the way this played out originally, was in a garden. “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:8-9).

Life in God's creation was good. It was, as we often call it, *paradise*. God even gave the man a helper, fit for him—the first woman, Eve—and together they enjoyed God's provision (all that they could ever need). More than that, they enjoyed God's presence. In God's creation, people could speak face to face with God. This is the way the world was meant to be. There was just one rule. A rule that reminded Adam and Eve that this was God's world, God's garden, which means that he gets to decide what is good, what to include in it, and what can be done with its produce. "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (2:16-17).

But it was this one rule that Adam and Eve rebelled against. An event so dramatic that the very fabric of creation was torn, making it impossible to live in the world the same way as before. This brings us to the fall, when sin and death entered God's good world.

THE FALL



Death is not the way it's supposed to be. We know this instinctively. It's why we grieve so deeply when it happens. From the death of a loved one, to the death of a pet, to the shriveled up flowers that never really bloomed in the garden, not to mention the massive casualties of countless wars and atrocities, we're surrounded by death in this world.

But death entered the world not by design, but as a punishment for rebellion against God and his rule. In essence, what Adam and Eve did was commit high treason against God. As it's been put, God offered Adam and Eve a paradise of yes, and a single tree of no.¹ But that wasn't enough. They wanted to be king. They thought they could do a better job of running God's garden, of running God's universe. They wanted to be able to call the shots, to decide for themselves between right and wrong. That's treason, rebellion. And because God is committed to the goodness of his creation and the holiness of his name, he has to deal justly with evil and rebellion.

And so death entered the world. What was designed as a paradise, brimming with life and glory, was replaced by a hard, thorn-infested earth, shrouded by death, and plagued by curse. "And to Adam [God] said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return'" (3:17-19).

And it's not just Adam and Eve's problem. Every person since then has run into the same problem. In some corner of our hearts, we all think we could do a better job running the world than God. And so we live by our own rules. The Bible calls this *sin*, and it's everyone's problem. Which means that *death* is everyone's problem, for death is the penalty of sin. As it says in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . ." We're all guilty. We're all under death's curse.

And we feel it. We feel it when our relationships don't work the way they're supposed to. What should have been a source of comfort and security becomes an experience of sadness and betrayal. We feel it when our jobs don't work—the slow death of a career, the quick death of a

¹ Barry Cooper, "The Generous God," Session Two, *Life Explored* (2016).

business partnership. We feel it when our bodies don't work—getting old, getting sick, closer each day to the grave. We feel it when we garden—the area we're planning to put our garden in the back yard is currently overrun by vines. More than anything, we feel it in our distance from God. Like there's a wall between us, shutting us out from life and relationship with him.

And you can't go back. Now that death has entered the picture, life doesn't work the same. You can't live in the world as though the fall never happened, as though sin and death aren't part of the picture; it will never work. Though that doesn't stop us from trying. We do everything we can to avoid death. We drive the safest cars. We spend billions on medications. We shop at stores called Forever 21, as though our clothing will stop the effects of the fall. We spend millions on cosmetics and hair color—so we can try to cheat death or at least cover over the effects of the fall.

We even try to make it up to God sometimes, by doing good things for him—like helping others or going to church. But that doesn't deal with the problem of death, *because it can't deal with the problem of sin*. Doing a bunch of good things doesn't get rid of the bad ones; the penalty still has to be paid. Which means that so far, nobody in history has figured out a way to cheat death.

Well there was *one person*. One person, who didn't cheat death; he defeated it. Not by avoiding death, but by going through it. Who did it not for himself, but for us and for his Father. And understanding his story in light of the stories of creation and the fall helps us understand what we mean when we say the resurrection changes everything. Death meets its match in Jesus.

This brings us to the next cosmic, world-altering event, the one we came here to celebrate today: redemption. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

REDEMPTION



Think again about 1 Corinthians 15, what we heard read earlier. The apostle Paul wrote that letter to a young church, plagued with all sorts of difficulties. And one of them was confusion about the resurrection from the dead. Not everybody believed it, even in Paul's day. Dead people don't come alive again. When you go to the grave, you stay there and rot. That's what happens. That's how death works. And prior to Jesus, that logic was perfectly sound. But what Paul is telling us in ch. 15, is that something has changed. Something new and radical has happened, such that the old rules no longer apply. Such that we must now live differently in the world this side of the resurrection.

First he tells us that Jesus "Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scripture" (15:3-4). Understand what that means: that *the penalty we all deserve for our sin has been paid in full on our behalf by God's very own Son*. While we were making a mess of God's creation through our sin, he sent his Son *not* to condemn us, but to save us, by taking the curse for our sin on himself. Where thorns once covered the ground, they now adorned our Lord's head, in a bloodstained crown. The death we deserved, he bore in his own body, "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

But that's not all. Next he tells us that Christ "was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (15:4). Jesus didn't stay in the grave. Because he himself was not guilty of sin, death had no jurisdiction over him. No power to keep him down. And so as Paul declares in v. 20: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those

who have fallen asleep.” Jesus Christ conquered death. He defeated death not by avoiding it, but by going through it. That he might deal with our sin, taking his Father’s holy wrath in our place, and that he might disarm death, and so offer new life to all who believe in him.

Because notice that Jesus wasn’t raised just for his own benefit. Paul describes his resurrection here as “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Sleep here is a euphemism for death. But what are firstfruits? “The firstfruits is an agricultural term for the first installment of the harvest that pledges more of the same kind to come.”² In other words, Jesus isn’t the only one who is going to rise from the dead. The resurrection he accomplished is what we will all experience in the end, if we have Jesus. He has overturned sin’s curse. As Paul explains in vv. 21-22: “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”

If this is true, this changes everything.

It means it’s possible for a sinner, someone who doesn’t have it all together, who makes mistakes and lets people down, who lets *God* down—someone like you and me—it’s possible for sinners to have relationship with a holy God. There is forgiveness. If we have Jesus, the wall of sin that separates us from God has been torn down, because the price has been paid in full.

It means that death no longer has the final word. All our clamoring to cheat death, to slow down or reverse the effects of the fall—they’re unnecessary. Because Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves; he has defeated death. If we have Jesus, we need no longer live in fear of death, because as Jesus puts it in John 11, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

It means that God’s original plan for creation is back on the table, and already beginning to become true. Through Jesus we become God’s children again. Through Jesus we can serve God’s kingdom. Through Jesus, we are welcome into God’s presence. Through Jesus we have purpose and meaning in life.

It means that everything sad will one day come untrue—our broken relationships, our broken hearts, even our broken bodies—if we have Jesus. His resurrection is the firstfruits; our resurrection is yet to come (1 Cor. 15:23; cf. vv. 35-49).

NEW CREATION



Because there is one more chapter in the story—what the Bible calls *new creation*. In Christ shall all be made alive, “but each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Cor. 15: 23-24). There is one more chapter coming—the longest and best chapter. As C.S. Lewis puts it, “the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”³

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 268. Cf. Lev. 23:9-14.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle (The Chronicles of Narnia)*; New York: Harper Collins, 1956, 1982), 767.

It's a grand finish that we can't even begin to imagine. One made possible through the resurrection of Christ. But God gives us a glimpse. Listen to how John describes it in Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (21:1-4)

This is the hope available to us through Jesus. And Jesus himself wants us to have that hope. To step out of the realm of death—the way the world used to be—and live in the world *as it really is now*, finding new and eternal life in Jesus. And we do that by trusting in him as our Savior and King. He's not asking us trying harder, or being more religious; he's asking us to believe. Listen to what Jesus says in John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Because Jesus died for sins, you can be forgiven. Because Jesus is risen, you can have life.

So many people choose to remain under the shadow of death. To carry on as if the world hasn't changed, as if the resurrection never happened. Running against the clock, trying to milk as much as they can from this world before it's too late. Trying to prove to themselves that they really matter. Trying to please themselves while they still have time. Even Christians, those who believe and follow Jesus, so often still live as though Jesus is still in the tomb. Finding our identity and hope in *this* world, in people and possessions and achievements, as though this life is all there is (cf. Mk. 8:34-38). Giving up in our fight against sin, forgetting that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us by the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph. 1:18-20).

But if Christ is risen, that doesn't make any sense. It's like showing up for class after you graduated, or two people living separate lives after their wedding day. The world is different now; God calls us to live differently in it, not in slavery to sin or fear of death, but by faith in Christ and hope of the resurrection.

So how will you respond this morning? How will you respond to what Jesus has done? How will you respond to his invitation to believe in him and live?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. While Christmas gets a whole season for celebration in the modern world, Easter often gets a week at best, if not a mere day. Why do you think that is?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. How does Paul summarize the gospel in vv. 3-6?
3. What's wrong with Christianity if the resurrection isn't true (see vv.12-19)?

4. How does Paul describe Christ's resurrection in v. 20? What does that mean?
5. How does the resurrection of Jesus connect to the story of Adam (see vv. 21-22)? What does that mean for us?
6. What do vv. 23-26 help us understand how God will apply the resurrection (i.e. to Christ, to us, to the world)? What does that mean for us?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. How is the world different because of the resurrection? (i.e. describe the world under the reign of sin and death vs. under the reign of Christ)
8. How should we live differently in the world now that Christ is raised? What are some specific applications from the truth of the resurrection?