

Beginning with the End

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

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Acts 1:1–14 (Common English Bible)

Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, ² right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven. Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. ⁴ While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me." ⁵ John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority." ⁸ Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

⁹ After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. ¹¹ They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven."

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they entered the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James, Alphaeus' son; Simon the zealot; and Judas, James' son—¹⁴ all were united in their devotion to prayer, along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

1 Corinthians 15:20–23b, 50–58 (CEB)

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest of those who have died. ²¹ Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came through one too. ²² In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ. ²³ Each event will happen in the right order: Christ, the first crop of the harvest, then those who belong to Christ at his coming . . .

⁵⁰ This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom. Something that rots can't inherit something that doesn't decay. ⁵¹ Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed—⁵² in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. ⁵³ It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. ⁵⁴ And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen:

Death has been swallowed up by a victory.

⁵⁵ *Where is your victory, Death?*

Where is your sting, Death?

(⁵⁶ Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) ⁵⁷ Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! ⁵⁸ As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.

This year, we'll be telling the Christmas story backwards, beginning with the end and moving back to the manger in Bethlehem - all through the eyes of Mary.

Preachers are always on the prowl for good sermon ideas and helpful ways to develop a sermon series. This is especially true at Christmas, for Advent arrives every year. What approach haven't we already taken numerous times? How might we try to come at Advent from a fresh vantage point? Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at Church of the Resurrection UMC in Leawood, Kansas, came up with just such an approach in his sermon series and

book, *Not A Silent Night*, and we're going to build off his approach in this year's Advent series.

First, Hamilton suggested starting at the end, Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and then working backwards to the manger. It reminds me of a Seinfeld episode (really, what doesn't?) that told the story of the quartet attending a wedding in India – but by starting at the wedding ceremony and then working backwards . . . and it worked.

The God-bearer

In Christian theology, Mary is referred to as the *theotokos*, literally, "God-bearer." In early Christianity, there were some who wanted to refer to Mary only as *christotokos*, literally "Messiah-bearer." The Christian community affirmed the term *theotokos*, not because of what it says about Mary, but because of what it says about Jesus. It doesn't mean that Mary is the source of God, but that she is the one through whom God was made flesh. Thus, calling Mary *theotokos* was a way to affirm Jesus' divinity, just as the Virgin Birth was a way to affirm Jesus' humanity.

Second, Hamilton, looked at the story through the eyes of Mary. After all, who knew Jesus better or loved him more? No one else was there at the end and at the beginning. We Protestants often pay too little attention to Mary, perhaps in reaction to the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary. Lately, many Protestant pastors and scholars have urged us to "recover" Mary and to let our hearts dwell on this singular woman, this *theotokos*, the "God-bearer."

The "end" of Mary's story

In 2007 and 2011, my wife, Patti, and I led some St. Andrew folks on a trip that encompassed all the biblical lands – Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Greece, Malta, and Rome. While in Turkey, we visited the ruins of Ephesus on the western coastline. High above the ruined city sits a small stone house and, often, numerous tourist buses. Devoted Christians remember this little house as the house of Mary.

The story is told that after the resurrection and ascension of her son, Mary, accompanied by John, the youngest of the apostles, made her way over the course of nearly a decade to Ephesus, where she lived out her days. There are other stories told about Mary's life after Jesus had returned to the Father, but I like the Ephesus story best. The mountainside where Mary's house sits is a beautiful and tranquil place, even with all the tourists crawling around it.

I can picture Mary there, making her way through the years. I expect that she often reflected on her son. She had brought him through the miracle of birth. And what a grand day that had been when she had visited her cousin, Elizabeth. I'm also sure that Jesus had posed some unique parenting challenges; wouldn't we love to know more! Even she had gazed in wonderment and even confusion as he began his public ministry. "Who is my mother?" Jesus had said (Mark 4:33). Mary darn well knew the answer!

She had been there when Jesus was beaten, scourged, and crucified. How could a mother, any mother, endure such a thing? So much horror and pain and suffering and sorrow. She had seen him die on that abomination called a cross. And she had seen him buried and the stone rolled across the entrance to the tomb. Did she have any idea what would happen next? Did anyone . . . really? Regardless of what she expected, what must it have been like to meet her son again, not dead, not merely resuscitated so that he would have to face death again, but resurrected to newly embodied life, the victory over sin and death won. We aren't told explicitly that Mary met Jesus in the weeks after his resurrection, but Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to five hundred people – surely Mary was numbered among them. How could Jesus do otherwise? Mary was then and always will be his mother.

We are told in the book of Acts that Mary was present with the disciples in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension, so it seems likely that she witnessed for herself Jesus' departure as he returned to his Father. And then . . . well, as I said, the stories differ. Seems likely to me that she stayed in Jerusalem for some time and then headed out toward Asia Minor with John. Why? Simply enough, she too would be a witness even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Furthermore, even as Mary lived out her days and faced her own passing, she knew that one day she would be reunited with her son again. For surely she came to see, as did the other apostles and disciples, that the resurrection of Jesus meant that the long-awaited

resurrection of the dead had begun. Jesus first and then everyone else when he returned (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). Mary would be resurrected just as Jesus had been. She would be able to hold him as she had before. Thus, in Mary, Christmas and Easter were joined together. Incarnation and resurrection – two parts of one whole. God had acted and nothing would ever be the same.

Easter and Christmas

We don't talk much about resurrection at Christmas and that's a shame. Resurrection, the defeat of death and sin, is the great promise embodied in Mary's baby. It surely changed the way Mary viewed her own death and should change our own as well. Death happens, but it does not win. Death does not prevail. Jesus' resurrection is the proof and the evidence that death's day is passing for when Jesus returns, death will be no more.

Sadly, many modern-day Christians are never really taught the meaning of the phrase "resurrection of the body" which millions of us say every week when we recite the Apostles' Creed. Perhaps the following will help with any lingering confusion on this; it is adapted from my book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*.

When, in the Apostles' Creed, we are affirming our essential claims about Jesus, we assert that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and buried" and that "on the third day he rose from the dead." It is important to remember that resurrection is not the same as resuscitation, which is being brought back to life. Instead, resurrection is about moving forward from death to a newly embodied life on the other side of the grave. We can think of resurrection as death's reversal, whereas resuscitation is merely its delay. Resurrection is what happened to Jesus and what will one day happen to us all.

It is important to remember that resurrection is about the restoration of the whole person—body and soul, we might say. Resurrection puts back together what death ripped apart. After his resurrection, Jesus walked with his disciples, ate with them, and even asked one to touch his wounds. He ate fish in front of them so they could see that he was still "flesh and bone" (Luke 24:36-49). Jesus' resurrected body, his flesh and bones, wasn't exactly the same as it was before, but it was similar and still very material.

1 Corinthians 15 is a lengthy passage from Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth, Greece. They have an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the Christian gospel, leading them to deny even that Jesus was actually resurrected. They thought the exalted Jesus had to be above the "messiness" of an actual material body.

Paul can hardly believe what he hears from them. Deny Jesus' resurrection!? He proceeds to list witnesses who can testify to the truth of the claim. There are nearly 500 and most are still living, Paul writes. And, he goes on, if Jesus wasn't bodily resurrected¹ then Christianity is one big lie and the believers, all those who placed their faith in Jesus, are to be pitied. "If Christ has not been raised," Paul writes, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

But there's more, which is the focus of the passage printed above. If Jesus wasn't resurrected, then we won't be resurrected ourselves. However, as Eugene Peterson artfully puts in his paraphrase, *The Message*, Paul writes, "the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. . . . Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming." To translate it more literally, Jesus Christ is "the first fruits of the those who have died." Jesus is the first to be resurrected, then when he returns, the rest of us will be resurrected too! *Full stop: The rest of us?*

Yes, simply put, the creedal affirmation, "the resurrection of the body," is not about Jesus' bodily resurrection, which we affirmed earlier in the creed, *it is about our own bodies*. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised! Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ

¹Yes, "bodily resurrected" is redundant, but I feel compelled to say it once in awhile because I think too many Christians don't really understand the meaning of "resurrection," *anastasis* in the Greek.

from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that when the last days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first, and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of us. To use Paul’s agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the “first fruits,” God’s harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection. That doesn’t seem so fantastical only because we’ve gotten used to the idea. But once you’ve accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God into a small box that seems “reasonable.”

Fleming Rutledge writes²:

A story was told me recently that might be apocryphal but might well be true. The two people in question, both clergy, are very well known in the American church. One of them is a prolific writer of skeptical books calling the orthodox faith into question. The other is a famous preacher of the gospel. The skeptic, seeking to provoke the preacher, says, “My daughter has two Ph.D.s. How can I expect her to believe anything so unacceptable to the modern mind as the resurrection of the body?” The preacher says, thoughtfully, “I don’t know your daughter. How limited is her imagination?”

Our belief in the resurrection of the body is the promise that I will one day again see my grandfather—solid, material, tactile, *real*. And not only see him, but hug him. What could be better news than that!

And so it must have been with Mary. She was the embodiment of obedience and hope when the angel Gabriel first came to her and told her that she would bear the “Son of the Most High.” As she looked back over her life with Jesus and after, how could she also not look forward to the reunion with her son that one-day would be hers? Christmas and Easter. The beginning and the end of one profound, cosmic, loving act by our triune God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In most UMC churches, there are typically a pretty large number of members who grew up attending a Roman Catholic church. (Why this is so is another interesting discussion topic.) When it comes to Mary, there is a substantial divide between Catholics and Protestants. Assuming there are people in your group from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, you might make a list of the varying impressions and knowledge of Mary.

- Why do you think Catholics are so devoted to Mary? Why have Protestants often ignored her (except at Christmas time!)?
- You might discuss some of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, such as the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception (Mary was born without original sin), Mary’s perpetual virginity (the consequence of which is the Catholic belief that Jesus had no half-siblings), and Mary’s Assumption (the belief that Mary has already been bodily resurrected and glorified in heaven). Why do you think that the Roman Catholic Church would come to hold these beliefs – what is it about Mary?

2. Christmas tests us in a way that no other Christian holiday does. Remembering the “reason for the season” is a lot harder that we’d like to admit. How can remembering our Easter proclamation, “He is Risen!,” shape our understanding and commitment to making sure that Christmas is a holy season in our hearts and minds?

² From Rutledge’s sermon on the resurrection of the body in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, Ed. Roger van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

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.

<p>Monday, Daniel 12:1-4 The conquering of death and the raising to eternal life – the promise of resurrection.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Luke 24:36-49 The resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples. He is flesh and bones, not a ghost or spirit and even eats fish to prove it.</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 21:1-14 The resurrected Jesus comes to his disciples while they are fishing and cooks breakfast for everyone.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 Yes, Jesus was resurrected and, yes, we shall be resurrected too.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul encourages believers with the promise that no one, living or dead, will be left out when Jesus returns.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

