

The Easter Challenge

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Easter Sunday

April 20, 2014

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Luke 24:1-12, 36-49 (NIV)

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

[Later, two disciples encounter the resurrected Jesus as they are walking to Emmaus. They go to the Eleven and tell them what happened.]

³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

But what does it truly mean? What could we be missing?

Easter Monday

What must Monday morning have been like for Jesus’ disciples? On Friday afternoon, the Romans had crucified Jesus and the disciples had gone into hiding, fearful of being swept up by the Romans. Then, on Sunday, some of the women who had gone to finish laying Jesus’ body out for burial had come back telling amazing stories about an empty tomb and a living Jesus. And then . . . on Sunday evening, Jesus had come to the disciples himself. Alive. In the flesh. Not a ghost. He had even eaten some of the broiled fish to prove it. He wasn’t like someone brought back from the dead, whatever that would be like. No, Jesus had been bodily resurrected.¹ He was himself, though not quite the same as before. Yes, he could simply appear inside a closed room, but it was still Jesus.

¹ Like most first-century Jews, the disciples believed that when the long-promised Day of the Lord arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. This is not “resuscitation,” which is returning to life only to go on to die at a later time, like being yanked back to life on the operating table. And it has nothing to do with ghosts or

Surely Peter and the others awoke the next day joyful and confused, excited and bewildered. Joyful and excited, because Jesus, their beloved master and teacher, lived. Confused and bewildered because none of it made any sense to them. The resurrection of the dead was part of a larger package – Messiah, liberation, victory, judgment, God’s return, the new heavens and new earth, and more. The Jews often referred to this whole package as the “Day of the Lord” and its coming meant the arrival of God’s kingdom and the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

So . . . try to imagine for a moment that you are Peter. You wake up on Easter Monday, perhaps half expecting that you’ll stumble outside to find the resurrection of the rest of the dead underway and Jesus sitting in triumph over all Judea. But you quickly realize that the world on Monday looks pretty much as it did on Sunday and Saturday and Friday and Thursday. The dead are still in their graves (with the exception of Jesus). There is still plenty of sickness and tragedy. The Romans still stand watch over the temple. To all outward appearances, the world was unchanged and the Day of the Lord had not arrived. But, of course, Peter also knew that Jesus had been resurrected the day before. What could it mean?

God’s Future Now

Grasping the answer to that question takes some boldness and a lot of imagination – for the resurrection of Jesus meant that God’s future had arrived. God’s kingdom had come. It was the time of New Creation. It was the long-awaited Day of the Lord . . . it just wasn’t playing out like Peter or any other Jew expected. Regardless of what it looked like, Jesus’ resurrection could mean only one thing: the resurrection of the dead had begun.² We don’t know whether Peter thought that the playing out of the whole Day of the Lord package would last an instant or a day or a week or a month or longer. But however long it would take to complete, Jesus’ resurrection meant that it had started. And what God starts is as good as done.

Frankly, this isn’t really any easier for us to understand than it was for Peter and the others. We live in a world filled with sickness and tragedy. The dead are still in their graves. Our own eyes can tell us that what began with Jesus is still not complete. Yes, God’s victory has been won, but the mopping up work goes on.

The fact that it has now been 2,000 years since Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t change the meaning of Easter nor does it change the final outcome. Decades after the first Easter, the writer of 2 Peter would caution the Christians that a day for the Lord is like a thousand years for us (2 Peter 3:8). In other words, God will bring about the consummation of his kingdom according to his schedule, not ours. We can safely bet that it took a long time for Peter and the others to come to grips with this. Many today still haven’t.

The Easter Challenge

We tend to diminish the meaning of Easter in two ways. First, we sometimes make the mistake of seeing the resurrection as no more than a demonstration of God’s power, perhaps the greatest “miracle” ever but little more than that. Second, we might think of the resurrection as Jesus proving something about what will happen to us after we die, showing us the “way to heaven” as it were. The problem is that both of these meanings short-change Easter. For the New Testament writers, Jesus’ resurrection meant that the kingdom of God had arrived and that it was time for the people of God to get to work being the light to the world and the salt of the earth, feeding the poor and clothing the naked, making disciples of all nations.

other spirits. “Resurrection” (*anastasis* in the Greek) was a word that meant passing through death to a new bodily (truly physical) and eternal life on the other side. Lazarus was resuscitated, having been brought back from the dead, but still going on to age and to die. Jesus of Nazareth, on the hand, was resurrected by God. Jesus passed through death to the other side. He lives still, and not just in our hearts or in the pages of Scripture – he lives, bodily, in God’s place, God’s dimension, God’s Kingdom. And, Hallelujah, God promises the same future for those who entrust themselves to Jesus.

²Admittedly, this sounds odd, but a little more than twenty years later, Paul would describe Jesus as the “first-fruits” of the resurrection, the first to be harvested in a harvest that had begun and would one day be completed. See 1 Corinthians 15:20.

Hence, when Paul concludes his glorious chapter on the resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians, he doesn't say, "Jesus has been raised and God's victory won, so have faith and you'll get to heaven." Instead, Paul writes, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Easter is a very public proclamation that God has acted decisively in human history to rescue us and to renew all of creation. God has called us to build for his kingdom as we confidently await its final consummation. And, thankfully, God is with us in this. God's Spirit enables us to do the work that God has given, refreshing us in our prayers, our worship, our learning, our loving, and our serving. God's new creation has begun and we are summoned to be part of it. Alleluia. Christ is risen indeed!

God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. Abandoned by all but a few, Jesus had cried out to God just before his death, "Why have you forsaken me?" To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world "held him of no account" (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is "free of blame, criticism, or doubt." Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was actually the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court, he had been found innocent!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We struggle for words when it comes to Easter, or at least we should. Easter is big. It is public. It matters for the whole world. It is about God's victory over sin and death, a victory won on the cross. It is about the God who keeps faith with his creation. It is about the arrival of God's kingdom and the beginning of God's new creation. When we pray "your kingdom come" in the Lord's prayer, we are not praying for its arrival but for its fulfillment, that what was begun in Jesus' death and resurrection will be consummated.

How does the understanding of Easter that I've tried to convey in this brief study differ from your own, from what you were taught, or from what you've read? Why does it matter? What makes Jesus' resurrection the linchpin on which Christianity stands or falls?

2. God's work of new creation goes on still. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – New Creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). What evidence do you see in our world of God's work of new creation? Where do you see glimpses of God's kingdom in the world around us? If we are to build for God's kingdom, to what work God called you?

3. Christians, all Christians, are resurrection people. But what do we really mean by this? What does the phrase "resurrection people" mean to you? It certainly means much more than simply believing in Jesus' resurrection. In a letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote that those "who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death . . . that our old self was crucified with him . . . [that we are to] consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." As resurrection people, we have been transformed and made new: "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life" (all the quotes are from Romans 6:1-11).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Isaiah 65:17-25 God's promise that one day all would be made new.	Tuesday, Matthew 28 Matthew's story of the resurrection of Jesus and his charge to his disciples.
Wednesday, Mark 16 Mark's account of the empty tomb. The shorter ending may be authentic; the longer is not. How would you interpret Mark if he ended his Gospel at verse 8?	Thursday, Romans 6:1-11 Dying and rising with the Messiah. Those who are "in the Messiah" are to walk as resurrected people, in the newness of life – for, in a very real sense, we are resurrected people.
Friday, Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5 A portrait that draws on Isaiah to portray the renewed and restored cosmos, including humanity.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying 1 Samuel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our Current Series:

Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World

The Next Series:

Simon the Rock: The Life of Peter

This class is not meeting on Easter Sunday

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
