

What is the Meaning? Created for Change
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Life has changed dramatically... and very quickly, hasn't it? And nothing... not even the news media... has chronicled the change better than the creators of Facebook memes. :) I love how so many people are trying to keep a sense of humor in all this... here are some examples I've seen in recent weeks....

Those are funny. But we all know that there's a lot going on that isn't funny at all... and that's besides all the people who have gotten sick or died as a result of this virus. Many people have lost jobs... temporarily or even permanently. Residents of nursing homes, hospitals, and retirement centers have been cut off from their families. Children are going stir crazy, and their parents are worn out! I feel a strong compassion for parents of young children these days. Weddings have been canceled and funerals postponed, and all sorts of other life celebrations are happening in other, less joyful ways. What did Easter dinner look like for you last weekend? We shared dinner on Zoom with our extended family. :)

So here's one more meme I saw just the other day that summarized well, I think, what many people are thinking right now... "When all this is over, there are three words I don't ever want to hear again: Uncertain, Unprecedented, and Difficult." Things ARE different, and we're hoping they don't stay this way. But what should they become? There's a lot of talk about things returning to "normal"... but we really don't want that, do we? "Normal" was far too often silly, or shallow, violent or dangerous, dysfunctional or even disastrous. This is an opportunity for the world to change for the better, isn't it? And for those who have been changed by Christ to point the way forward. But for that to happen, our lives will have to include a fair amount of uncertainty, the changes in us all be unprecedented, and the process will indeed sometimes be difficult. Yikes. But do not be afraid! It will also be GOOD! It's what our hearts have been waiting for... what our world has been longing for.... what we all desperately need.

Last week, we saw that Jesus' Resurrection changed everything... starting with Jesus Himself... and because Jesus was changed, the experience of the Trinity was changed. God had never been human before... and in the Incarnation, that happened. For 33 years, through Jesus, God experienced firsthand everything we experience... that was definitely a change for Him :).... and Jesus' resurrection made that change permanent! Divinity and humanity, the invisible and the visible, were joined together eternally in the resurrected Jesus! And, yes, that did change everything! So, last time, we focused on God's Easter celebration... sharing in Jesus' own joy at being alive again... and in the Father's joy of having his Son alive again!

Today, we are going to talk about how that celebration has overflowed from the Father, Son, and Spirit... to include Jesus' friends and followers... those who were with Him then and all who would later choose to follow, including you and me. As we enter into the celebration... we not only get to share in God's joy... we also get to share in Jesus' resurrection! ... We not only get to receive God's love... we are transformed by that love into the people God created us to be... people who are truly the likeness and image of Christ in the world.

The scriptures clearly declare just how radically Jesus' resurrection changes us... 1 John 4:17 says: "...as He is, so are we in this world." (NRSV) As Jesus IS (present tense... NOW)... and how is Jesus now? Alive from the dead! And, in Him, so are we... NOW... in THIS world! Jesus is resurrected now... and so are we... no matter what we might think or feel to the opposite! Jesus' resurrection changes everything... including us!

And, in a way, this change shouldn't surprise us. We were created for change! At the beginning of the story, we see that change was woven into the fabric of God's creation... seasons changed, plants grew and bore fruit in regular rhythms, and humanity was told to multiply and fill the earth... so babies would be born who would grow into adulthood and have babies of their own... God did not create a static, unchanging universe... living things grow, and growth requires change! And, yes, also at the beginning of the story, we made a choice that changed our relationship to God in damaging ways... yet, God provided a way for that destructive change to be changed! The resurrection made the greatest change of all possible for us... eternal redemption!

So, this is all very exciting! But if this is true, then why aren't all of us living in this shared resurrection life with Jesus... right now... in this world? Well, that's what we want to unpack a bit this morning... and then in even more practical detail in the coming weeks...

To understand why we are NOT living in this shared resurrection life right now, let's start with what God did when he raised Jesus from the dead... it's more than you may think!... and then ask, How does Jesus' transformation outwork in our own lives?

First, let's notice that Jesus was resurrected in a real, physical body. He spoke, he ate, he walked, he had wounds. But Jesus' resurrected body had also changed somehow! He was not immediately recognizable to his friends. He could materialize in a closed room. He defied gravity and ascended into the clouds. What was that? A Star Trek transporter? "Beam me up, Jesus?" :) Or what if his body was transformed so his friends could get a glimpse of the transformation awaiting them...and us...even in our bodies? Because Jesus' resurrection changed His body, our experience of our bodies can change.

Now some may struggle with this. Over the centuries many people of faith have attempted to downplay the body in favor of the spirit... there was even a group in the early centuries of the church that insisted that bodies are disgusting, sinful, corrupt. Jesus' body must have been just an illusion, they said! But that's not biblical. The first humans were created as physical beings...and God looked at them and said they were "very good". Jesus was born into one of those human bodies too!... God became flesh and blood, fully human. Our bodies must not be distasteful to God, as they are to so many of us. :)

But our bodies also illustrate what life in this broken world does to us. Hard labor, childbirth, sickness, violence, stress, abuse, addiction, accidents, and injuries cause pain and distress. And so our bodies die. Today we are in the midst of a global pandemic that, thankfully, is not claiming nearly as many lives as originally predicted... but tens of thousands nonetheless. It can be scary. So that's why it's good news that when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose with a physical body, even a glorified one!

Paul wrote to the Corinthians a wonderful truth... that *if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (II Cor. 5:17 NSRV). Does that include our bodies as well? Paul said, yes! Absolutely. The Corinthians were naturally skeptical about this.. *I can almost hear someone saying*, Paul wrote in another letter to them, *“How can the dead come back to life? And what kind of body will they have when they are resurrected?”* So he answered their question by describing what happens when a seed is sown in the ground... it sort of dies, but it comes back to life later as a plant, looking very different than it did before.

The same thing is true of us, he says. *The body...our physical, human body... is “sown” in decay, but will be raised in immortality. It is “sown” in humiliation, but will be raised in glorification. It is “sown” in weakness but will be raised in power* (I Corinthians 15:25, 43-44 TPT). Wow... that gives us hope, doesn't it?... especially when our own bodies are weak or decaying... that immortality, glorification, and power await these puny bodies of ours! It's also an encouragement to love our bodies here and now, as we will remain “embodied”, it seems, for eternity. God seems to love bodies. :)

And this all means also that, because Jesus' resurrection changed death, our experience of death can change. God sees the death of our bodies differently than most people do. Death and rebirth are present in everything... the seasons of life, the earth itself, everything recycled. And in Christ, God does the same thing with human death. It is transformed. Scripture says *that one has died for all; therefore all have died*. When we are in Christ, we have died with him. Why? So that we may live... and live with a purpose... *And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them* (II Cor. 5:14-15 NRSV). Our lives become new in him.

This means that death is no longer our enemy, but our friend. It is no longer just the *end* of something... earthly life...but is the *beginning* of something... life for a reason! And eternity itself begins now for those who are in Christ!...on earth, as it is heaven. And someday even dying... for many, the hardest part of it all... will be abolished too. As Paul told the Corinthians elsewhere, death has truly lost its sting. :)

And what was death's sting? Paul tells us that: *The sting of death is sin...* Stop for a moment and notice that Sin is singular... not sins, but Sin. That's because there is a difference between Sin and sins that really matters. Sin refers to our inner state of being, our core identity, when we are separated from God. It's like the root and trunk of a tree growing within us... and sins plural are the outward branches and fruit of that tree... our words and actions that reveal the source they come from. Like Jesus said, you know a tree... and a person... by its fruit. So... *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:56-57 NRSV)* We can indeed rejoice...

...Because Jesus' resurrection changed Sin, (so) our experience of Sin can change. How did Jesus' resurrection change Sin? As Tony said earlier... by initiating a new creation... *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV) ... including you and me! The first Christians understood exactly what Paul meant... the old life, the old covenant, our old sin-enslaved selves DIED and were BURIED with Christ... and when He rose changed, so did we. Paul explained it to the Roman believers this way:

Your old sin-loving nature was buried with him by baptism when he died (baptism is an outward physical symbol of this inner spiritual reality); and when God the Father, with glorious power, brought him back to life again, you were (raised up with Him) given his wonderful new life to enjoy. (Romans 6:4-5 TLB)

So, if this is true, the question remains: Why are we... and most Christians... living anything BUT resurrected lives? One reason is that we have not been taught just how radical our transformation in Christ really is... and just how changed we truly are. We are told that even after we give our lives to Christ, we remain sinners. Yet, nowhere in the New Testament is a Christian called a sinner. NOWHERE! We are called saints, holy ones... because when Christ comes to live His life in us, the old tree of Sin is torn up by the roots... and His tree of life is planted within us which will bear the fruit of the Spirit as we nurture its growth in love! Our very nature is changed... our identity is made completely new! We are set free from the power of sin and death... we are no longer Sin's slaves, powerless to do anything but sinful behavior. We are now joined as one with Christ through the Holy Spirit... free to live empowered by His life. Can we still sin? Of course. But we don't have to... and why would we want to?

Listen again to Paul's radical proclamation in the passage we read earlier, *For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin (singular) who knew no sin, so that in him we might become (can be becoming) the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21 NRSV)*. Jesus has forever changed our experience with sin. Jesus became our sin and destroyed its power... so that in Him, we can become His righteousness! As Christ IS, so are we in THIS world! We begin to live our resurrected lives NOW... even as we wait for the final transformation of our bodies.

This does not mean, of course, that we will not occasionally commit sins. It's like moving into a completely renovated home that is still in the same old neighborhood... our core identity has been changed spiritually... but we can still be tempted by the old patterns of life in the old neighborhood.

So, we nurture the new life planted in us... so that His life will put down deep roots... and we cooperate with His grace in renewing our minds so we grow to think more and more like He does... in renewing our hearts, so that we grow more and more to feel and desire what He does... in renewing our wills, so that we grow more and more free to choose Life rather than Death... and to enjoy the victory we already have in Christ over both death and Sin.

And the news gets even better! Because Jesus' resurrection changed Relationship, our experience of relationship can change as well. And this is directly related to what Jo Ann was just saying about our relationship with sin being changed... because it is sin that has separated us from God and each other.

This started way back in the Garden, with the first man and the first woman. When they chose sin, they turned against each other... "he did it!" "she made me!". They felt naked and ashamed before God and each other. And as we read the biblical story, we see that over the coming generations every relationship was soured by sin--until sin had separated us all from each other... and, most significantly, from the One who created us in love and still longed to be one with us in love. And that's why Jesus came, died, and rose again....to bring God and humans together in intimate, loving union.. He prayed on the night before his crucifixion that we would be ONE with each other as he was one with the Father. He was raised from the dead so that our sin-soaked separation could end and we could be reconciled.

To reconcile means “to bring back together.” That’s why that passage from II Corinthians 5 we read earlier says that *in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us* (v. 19). Not only our own relationships changed because of Christ... but our mission is as well. Paul announced that *we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us* (II Cor. 5:20, NRSV). It is part of every Christian’s joy to be ambassadors of this good news to the world... to announce and illustrate in our own lives that the “dividing wall of hostility” has been broken down... that God is creating in his Church a new people on the earth... from every tribe and every tongue... to offer reconciliation to the whole world... so they, too, can experience it in its fullness.

But we know that this is not yet the experience of most. We still feel our separation from others... and right now we may feel that more acutely than most times, when we are isolated from each other, except through a screen. We may feel lonely, ignored, misunderstood, weird, or irrelevant.... maybe even to God. And, to be honest, the Church has often made this sense of separation worse, not better... the Church has not always been, in practice, an agent of reconciliation. But there is hope. I was in Corinth a few weeks ago. It may have been the most difficult place in the ancient world to try to live as one body, and they struggled with it, as we do. But in Christ they were reconciled... and they carried that message of reconciliation into and beyond that very needy, broken city... because it was and is the good news that changes all relationships. And so it is our message and desire too... that we, too, may experience Relationship differently because of Christ....and show our own world what a difference it makes! Maybe this extremely odd time in our lives gives us all an opportunity to reboot and live this out more fully!

And the good news only continues... especially as we live through this time when our usual reality has been greatly altered... Because Jesus’ resurrection changed reality itself, our experience of reality can change.

So, what is reality, anyway? Hmmm... that’s a HUGE question for both theologians and scientists alike. For the sake of simplicity, let’s just say that reality is what can be commonly observed and verified... things which can be perceived and experienced with the senses. And let’s also notice that objective reality can be subjectively interpreted... There is the “thing” itself, and then there are the different meanings that different people attach to that thing... because we see from where we stand.

For example, everyone is now sharing the experience of the same virus loose in the world... but there are as many different perceptions/understandings of that experience as there are people in the world!

Some believe that God sent the virus as some kind of wake-up call or punishment... some believe that climate change may be the culprit... and others believe that things like this just happen because it’s the nature of viruses to mutate... some worry that it was done for evil purposes. There are some who think this is the most wonderful time of rest and Sabbath, while others... especially those who are not financially secure or who have young children... are experiencing this as a frightening or frustrating time. But, as Tony mentioned earlier, there is one interpretation of reality that seems to be shared by multitudes of people... the hope that things will just go back to “normal” when this is over... which also means different things for different people!

Yet, if Jesus' resurrection has shown us anything... it is that for His people... everything has already been reset to its true normal... Resurrection has always been the reality that God intended to be the "normal Christian life." Hopefully, sooner rather than later, this virus WILL die out... or a vaccine will be developed to control it.

That will happen... and the lived reality of the world will change as a result... some will try to reconstruct the OLD normal... and some will try to reconstruct a NEW normal. But here's the thing for us... nothing has changed our TRUE normal since the moment Jesus walked out of that tomb! Easter was not about recreating the first seven days of Creation... Easter was the first day of the new Creation... the 8th day, the early Christians called it... and they changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday to reflect this changed reality!

Jesus was not raised to new life so He could go back to living an old life! The Risen Christ did not invite his first disciples to follow Him backward... but forward... into the New Creation which had come into the world... and would continue to spread, like yeast through dough... until the whole earth is covered in the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea!

This is a reason that the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection insist that He was not only spiritually real... but also physically real:

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1 MSG)

These first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection are adamant! This is not a fantasy we imagined in our grief... or a story we made up... this really happened! And because it happened... reality as we know it has been completely changed! YES... there IS a reality beyond our physical senses... as real, or even more real, than anything we have ever known before! In this transformed reality... the dead DO live again... the powers that held us captive ARE destroyed... and the impossible CAN happen at any time! And we CAN know this with confidence... through both our physical senses... and our newly-given spiritual senses... which forever alter our limited human understandings of everything... especially each other... As Paul encourages: *...we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! (2 Corinthians 5:16 MSG)*

Jesus' resurrection has utterly changed reality... and our experience of reality can change, too... as we LOOK AT IT... the unchanging resurrection reality present in the midst of every changing circumstance of our lives...

We've used A LOT of Scripture in this message...did you notice? :) That's because what we're talking about here is core to our faith...and still controversial in some circles. And so we want you to be assured that we're not making this up... that this is what Jesus and the apostles said, what the early church believed, and what has been true all along. His resurrection changes everything...including us! :)

Our response of loving faith to that change is to be God's partner.. There's a temptation to regard Jesus' resurrection as the end rather than the beginning, but Paul told the Corinthians that Christ was the "firstfruits" of the resurrection...and we follow after. What happened to him is what happens to us...if we choose. And so the invitation today is to choose... to respond in loving surrender to what God has already done for you, in love, with love, and for love... and allow these changes to be true in you.

Today we have given you this encouraging foundation of truth. In the coming week we'll talk about how this happens in very practical terms... how Jesus honored his friends ... because we haven't laid aside our annual theme in all of this... as he came alongside his friends in those weeks after the resurrection to console, to clarify, to commission, to challenge, and to commune with them, so that when his Spirit came on Pentecost, they were ready to be changed... and world-changers. :) And so can we!

Closing prayer (Feel free to pray this prayer out loud, wherever you are...)

Free Indeed

You did a marvel, Lord Jesus Christ,
and make me feel beside myself in surprise.
My spirit glistens with Your rising.
I smile and smile with You,
I am drowning in the laughter of Your friends.

You have won, Lord, we know You have won!
You have defeated all the worst that we could do,
each alone and all together.
You crushed the power of darkness and of death
to walk peacefully again in our flesh,
now and forever.

Come to me, great Lord of Life,
as You come to all Your friends.
Send me to console those around me who hurt.
Come, and send Your friends into this daily world
to labor full of hope for the Reign of God.

Heavenly Father and God of mercy,
I no longer look for Jesus among the dead,
for He is alive and has become the Lord of life.
From the tomb of death You raise me with Him
and renew Your gift of life within me.

Increase in my mind and in my heart
the risen life I share with Jesus
and help me to grow as Your servant,
from this day into eternity. Amen.

-- Joseph Tetlow