

Our hope is not rooted in our mood. It is not bound in our feelings. It is grounded in the stones outside of a Middle Eastern city, an historical rock upon which our house has been built. The physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, having prevailed over all that opposes God and Man, is the foundation of our hope, even when we are overcome in fear and grief. The emptiness of that rock, mouth wide open in triumphant aria, sings of ultimate hope on the other side of the darkness of death.

Last week our brothers and sisters in Alexandria, Egypt, were abruptly thrown into such grief when, during their Palm Sunday worship, two bombs ripped through their sanctuary – the holy torn asunder by the profane, an amateur reproduction of the cosmic reality of every one of my sin's suicidal violence against God. The enemies of Jesus waged their war on the cross, in their own words, by surreptitious violence justifiable by their prophet's own proclamation.

Amid the rubble and the blood, the acrid smell of incendiary dust still hanging in the air, with every breath clawing the backs of their throats, that bitter taste that, for some reason, makes your mouth water, a crowd surrounded the church, bearded young men in drab colored clothing with arms in the air, standing tightly packed together, chanting in Arabic as if with one defiant voice, my presumptions interpreting their intentions in my head. And the ticker at the bottom of the screen scrolled the words in English...to my shame:

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth; of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...he suffered and was buried, and on the third day rose again, according to the Scriptures...”

And they ended with: “We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and to life in the world to come. Amen.”

The injustice and cruelty of fraudulent piety cratered their sidewalks and the gaped walls stood before these men and women whose eyes were fixed not upon their enemies, but upon their Savior. In the ironic display of gospel unity they gathered en masse outside the blasted church, stones caved inward from the external explosion and with those blown-out stones at their feet, they recalled the ancient promises of God summarized in the creed of Nicaea, of the glory of the One who entered into the self-imposed tombs of our own violence in order to roll the stone of our death outward from the inside, expelling its power by the sheer glory of His life.

While Jihadists are told that their salvation comes by wielding the sword, that they receive paradise for killing their enemies, these lovers of Jesus Christ proclaimed a Savior and Hero who died for His enemies. The one who laid his life down by his own will to rescue the swingers of the sword against him. His followers take each stride of their lives inside of his, for He told us, “He who would lose his life for my sake – and for the gospel’s sake – would save it (Mark 8:35). Christians offer to the world – to our enemies – a gospel of grace, of reconciliation, of mercy and forgiveness. They are not the means of their enemies’ death, but they proclaim the means of their life at the expense of their own. How could they do that? Because they know that God raises the dead, and the tomb is not the last nor greatest word.

When Christians are persecuted and unjustly executed and belittled, robbed and ruined by the powers-that-be, coerced by our governments through threat of economic penalty, we do not respond with violence. We do not respond with terrorism. We do not respond with retaliation, but we die like Stephen: standing firmly with eyes on the risen Jesus, proclaiming the truth in love, and imploring God to forgive our enemies. Our brothers and sisters martyred for their faith in Jesus died with expectant hope that their suffering is not the determinative player of their true and ever-growing life.

This is not new. It is the ancient path, packed hard by the crushed feet of the dancing saints who have stumbled and exulted before us, seeking

reconciliation and unity under one Master whose own feet were pierced for their wrongs.

So, what was it that makes Christians so compassionate, so perseverant, and so inclusive? What was it that made them not only endure suffering, but willingly and purposefully risk its horrors so that others might live and flourish? What was it that made them seek their enemies' good even when the stones were raised above their heads, the torches laid to the pyre, and the blade was upon their throats? What was it that made them lay down their power of heritage, to give away their wealth and social prestige to serve those ethnically different than them? It was their knowledge that flesh and blood does not inherit the Kingdom of God, but that this perishable world will be swallowed up by the imperishable glory of the resurrection *in the time which God ordains*.

They *knew* their future. They lived, gave, served, and died with hope. The Greeks didn't have any knowledge of the "great leap into the darkness", death was shrouded in mystery. But, Christians have a pioneer who walked through it triumphantly. So, they risked their lives, trusting Him through the grim horrors of Friday and the dark silences of Saturdays, awaiting that Sunday sunrise of renewal and righteousness. Christians didn't retaliate when persecuted, even unto death, because they knew that at the end of time Jesus would judge finally, and all injustice would be accounted for. This created a

people who contend for justice, but never violently defend themselves, who are lambs led to the slaughter because they refuse to kill the wolves, leaving it completely to the shepherd, knowing full well that should a wolf consume them, he will raise them up to the fullness and glory of an imperishable life.

Their certainty of their future joy and glory in the love of God was so strong that it absolutely altered the way that they lived. So, the question for us becomes, “How can we have such a certainty that we, too, will inherit such a future glory so that we can presently love our enemies, lay down our power, endure great suffering, all with expectant joy?” The answer lies in the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus frames our future. The hope of newness – eyes upon future glory – which makes present endurance in suffering and endurance in doing good to all men not merely possible, but purposeful.

When Paul the apostle wrote the Corinthians, one of the issues which he felt needed to be addressed was the view of some among them who denied the possibility of any physical resurrection at all. At the beginning of chapter 15 he logically proves that the implications of denying the physical resurrection means that Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, they eyewitnesses would be liars, the New Testament would be a false account unworthy of ever being called good, and we would all still be in our sins under the wrath of God's

impending judgment. You can't have Christianity in any form without a physical resurrection of Jesus.

However, because Jesus was raised physically from the dead, it absolutely changes *everything*. In our passage today, we see that the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes the Kingdom of God the Christian's primary optic of life. This optic, how one views life, is based upon the conclusion that the Kingdom of God is inherited. That is, the resurrection of Jesus means that those who entrust themselves to Him, are united to Him by faith, who love Him, are not merely included in a community of citizens, but rather into a family with a Father. An inheritance is passed down from a Father, the glory of a Father's work shared with His children. Thus, because we now inherit everything with Christ, we are not citizens imploring an unwilling King to grant us leniency. We are sons, beckoned to come near to God, into a throne room where He sits us with Him to show us His glory: God at the center of all things and we, humbled and exceedingly joyful run like children around Him. It is in this familial Kingdom of present and fuller glory, with the triumphant Jesus as our King and as our brother who laid down His life to pay down our prodigal debts and animosity towards God AND then shared His inheritance with us for all of eternity in the newness of deathless life, which is the primary optic of the Christian. Therefore, this hope also shapes the Christian's present experience, ethos, and endeavors. It transforms every way in which we

respond to circumstances today because we know to whom we belong and how the end of our story will go: Christ among you, the hope of glory.

How do we, then, inherit this Kingdom of God? Christians inherit it by being changed. Look at how Paul describes it. Those united to Christ Jesus will be “altered” or “changed” to be like our resurrected Master. “In a moment” we “will all be transformed”. This transformation is a change from temporal to eternal, from frail to immortal, from corruption to incorruption. It is a qualitative transformation, not merely a chronological transformation. What I mean is that what we ARE (frail, corrupt, decomposing) will, on the day of our resurrection, be transformed (to incorruptible, reintegrated life).

This is a change of quality which is obtained, not achieved. We do not progress towards it by our performances. We do not earn it by shaping our own souls, or proving the strength or perfection of our faith. We cling, endure, persevere, and overcome by dependence, not independence. We obtain this transformation “in a moment” when God raises us up from the dead on that final day of His Son’s return to set all things right. Our transformation is obtained by the work of the first one to rise: Jesus. His resurrection is the foundational cause of our resurrection to imperishable incorruption.

We are transformed in His image by the removal of our sin and its consequences. See how Paul argues. At our own resurrection death itself is

transformed for the Christian. It becomes stingless, poisonless, powerless. The word “sting” in v55-56 is a word which means a “poisoned sting”, like from a scorpion, which causes death. It’s not the stab that kills you, it’s the poison in the stab. Thus, death is not the problem for humanity. It’s the poison in the death. And what is the poison in death? He tells us: it is sin. The sting of death is sin (v56), and its power comes from the revelation of God, the Law, that He is holy and sin is treacherous. This revelation of God’s justice and our sin places every human under the penalty of a lawbreaker in the court of the Most Holy God, the poison of our death is judgment. The Greek poet Epicurus knew this. He wrote:

“If we could be sure that death was annihilation, then there would be no fear of it, for as long as we exist death is not there and when it does come we no longer exist. But we cannot be totally sure that death is annihilation. What people fear the most is not that maybe death is annihilation, but that maybe it is not.”

Shakespeare saw the same thing when he wrote Hamlet (Act 3, Scene 1):

“To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
NO traveler returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all”

Fear of death comes from the fear of judgment...and since after death comes judgment, we fear it, the poison of the sin which we know to be true in the light of the consuming fire of God's holy perfections.

And the death of Jesus proves to us that there is a judgment. His words of forsakenness on the cross, His sweaty blood pouring forth from the depths of his anxiety before the judgment and wrath of His Father. It was not the stab that he feared, but the poison in the stab..., "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?!" It was for us! It was for us! Yes, the death of Christ proves to us that there is a judgment from God upon our sins, but the resurrection of Christ equally proves to us that Jesus absorbed it for us! He has gained victory over the sting, the poison fully quaffed by the Son of God, who had no sin, but took ours upon Himself that we might gain in His victory. No poison remains for those in Christ Jesus. So, Paul can tell the Romans that "there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! Thanks be to God who grants us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" Even when we struggle and fail today with sin (Romans 7), there is victory through faith in Jesus. He answered for our sins, weaknesses, frailties, and rebellion.

This is why Jesus came to us 2,000 years ago: to drink the poison, not to swing the sword but to receive its slash. He told Peter in John 18:11, "Sheath your sword, Peter! Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given to me?" In drinking the cup of God's judgment, the poison of sin's curse, He

swallowed it up and mastered it by the power of His holy life, as God intended for His glory and our good. So death now has no judgment, no law, and no poison for those who belong to Christ Jesus.

Death may one day come to stab you. The odds are fairly high. ☺ But for those who love Christ Jesus, it won't really kill you, for its stab holds no poison. In fact, it will only make you greater, imperishable, lacking corruption, holy and without sin's affections in your soul. You will be truly like the heavenly man, Jesus, in this sense. In the words of George Herbert, death was once your executioner at best, swinging his hatchet for your doom, but now he has become your gardener, pruning you on that day to your flourishing glory in full bloom of what humans are supposed to be.

That the Christian flourishes *through* death is the another thing revealed here. Death has been swallowed up in victory! For the Christian, then, death is not merely removed or made powerless, it is utterly defeated by making it our servant, who claims to be our master. There are two ways to get rid of that Easter roast this afternoon. You can throw it out, remove it. Or, you can gobble it up, consume it. Only the second option uses it for your good, your nourishment, your flourishing.

You see, the resurrection is not a consolation for our suffering, but it swallows our suffering up, and makes it serve our good. It makes our suffering productive for our enhancement and joy. The Scriptures tell us that this

resurrection means that the more you've suffered, the greater your joy in the resurrection. Every temporal affliction is *constructing* for you an eternal weight of glory. Every penny of your pain in this life will pay billions in divine joy on that day. Somehow, our scars will only make our joy greater. This is the utter defeat of suffering – not just an annihilation of your pain, but turning it on its head to become an accumulation of your joy.

Without this, suffering would just be endurable, and utterly useless, a meaningless divergence, maybe a mere test. But, Christians have a hope *through* suffering, and achieve this hope for today by thinking through this doctrine of resurrection. Thus, resurrection is not wishful thinking, pie in the sky. It is grounded thinking, consistent with the worldview of the Scriptures.

For the secular man, his only hope is wishful thinking, a determined deflection of where his worldview logically leads. He must stop thinking through his worldview in order to hope, for in it he finds nothing but “blind, pitiful indifference” (Dawkins) in the cold vast brutality of Nature. Yet, very few atheists actually live like this. Rather, they live by blind faith that life must have some meaning, even if that is inconsistent with their worldview.

But Christians live consistently with their worldview when we believe that life has meaning, that justice is cosmically important, that suffering is not the end, but that it results in greater joy.

Death, therefore, and all its implications of suffering and pain and loss, is swallowed up in the triumph of resurrection renewal for the Christian!

This renewal of resurrection is also an imperishable physicality. That is, the perishable puts on the imperishable, not the immaterial. Resurrection reality will be qualitatively different, but still physical. We are not going to be spirits floating around, but will have a body like Jesus's resurrected body: renewed, glorified, and profoundly material and physical.

This is why we can KNOW that our suffering will produce glory. This is how our Egyptian brothers and sister KNOW that they can boldly chant our hope without picking up a sword over the bloodstains of their fallen brothers. We can know that God will make all things right because Jesus was physically raised from the dead! He pronounced the greatest receipt for payment ever made when he announced, "It has been finished!", and then was raised from the dead. He gave us proof of payment and proof of quality.

Thus, Jesus' resurrected body was not *less* physical than his prior body, but *more* physical. Now, it's hard to explain to a blind person what it is like to see. In like fashion, it's hard to explain to a sinful decaying anxious forgetful body what it's like to be incorruptible and imperishable. What we will be on that day is incomprehensible in its fullness. We will know it when we have it.

And the resurrection is not only hope for our bodies, but hope for all of Creation. All of Creation will be set free from its bondage to decay on that

day, too. Thus, Christians are true ecologists, because we know that what is here is like a seed that will be planted and flourish in tremendous glory that day. To the atheist, the future holds only the eventual consumption of the earth by the sun, or an asteroid, or a comet – in the end, it will all be destroyed in “cold, blind indifference” of natural meaningless forces.

Ironically, it is the same assumption for many paganized Christians, who think that we’re flying out of here and the earth will be burned up, so it doesn’t matter how we treat God’s world now.

But for the Christian who knows the doctrine of resurrection, we see that God cares about His Creation and is going to purify it, not destroy it. It will melt, but what will come out of those assaying fires will be far more natural than Nature, more resplendent than anything we behold in the waving of the meadows or the glint from the oceans scattering of the setting sun. We are now in sin’s shadow, the substance has passed, but the resurrection of Jesus has brought about the penetrating light which beckon the first buds of Spring’s promise and the flourishing just on the other side of the torrential downpour.

And finally we see the only command in this passage of hope: be settled in this hope. We are to be settled, immovable, and abounding in the works of the Lord for a very specific reason: because your painful strivings in this life, (the word for “labor” is actually the word “beatings”) are not fruitless or

empty, but are productive and will reap a glorious future. Your present sufferings have significance and meaning! In every loss and every millisecond of your pain, you will gain back an eternity of *better*: incorruptible and full of glory. This material newness and restoration, resurrection of what once was but will be made infinitely better, gives Christians endurance in doing good. We fight sin, and poverty, and suffering, and violence, and death because we know the Son has risen on the coming Spring. We seek flourishing because we are partakers of its fullness.

We see the torture, the abuse, the violence, the hatred, the ugly wretched evil perpetrated from man to man and we KNOW that this is NOT the way it is supposed to be. The world sees it, too. They riot over it, ironically. They lament in songs and poems. And we know why it is not the way it is supposed to be, sin. And we know how it will be made right: Jesus the Victor over death will subject it to Himself.

So, how do we endure like our brothers in Egypt? How do we stand firm in well-doing, forgiving our enemies, striving for justice and refusing to retaliate? How do we get out of bed in the morning when our inner thoughts are dark and turbulent, setting out a hopeless path of perceived doom? We see Jesus, the One who bore up all the tortures of every horrific cruelty which man can wield, who absorbed every meaningless word and terrific hate which any human has lambasted against another, and who carried every burden and

anxiety and fear of every suffering brought about by the sin which we continuously spew upon the canvas of His opus. He took the darkest colors of our sin which we splayed upon His work on that Friday of the cross...and He painted the most glorious images of hope, life, and joy with it and called it "Good." If God can inscribe "good" upon the Friday of His Son's greatest suffering because He knew the resultant glory would far surpass it, then He can inscribe any suffering, pain, and evil against you with the same epithet in the light of the same resultant surpassing glory to come out of it.

The Friday of His sufferings gave way to Saturday's dark silence...but Sunday. Oh, Sunday blew open the doors of hope and of life everlasting and full of glory!

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.

<sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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."

<sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

(Rev. 21:1-5 ESV)