

EASTER SUNDAY

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AND I LOOK FOR THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

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(Throughout this document I have placed in parentheses after a thought those who deserve credit for that thought, including those times I have not quoted them directly. My sources were N.T. Wright's books, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Surprised by Hope*; Jeffrey Gibbs' *Concordia Journal* article October 2001, *Regaining Biblical Hope: Restoring the Prominence of the Parousia*, and his sermon notes on Luke 24:1-12 in *Lectionary at Lunch* on iTunes; and Glenn Nielsen's article in *Lutheran Forum* Winter 2012, *Preparing to Die*.)

Luke 24:1-12

The Resurrection

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. **2** And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, **3** but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. **4** While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. **5** And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? **6** He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, **7** that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." **8** And they remembered his words, **9** and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. **10** Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, **11** but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. **12** But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

“...but when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.” (Luke 24:3)

You perhaps had this experience when you were a child. Your father or mother would send you to look for something. Perhaps they were working on some project around the home, repairing something or planting a garden. And they would send you to look for something they needed: a hammer, a screwdriver, a wrench. “It’s in the toolbox,” they’d say, or “It’s in the downstairs closet. “It’s in the third drawer from the bottom.” Then after a few minutes, you would return and say, “I can’t find it.” And they might have answered, “Were you really looking?” Or, “You must have been looking in the wrong place.”

When the women went looking for Jesus’ body, they did not find it. And while they were perplexed about this, two men in gleaming clothes, that is, two angels spoke to them with a parental tone. “Were you really looking? You must have been looking in the wrong place. Why did you look for the Living One among dead people? Why? Why were these women looking in the wrong place? Because they were not looking for Jesus in His resurrection body. Not while carrying burial spices. They were looking for a dead body on which to place the spices so that Jesus’ dead body wouldn’t smell bad.

No one expected Jesus to rise. So, when the women were reminded by the angels of Jesus’ own words, which he repeated numerous times, that He would rise, and when the women reported to the other disciples all that the angels had said, the other disciples “did not believe them.” Because not one of Jesus’ followers had been looking for the resurrection of Jesus’ body. “No one expected this to happen. Because death is irreversible.” (Gibbs and Wright)

In other words, this wasn’t a story they made up in order to satisfy disappointed expectations.

On the other hand, our American culture tries to soften the idea of death by making up stories. Zombie stories. Vampire stories. Ghost stories. They can be fun. Is that all they are? Aren't these stories a safe, socially acceptable, painless way for our culture to think and talk about death? So many in this culture see death as final; they believe there's nothing after. This culture is not looking for the resurrection of the dead, so it tries to soften the idea of death. So, people have bucket lists. Or, they put a good spin on death by saying, "He was in so much pain that death was a blessing." (Nielsen) Funeral homes are relied on to soften the idea of death so that the grieving can say: "That's not really her. It's just her body. She's really in heaven." (Gibbs)

Actually, technically, that sounds right. After all, the soul is the immortal part of us, isn't it? Well, that's something we need to think about some more...

Well, if that's our hope: dying and going to heaven, escaping this vale of tears, and receiving our mansion in heaven. Then, are we *looking* for the return of Jesus? Are we *looking* for the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day?

A huge *find* made the news again recently. It raised the question, "Why did it take so long for it to be *found*?" The find was two cases of a particular beverage found at the bottom of the world in Antarctica in the hut of the great explorer Ernest Shackleton. Shackleton purchased these cases of beverage in 1907, the year of his first expedition to the Antarctic. He left them there. Archaeologists and anthropologists found them in 2006. Why did it take so long?

As a parent would put it, "Were they really looking?" Or, since these cases weren't actually in the hut but underneath it, and the only way to get to them was by crawling under the hut in a space only 18 inches high, had they all along been looking in the wrong place? And are we really looking for the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead when our hope is on dying and going to heaven? Or, are we looking for the resurrection of the dead in the wrong place?

Whenever grief is addressed by God, He directs our hope not to dying and going to heaven but to the resurrection of the dead:

- the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1Kings 17:22),
- the raising of the son of the Shunammite woman (2Kings 4:32-35),
- the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:14-15);
- the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:54-55);
- the grieving Thessalonians directed by Paul to remember that “the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first” (1Thessalonians 4:13-18);
- and the raising of Lazarus (John 11)

The raising of Lazarus is also where we are reminded that if our hope looks for resurrection bodies in heaven then we are looking in the wrong place. As Martha said of her brother Lazarus, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection *at the last day.*” (John 11:24) (Nielsen)

Looking for resurrection bodies in heaven is the wrong place, because it robs us of hope. It causes us to raise questions we need never worry about. Causes us to raise questions because the Bible says so very little about life in heaven other than to tell us that our souls will be at rest there from our labors (Revelation 14:13). And thus that hope is often built only on speculation.

The resurrection of the dead builds your hope on God's Word. It's the resurrection of the dead that tells us life in the age to come is a physical life with taste buds and fingertips, vocal cords and eardrums, with eyes that see and with noses that smell the aroma of a supper of fish. “They gave Jesus a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate in front of them.” Luke 24:42. (Nielsen) It's the resurrection of the dead that tells us that we will recognize each other in the life of the age to come.

After Jesus rose from the dead the Bible tells us the disciples recognized Him by His voice, in the breaking of the bread, and by His scars. It's the resurrection of the dead that tells us that our work in this life will find its way into the life of the age to come.

Every glimpse of God's reign already breaking into this old creation, every act of kindness, every work of art inspired by God's love, every prayer, every Spirit-led teaching will be there in God's new creation.

We are told this as the conclusion to the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15: "So you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58) Your work will not be wasted. (Nielsen, Wright)

The early church shifted its day of rest not to the day of the week Jesus went up into heaven but to the day of His resurrection. (Nielsen) Because it's His resurrection from the dead that tells us God accepted His sacrifice for us as sufficient. It was God's plan that Jesus be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified; that Jesus say to sin, Satan, hell, and death, "Bring it! Do your worst!" Not just any death but crucifixion. Not just your average kind of hell. The worst hell could dish out.

And then God reversed it. He undid it. (Gibbs, Wright) Assuring us that the worst they can do to us, or that we can do to ourselves, God will reverse. He will recreate these bodies to never die again, just like He did with Jesus' wounded body. (God did not give a Him a new body but recreated His wounded, crucified body.) And He will recreate this creation, will redeem it (Romans 8:22-23), He will reverse everything when His Son returns. (Gibbs, Wright) Therefore, with hope we confess: "And I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."

Amen!