



Stephen N. Johnson

AN EASTER TRILOGY (Part 3)

EASTER: "THE HARD TRUTH OF EASTER"

Many sermons will be preached on Easter Sunday in defense of an empty tomb, explaining how every credible witness at the time confirmed it, and how all who deny it do so because of prejudicial presuppositions. Answers will be given to the various arguments against it: the women went to the wrong grave; the body was stolen by His enemies or removed by His disciples, etc.

There is something of far greater, more practical importance than discussions about an empty tomb. In fact, the Apostle Paul never—not even one time in thirteen epistles—mentioned the empty tomb. So what is the significance of the resurrection? For while Paul never mentioned an empty tomb, he did mention—a lot—the reality of the living Jesus being present with us.

Let me suggest two life-transforming truths of this Easter reality. First, Jesus is alive. This is the unanimous witness of the biblical writers. The presence of Jesus was felt and affirmed throughout the days following the resurrection.

By the time the Gospel writers penned their stories, they had not seen the physical Jesus for some thirty years. Yet after three decades they still believed Jesus was alive. Why? They continued to experience the living, risen presence of Jesus with them. They were comforted, convicted, consoled, encouraged, and guided by Him. They knew Jesus was alive. He lived with them. Without this, they would have never written His story, and we would have never heard of Jesus.

What convinced these people, and all those who have believed since, that Jesus was alive was not an empty tomb or seeing Jesus in the flesh. Like us, most of the early believers saw neither. Rather, they were convinced that Jesus was live because they experienced His presence.

In the final analysis, what convinces us today that Jesus is alive? It's not some argument that can never be proved or disproved about an empty tomb. Rather, it is that we too have come to experience His presence.

The resurrection of Jesus is significance because the living Jesus is present with us today. We can count on Him. The resurrection means that we face nothing alone. In every hardship, setback, conflict, suffering, and sorrow, He is here with us. In every success, accomplishment, finished task, and answered prayer, He is with us. He is with us in victory and in defeat. He weeps with us when we weep and rejoices with us when we rejoice. When we obey or disobey, He is with us. When acting nobly or nasty, He is there. Name your situation. Wherever are you—emotionally, spiritually, mentally, physically, morally, ethically—the resurrection means that Jesus is there with you.

Matthew's Gospel begins and ends with the truth that Jesus is with us. Even before Jesus was born the announcing angel tells Joseph that Mary's baby will fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "They shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, 'God with us'" (1:23). Then the concluding verse of Matthew gives Jesus' promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20). Do you think maybe Matthew



wanted us to know it and believe that Jesus is with us? He did.

The significance of the resurrection is not about an empty tomb somewhere back there, but a living Jesus with us right here right now. Knowing this matters. It will transform your life.

There is a second life-transforming significance to the resurrection: Jesus is Lord. On the Day of Pentecost, Simon Peter proclaimed, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). The Romans ruled that Jesus should be crucified, but God overruled and raised Him from the dead. The Romans proclaimed, "Caesar is Lord," but in the resurrection God proclaims Jesus as Lord. He is Lord of all—Lord over Roman authority, governors and emperors, even Lord over death itself.

The earliest Christians confession of faith was, "Jesus is Lord." This confession has both personal and social ramifications. Personally, making Jesus Lord means taking the same path Jesus took and drinking the same cup He drank. It is the path of the cross and resurrection. We really don't like to think of this, but it is the teaching of Scripture and for a serious disciple it is unavoidable. After Jesus first speaks to the disciples of His own crucifixion, Mark records, "And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). Then, Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me."

Making Jesus Lord requires dying to an old life and rising to a new life. There is no other way. We "must be born again" (John 3:7). This personal death, burial, and

resurrection is symbolized in baptism by immersion. We are buried with Jesus in the waters of baptism, and then we are raised from death to walk in new life (Romans 6:3-4)

Crucifixion and resurrection are the path of transformation for all who confess Jesus as Lord. We are new creatures. Old things pass away; new things have come (II Corinthians 5:17). The Lord's Supper symbolizes that the risen Jesus abides within giving us new life. We regularly eat the bread of His body and drink the wine of His blood. Continually Jesus is imparting His life to us.

Because of the personal dimension of confessing "Jesus is Lord," the social dimension is unavoidable. Christ living in us changes who we are and how we live.

If Jesus is living within, we should take on the character of Christ, shouldn't we? Should not His values become our values, His priorities our priorities? If "God is love" and Jesus loved all humanity, shouldn't those who confess Jesus is Lord do the same? John thought so. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

It is patently obvious that we are to love as God loves, but, oh, how extraordinarily difficult.

It is relatively easy to love the lovely and those who love us. Beyond that, it gets tricky. Loving our enemies is troubling. Just saying that Christians should love the same people Jesus loves (present tense) becomes downright offensive in our culture just as it was in His.

But part of living under the lordship of Christ and having the resurrected Jesus live within is doing just that—loving those who Jesus loves, especially the most unlovable among us. Paul knew all too well how costly



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this could be. He knew that it took a power beyond the physical, and that even so it could still lead to death. Take careful note of his prayer in Philippians 3:10: “. . . that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” Paul knew that only the resurrection power of Christ enables us to love as Jesus loved. Further, he knew that loving like this would cause suffering and could cost him his life (which it did). But he did it anyway. Paul took the lordship of Jesus seriously.

Who are the most difficult people for you to love? A boss? An in-law? A rival? A neighbor? One who has offended, rejected, or scorned you?

Jesus commands that we love all humanity. That includes Islamic terrorists, those who bomb and kill Americans. We are to love illegal immigrants, people of a different race, ethnicity, or religion, misogynists, murderers, thieves, rapists, Republicans and Democrats, those with an alternative sexual orientation, sex offenders, and all personal, social, and political enemies.

Not only is it extremely difficult to love these people, but the mere suggestion can bring derision and ridicule. It can cost you a job, a friendship, and acceptance—even in the church. Do you now see why I said in Part 2 of this Easter Trilogy, “Jesus embodied the pure, plain, and furious love of God for all humanity. That sounds innocuous enough, doesn’t it? I mean, what can be bad about just loving people? But then, as now, seriously loving people of all types can create tremendous problems.”

In loving the most despised in His society, Jesus defied the social and political norms of His day. Because of that, they crucified Him.

Loving today as Jesus loved may not cost us our life, like Jesus and Paul (though Christians around the world are

killed every day), but we will surely know “the fellowship of His suffering,” and it still requires His resurrection power operative within us.

Being a Christian is more than believing in Jesus. Being a Christian means following Jesus in loving as He loved—loving all humanity knowing that this path may lead to a cross. But, because He is Lord we follow Him anyway.

This is the hard truth about the glorious resurrection.

*Grace be with you,
Steve Johnson*

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