

## RESURRECTION: CHANGED!

There was not the slightest doubt in the mind of the apostle Paul concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He knew – he really KNEW! – that Jesus had been raised from the dead. What was his proof? The risen Christ had appeared to him on the road to Damascus, just as surely as he had appeared to Mary, to Peter, to the disciples, to hundreds of believers in the days after the resurrection took place. Paul knew, of course, that the Scriptures also told about the resurrection. When Scripture and personal experience coincide, the witness is so powerful that it cannot be shaken. That's why I love to read what Paul says about the resurrection of Jesus and the implications that event has for us. His logic is so marvelous that very little comment is needed. Listen as Paul responds to some of the believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:12ff):

*If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? (The thought absolutely shocked Paul.) If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, Christ is not raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people. (How true! What would be the point of embracing a faith, a hope, that ends as soon as we die?)*

Verse 20 opens with such an important truth, a truth that says, "Don't worry; the above is only speculation": **BUT CHRIST HAS INDEED BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD, THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP.** Take a deep breath with me; Jesus is alive!

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Knowing that the women would be coming to the tomb early on the first day of the week, God stationed angels there to handle the situation. First of all, they rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. The women would have a hard time believing that the tomb was empty if they could not look inside. Suddenly, there they were, coming with their spices. They were going to see to it that the body of their precious Lord Jesus was properly prepared for burial. (Did you ever wonder what became of the spices? God knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts; the women will have their reward. Nothing done for Jesus is ever wasted.)

What a shock they got when they saw at the tomb two men in shiny white clothes! *"Don't be afraid," they said. "You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Come and see the place where they laid him. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'"*

The tomb was indeed empty! What a message they had to deliver! They also had questions: What would he look like? What would he be wearing? His clothing had been distributed at the cross and his grave clothes were in the tomb. Whatever had happened to Jesus, it was different from what happened to Lazarus. They had been at the cemetery a few weeks earlier when Jesus called his friend out of the tomb. When Lazarus came out, his hands and feet were wrapped in strips of linen, and there was a cloth around his face. Jesus had left his linen strips in the tomb, as well as the burial cloth that had been around his head. Who had taken the time to fold that cloth and lay it separate from the linens? Above all, they wondered, would they know him and would he know them?

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Paul anticipated that the Corinthian believers would have similar questions and he answered them before they were expressed: *Someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body ... So it will be at the resurrection of the body. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body ... Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*

I grew up around seeds, as my father always had a productive garden wherever we lived. The soft, plump peas and kernels of corn that we ate for supper bore a resemblance to the hard, wrinkled seeds that we had sown, but they were different as well. Paul says that human bodies are sown (buried) perishable, dishonorable, weak and natural and will be raised (resurrected) imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. The resurrected body sounds better, doesn't it? Necessary, too, if we are to inherit the spiritual, imperishable kingdom of God.

We know that our resurrection bodies will be different from those we have now, but how different? Some of the seeds Dad planted had no resemblance at all to what we were eating: radishes and beets, for example. Was Jesus recognizable after his resurrection?

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Mary Magdalene stood outside the empty tomb weeping early on that first day of the week. The angels asked her why she was crying, and she said, *"They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."* At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. *"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."* Jesus said to her, *"Mary."* And then she knew – even as she was known. Of course it was Jesus!

That same day two of the believers were walking from Jerusalem to their home in suburban Emmaus. One of them was a man named Cleopas and the other, I imagine, was his wife. *They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. Cleopas asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked.*

To me, this is one of the funniest stories in the Bible. I don't know how Jesus kept a straight face as he asked "What things?" and then stood there listening to their answer. *"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."*

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with*

*Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. How they loved that Bible study!*

Can you imagine Jesus pretending? He does some acting in this story. Listen: *As they approached [Emmaus], Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. A meal was quickly prepared and the three of them sat down to eat. [At the table Jesus] took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.*

To be fair to these two people, we must remember that they were "kept" from recognizing Jesus and then their eyes were "opened." They themselves thought they should have recognized him by the quality of the Bible study he gave them. In any event, both agreed about what to do next. They had to return to Jerusalem. The seven miles seemed like nothing to them, so excited they were. There was excitement also in the room where the Eleven and others were assembled. They told the newcomers, *"It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."* Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Besides being in awe over the incident, I picture the Emmaus disciples erupting into gales of laughter from time to time when they recalled their telling Jesus what had happened in Jerusalem recently! Yes, eventually they – as well as Mary Magdalene and the others – did recognize Jesus, but more than facial features, it was what he said or a familiar gesture that revealed his identity to them.

But Jesus was certainly not the same as he had been before his death. It was different with Lazarus; after he had been freed from his grave clothes and dressed in his regular clothing, he was the same as always. On the other hand, Jesus now had the ability to appear and disappear. His body had substance and his mind functioned – he could be felt, he could eat, he could talk, he knew them – but he could also enter a locked room right through the walls! And forty days after he rose, his resurrected body lifted up from the presence of the assembled believers and ascended into heaven! Jesus was still Jesus, but he had been changed, really changed!

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After Paul told the Corinthian believers that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, he gave them some good news: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* Paul gave the Thessalonian believers further details about this event: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who sleep in him ... The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:14,16,17).* I am so glad that I will be changed! Literally, I will be able to walk and talk again. Many others will be doing so for the first time. What a day that will be!

These verses, coupled with the stories and passages addressed in this essay, touch on some questions that many of us have, such as:

– Where are the believers that have died? They are with Jesus. When the time comes for the trumpet to sound, Jesus will bring them with him to receive their resurrected bodies.

– Is it possible to escape death? Yes! Believers who are alive on earth when the trumpet sounds will not have to experience death. Change, yes; but death, no.

– Will Heaven be fun or constantly sober? I think Jesus was having a good time in his resurrected body, like when he prepared a surprise breakfast for his disciples on the seashore, and I'm sure we will, too! Just think of the day when Jesus comes to the air. If we are among those who have fallen asleep, all of us will come with him to receive our changed bodies. And if we are among those who have not died, imagine how it will feel to suddenly be strong, well and weightless, to lift up through the air, beyond the clouds, in the company of people from all the ages, to the place Jesus has prepared for us! Either way, it's an exhilarating thought! No amusement park ride comes close to duplicating the thrill we will have that day. David said in Psalm 16:11: *You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.* I agree with David. Heaven will be so much fun!

– Can we know when Jesus will return and our bodies will be changed or resurrected? No, we can't and Paul tells us not to try to figure it out. Peter adds more; he says that scoffers will come along saying, *"Where is this 'coming' he promised? Everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."* Peter corrects their faulty logic and then tells the believers, *"Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:4,8,9). Here also is the amazing answer to another question: With the world in such a dreadful state, why doesn't God put an end to things now? How deep is the love of God for the people he created! He is waiting for more people to turn to him in repentance.

In Tucson, Arizona I met a woman who joyfully lived her life in anticipation of our Lord's return. She said every time she heard a strange noise she thought, "Could that be the Lord?" I can still picture her with her head cocked, her hand cupping an ear as she spoke. How different from setting a date!

– Will unbelievers also be resurrected? The Bible states that there will be a resurrection that leads to a second death, but I will leave that topic for others to investigate and write about. It is enough for me to know that God reaches out to everybody in love, as Peter stated above. Why some people resist that love, I can't imagine.

– Does it matter how we dispose of the bodies of our loved ones? There are only examples of burying bodies in the Bible, no specific instructions that I know of. I have thought about this subject for a long time, becoming more open-minded as I aged. Bodies in the graves are meant to decay, to return to dust. And many, many bodies do not get buried: those lost at sea, for example, or those burned up in fires. If our Lord will give new resurrection bodies to the believers whose bodies have been totally destroyed (and he certainly will!), why do we try to preserve bodies?

Uncle Walter called me aside in the funeral parlor where my Aunt Clara's body lay in an open casket and showed me one of its special features: a sealed, waterproof tube that identified the body "in case a flood washed the coffins out of their graves." That can happen! We didn't think Uncle Walter would live long without the company of his beloved wife, but he fooled us! When he died, he had been in a nursing home for several years, and his money had been used up. It was the policy of the Home to cremate the bodies of those whose money was gone. I stood by the grave site, noticed the container that held the remains of my uncle's body, thought of my aunt's body in the adjacent grave and wondered: which burial – which "planting" – seemed more "natural"? But then, it doesn't really matter what I think, does it? There is no right or wrong involved, just preference. Both Aunt Clara and Uncle Walter will have new bodies when the trumpet sounds! That's what matters.

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To conclude this essay, I want to repeat the verse on which our hope is built: *CHRIST HAS INDEED BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD, THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP*

(1 Corinthians 15:20). Firstfruits is a word full of promise. It is used in the Bible to describe the first harvested fruits, vegetables or grain, all of which belonged to God; more of the same (for the people's use) would be sure to follow. Paul goes on to explain how this word applies to resurrection in the verses immediately following the above:

*For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a human being. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But in this order: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come ... (1 Corinthians 15:21-24).* The absolute certainty of Christ's resurrection is the promise that there will be a rich harvest of bodies resurrected, including ours!

Jesus fought a cruel battle on the cross against all the forces of evil in this world, and he won! The resurrection was proof of his victory, like a victory salute. Only now am I seeing that there may be a large scale celebration in store for us (like a victory parade!) with Jesus Christ as the guest of honor. For many years the last part of 1 Corinthians 15 (verse 51 to the end) has stirred my soul. Verses 55-57 are the words to a song I wrote a long time ago – in march tempo – and titled Victory Song. Here it is, combined with the stirring words about firstfruits:

I Corinthians 15:20, 55-57 (NIV)      Victory Song      Verna Mae Kwiatkowski

But Christ has in-deed been - raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fall-en a-sleep. Christ has in-deed been - raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fall-en a-sleep. Where, O death, is your vic-tor-y? Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O death, is your vic-tor-y? And where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the vic-tor-y through our Lord Je- sus Christ.

As I take the time to savor this song, I hear it being played by an excellent high school marching band. There are parts for every band instrument, including a large percussion section. They play to the end and then repeat the last sentence before starting again. Beautiful!

When would this parade take place? After God's trumpet sounds; after we have our resurrection bodies and are clothed with the imperishable, with immortality (our parade "uniform").

The banner at the head of the parade says in bold letters:

DEATH HAS BEEN SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY!

And then comes the band and the singers. What music! What harmony! Not a single misstep; not a sour note anywhere. All of God's people are playing and singing, happy as can be. And what are the words to our song? The ones Paul wrote with his overflowing heart (and that I set to music):

*Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.  
But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I would like to play a drum in that parade. In high school I had a chance to take drum lessons for the marching band, but Mom said no. She was afraid I might have to march in the rain and get sick as a result. She may have been right, for I was not a healthy child. But my resurrection body will never be sick! Never!!

Paul thought the wonderful subject of our future resurrection and change should encourage and strengthen us in this life, should help us persevere, endure. Listen to 1 Corinthians 15:58, the last verse in this wonderful chapter:

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Amen!

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