

Sermon Preached April 12, 2009
Easter Sunday
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Gracious God, Let your Kingdom come on Earth as in Heaven. Amen.

One day, following the resurrection, the disciples were still somewhat scattered around Jerusalem and the surrounding villages. John finds Peter and runs up to him. Excitedly he says, "Peter, Peter! I've got some good news and some bad news." Peter grabs hold of John and calms him down. "Take it easy, John. What is it? What's the good news?" John says, "The good news is Christ is risen." Peter says, "That's great! But, what's the bad news?" John, looking around, says, "He's really steamed about last Friday."

Now, you all have probably heard an Easter sermon or two in your day, and you probably all have some idea of what I'm going to say. Either I'll say, "the whole point of the resurrection is for us to believe in Jesus so that one day we can all go to heaven and be with him." The trouble is, I'm not sure what the connection between a bodily resurrection on earth is with a disembodied existence in heaven. I mean, why not just believe in Jesus before he died? Do you need miracle in order to believe?

He had plenty of them, including the raising of the dead. In fact, if believing in Jesus is the only point of the gospel message, why did he do so much teaching? And what possible purpose does a resurrection serve?

The other sermon direction I might take is something along the lines of “the whole point of the resurrection is as a teaching story. It is a metaphor to show us how our lives too can be changed and resurrected in new and healthier ways if we simply do what Jesus taught.” But if Jesus’ primary purpose was as a moral teacher, then the death and resurrection were merely an odd end to a nice young man. They serve no purpose. If Jesus was here just to teach us right living, he didn’t need to be the Son of God to do that, and he certainly didn’t need to resurrect from the dead. What possible purpose does a resurrection serve?

Now I realize that both of these examples are simplistic, but they underscore the general direction that many Christians take on Jesus and his work on earth. Either we are focused on his death and resurrection so we can believe in him and go to heaven. OR we are focused on Jesus’ teachings during his life and largely ignore his death, resurrection, and our afterlife, because it has nothing to offer for how we can live in this life.

I’d like to suggest a different direction which incorporates the entirety of his teaching, his death, his resurrection, and life after death. Let’s start by asking the question, “Why did Jesus come to earth in the first place?” I think the best place to answer that is to start at the beginning. At the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, at the beginning of the gospel of Mark, it says, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” [Mk

1:14]. In short, the good news, the message that Jesus is trying to get out there to the people is that the Kingdom of God is near. The good news isn't "believe in me or you are going to hell." The good news isn't "Just be nice to people." The good news is that despite the mess that our world is in, God wants to help us clean it up. God wants a world where there is no hunger, oppression, evil, sickness, or death. The Almighty wants God's Kingdom, God's community, to prevail on earth.

"On earth?!" you might ask, "I thought the Kingdom of God is up in heaven." Actually, not exactly. God lives and reigns in heaven, so certainly, the Kingdom of God is there. But what Jesus was talking about is the Kingdom of God coming to earth. When asked to offer a prayer, Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The Kingdom is coming down here. Over and over again, scripture talks about the earth being transformed, and it talks about the rest of us being transformed. Jesus had a bodily resurrection because God loves and cares for the creation. It wasn't Jesus' soul or a ghost that was walking around after his death. He was a physical body. God loves our physicality. It is a gift. That gift will continue in our life after death.

In the fullness of time, the Kingdom of God will come, and we will all be resurrected. Jesus' was simply the first resurrection, but all the rest of us will

resurrect as well. Paul writes, “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” [1 Cor 15:51-52].

What?! I won't just go hang out with Aunt Martha in heaven, floating around with my wings and harp? No, you won't. The bible never says you will. The Bible is really clear that the goal of creation, and that includes us, is that after death we will be resurrected. We will be made physical again. We will have corporeal bodies. There will be a new heavens and a new earth, where God's law of love will prevail. This will happen at the second coming.

Well, then, where is Aunt Martha now? The answer is, in heaven. Those who have died rest with God as they wait for the fulfillment of the Kingdom. They are happy and basking in God's love, but they know that their ultimate destination is the Kingdom of God on earth.

Is this a new belief? Where did this come from? Actually, this is a very ancient belief, one that all Christians believed until about the middle ages. At that point Christians became stuck on the concept of heaven only and stopped believing in the resurrection of humanity. They looked at Jesus' resurrection as a one time deal. In reality, the reason Jesus rose from the dead was as a down payment on the fact that all of us, you and me, will one day rise again, in new

and perfected bodies. Jesus rising from the dead was the beginning of this new Kingdom. It is a promise that death has been defeated and the Kingdom has already started.

We live in a world where half of the population lives on less than \$2.50 a day.¹ Over 25,000 children die every day around the world, mostly due to poverty, hunger, and easily preventable diseases and illnesses.² Around the world corruption pervades many organizations and governments. The world-wide economy is shaky and many are suffering. The earth is overused, polluted, and its resources are used unsustainably.³ All of us have our own personal pains and sorrows and inequities to deal with. Unless Jesus has something to say about all this, the whole Christianity-thing is useless. If all Jesus can say is “believe in me and wait it out, until I will whisk you away from this mess,” then he is useless to us now, and awfully callous to God’s creation. On the other hand, if all Jesus can say is, “be a good person,” we might as well all lie down and take our position as doormats. Since when is “being nice” able to conquer evil?

Jesus’ teachings were to tell us what Kingdom living looks like, so we can start living it today. We don’t wait till the second coming to start enjoying the fruits of the Kingdom, like loving God and neighbor. We live that now. His resurrection was to inaugurate the Kingdom. It has already started. So while evil

¹ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

² <http://www.globalissues.org/article/715/today-over-25000-children-died-around-the-world>

³ http://www.panda.org/about_our_earth/all_publications/living_planet_report/

and death seem to have the upper hand in our world today, Jesus' resurrection is a sign that although the current battle is lost, the war has already been won.

Easter Day is joyful, not because now we can sit back and wait for Jesus to take us to heaven, or because we can smell pretty flowers and think about what nice people we are. The Resurrection has power and joy because evil and death are not the last word! What amazing news this is! It is a call to action to us to feed the hungry, seek justice, forgive and be forgiven, to stand up to evil, and to love one another. But we can't do it alone, so God is with us as we continue the Kingdom work, until its final fulfillment, the resurrection of all. Evil and death have been overcome in the Kingdom of God. Alleluia!

Amen.⁴

⁴ Much of the theology of this sermon comes from N.T. Wright's book, Surprised by Hope, 2008.