

April 16, 2006 – Easter Sunday
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

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“What Difference Does The Resurrection Make” (Based on a sermon by another Nazarene Pastor)
Rom 1:4 NLT

And Jesus Christ our Lord was shown to be the Son of God when God powerfully raised him from the dead by means of the Holy Spirit.

Before I made a serious commitment to Christ and decided to be one His followers, I wasn't a very good Christian. I didn't go to church except maybe on Easter. As a matter of fact, when I would leave the Easter service the pastor would say, “Since I wouldn't be seeing you let me be the first to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New year.” He asked me one time why I didn't come to church and I said, “well, every time I come you speak on the same theme, the Resurrection.”

Of course of just joking, but perhaps we don't talk about the Resurrection much...except at Easter. Now I was told that this is a true story: A singing group called The Resurrection was scheduled to sing at a church. When a big snowstorm postponed the performance, the pastor fixed the outside sign to read, The Resurrection is postponed.

Why would that be a terrible thing ...if the Resurrection was postponed or didn't happen at all? Our text says today that Jesus was proven to be God when He was raised from the dead.

You probably do not remember the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. During his day he was as powerful a man as there was on earth. A Russian Communist leader he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda (which by the way means truth), and was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today. There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!" (let's try that) You see that makes all the difference. Christ is risen vindicates the truth of Christianity.

I heard a story by a Nazarene pastor who said:

“It was not in the Christian home in which I was raised, not an evangelical Christian college, not even at the Nazarene Theological Seminary that I made the greatest theological discovery of my life, but in the home of one of the most intelligent atheistic secularists to whom I have ever talked. He was the CEO of Martin Marietta Company’s Vandenberg Air Force Division, prime contractors for the Titan Intercontinental Ballistic Missile System. He informed me, he had never attended a worship service of anybody’s church.

Having asked why someone like me would want to waste his life in religious work, I shared my testimony. I did more than that: I gave him an overview of the life of Christ. When I got to the Resurrection, he stopped me and said, “Wait a minute: run that by me again.” “Run what by you again?” I asked. I’d been talking non-stop for about 20 minutes.

“Did you say something about this Jesus coming back to life again? Run that part by me again.” So I did. I told him that on the third day after Christ’s crucifixion, He rose bodily from the grave, appeared to over 500 believers on at least a dozen different occasions, talked with them, showed them His pierced hands and side, ate with them, and then in full view of many of them ascended into heaven.

“Now, pastor, I don’t doubt your sincerity, but are you sure you’ve got your facts straight?”

“It just so happens,” I replied as I pulled out my pocket New Testament, “that I have with me the original authentic account.” He fixed his eyes on me intently as I read Matthew 28 in its entirety, Matthew’s narrative of the resurrection.

“That’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Although I’ve never been to church, I’ve been surrounded by believers all of my life. I’ve watched that Billy Graham guy many times on television.

Then leaning forward he asked, “Given the fact that I’ve been surrounded by all these Christians all my life, many who have tried to convert me, and have heard your super-star evangelist preach many times, how is it that tonight is the first time I’ve ever heard that you people believe your Jesus not only died but came back to life again? Why aren’t you talking about that? Why aren’t you shouting it from the housetops?”

He got me! For I was a typical evangelical pastor, preaching long and intently on the cross and—except for Easter—rarely if ever speaking of the resurrection. That opened the door to a long and intense discussion of the resurrection, and how Jesus not only came back to life 2,000 years ago but continues to reveal Himself as alive to those who place their faith in Him.

As I was leaving, he took my hand in his and confessed, “Pastor, if what you’ve told me tonight is true, that at a point in time a human being died and came back to life again, and

had a way of making himself known as alive to people like yourself, I believe I would become the best missionary Santa Maria has ever seen!”

“I would to God,” I replied, “that you not only believed but you came to know Christ alive as I have and as millions across the centuries have. I do believe you would become the greatest missionary this town has ever seen, or whatever city you happened to be living in.”

I don’t know what happened to Chuck, for within a month or so, he was promoted to the head office in Denver and I never saw him again. But I know what happened to me. Sleep did not come easily that night, as I tossed and turned in my bed asking myself, “How is it that I could have been born into... a wonderful Christian home, received the finest Bible and theology education one could ever get, have read the NT through and through again many times, much of it in the original Greek, and had not seen that the sharp cutting edge of the gospel is not that somebody died, but that somebody was mightily raised from the dead by God?”

It took an atheistic secularist to see what is so good about the Good News. It is not that someone has died but that someone has been mightily raised by God from the dead. New Testament scholar C. Milo Connick says, “If God had not raised Jesus, we would never have heard about the cross, least of all from the disciples.” Given their Jewish way of thinking, the cross represented the end. All their Messianic hopes and dreams shattered in a thousand pieces at Golgotha.

It was only when God raised up Jesus bodily from the grave that the scales fell off their eyes, and like doubting Thomas they all with one accord confessed, “My Lord and my God.” Or as Paul put it in our text, “God has declared Jesus as Lord by the resurrection from the dead.”

What makes the Gospels ‘good news’ is that they do not end with death, but with the unprecedented story of a resurrection from the dead; a resurrection in which, unlike that of Lazarus, Jesus would never be subject to death again, but would remain alive forever more.

What Difference Did The Resurrection Make There and Then?

1. The Resurrection was not done in secret. Jesus’ resurrection was not done in a corner but was witnessed by over 500 believers in many different ways and places over a 40-day period of time. He appeared near the tomb, on the road, at a dinner table, beside the sea, and most often when the disciples were gathered together in the upper room. To show that He was no ghost, He ate bread and fish with them and invited them to touch Him.
2. The Resurrection was *the* topic of early preaching. Over half of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost was devoted to preaching the resurrection and that Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of the Father. Not only Peter’s sermon, but every sermon preached by Paul and the other apostles is first and foremost, resurrection preaching.

3. The Resurrection was such a revolutionary event that it gave us the most powerful and influential book in world history, our New Testament. If the story of Jesus had ended with a crucifixion—there were, after all, tens of thousands of people crucified on Roman crosses—there would have been no New Testament. It was only because the life of Jesus did not end with His crucifixion, but that He was raised up by God and continues to live in the world through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, that we have a New Testament.

4. The Resurrection caused a new day of worship. Jesus was a Jew. All His disciples were Jews. All those 3,000 converts on the Day of Pentecost were either Jews or converts to Judaism; that was why they were in Jerusalem, to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost. There's nothing more central in the Old Testament and the Jewish religion than Sabbath worship. Not only did Jesus worship on Saturday, but He never told His disciples to do anything different. Yet, from the Day of Pentecost on, we find early Christians worshipping on Sunday, a secular day on which, in that culture, everybody went back to work. Why? For two reasons: (1) God raised up Jesus on "the first day of the week," and (2), the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost which always fell on the first day of the week. The resurrection and the dawning of the Age of the Spirit were events of such enormous and historic significance that they called for a new day of worship! Likewise,

5. The Resurrection was the reason Holy Communion was celebrated on Sunday. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was observed not on Thursday, the day on which it was instituted, and not on Friday, the day Jesus died, but on Sunday, the Lord's Day. Why? Because in the early Church, holy communion not only recalled the sufferings and death of Jesus but most of all celebrated His resurrection. Notice the language of the Lord's Supper ritual. It is not "This was my body" but "This is my body which is broken for you." Present tense. The bread and wine (juice) represented the real presence of the living Christ with His Church. That's why in speaking of the Church, Paul most often describes it as "the body of Christ." It is that visible place, that gathering of believers, where the living Christ continues to make His presence felt alive and real even as we experience this very moment in this place.

6. The Resurrection was the theme of early Christian art. Professor Greg Athenos of North Park College outside Philadelphia spent a Sabbatical in Rome combing through some 23,000 copies of ancient Christian art, covering the first three centuries of the church. Much of it was taken off underground Roman catacomb walls where persecuted Christians met for worship. He was surprised to discover that not once did any pictorial representation of Christ show the image of a cross. Most often, Christian artists drew or painted pictures of Jesus holding a lamb in His arms or Jesus with outstretched hands following His resurrection. The cross was, after all, an ugly symbol of execution. It was not until the fourth century that the first cross appeared in Christian art. It originated not from Christians but from a pagan artist who wanted to make fun of Christians. So he sculpted a cross, in which the body that hung on it had the head of a pig. It was only then that Christians began to embrace the cross as their greatest and most important religious symbol. The absence of the cross in early Christian art is testimony to how resurrection-

centered those believers were. Perhaps that was the secret of the explosive growth of Christianity around the world during the first three centuries of the Church's existence.

7. The Resurrection was such a powerful force in early Christianity that it radically changed the content of their hope. No longer were these Jewish Christians looking for the ushering in of God's Messianic kingdom; now they were looking for the bodily return of the risen Christ. "This Jesus whom you have watched go up into heaven," the angels told those original witnesses to Jesus' ascension, "you will see return in like manner."

No wonder the whole world now dates everything to and from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, as the earliest apostles joyously proclaimed, "Is Lord and Christ by his resurrection from the dead." Which raises another important question:

What Difference Does the Resurrection Make Here and Now?

It makes all the difference in the world for at least three reasons.

1. The Resurrection vindicates (proves without a doubt) Jesus as Lord. Thirty years ago a pastor of the Atlanta First Church of the Nazarene preached from the pulpit that Jesus is Lord. Today another voice is heard in that pulpit. He does not preach Jesus but rather Mohammed as the true prophet of Allah whom we are to follow. In the major sociological changes that have occurred in that great city, what was once First Church of the Nazarene is now one of several Muslim temples in the city. So, who was right? The Muslim or was the pastor? How do we settle the issue of which is the true religion? I know of only one way to resolve that question. When Mohammed died, he stayed dead and millions make pilgrimages to Medina where his body lies buried today. But when Christians go to the Church of the Sepulchre, just outside the walled city of Jerusalem today, what do they find? An empty tomb!

2. The Resurrection gives me a sure hope for the future. I don't like to meditate on this fact but if Jesus does not come back soon, I have a sure date with the funeral home director. When that day comes I can tell you that I will not care not a bit about the stock market or who wins the next presidential election. There's only one thing I will care about and that is the One who died but who did not stay dead. Rather,

Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes,
He arose a victor o'er the dark domain,
And he lives forever with his saints to reign;
He arose, He arose, Hallelujah, Christ arose.

In that moment, all I'll care about is the one who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, yet will he live!"

3. The Resurrection gives me solid help for today. Death does not wait for the undertaker. It comes to us in many ways and forms: in the death of a child, a spouse, a parent, a loved one, in a divorce, in the loss of a job, in the failure of a business, a bankruptcy. But here

is the good news: for those who are in Christ, there is not a chapter that closes but that a new chapter begins to be written. No wonder the Apostle Paul exclaimed, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain!" For beyond every death is a resurrection, a new dimension of life. Resurrection gives hope, not only hope of life after death, but hope for this life. We have a life of meaning and purpose. And not matter what the circumstance we know that our risen Jesus is with us. In difficult times He may not give us an answer to why we have difficulties, but He will give us Himself.

Many years ago, and again recently at a Men's Retreat, I heard Dr. Tony Campolo tell a story I will never forget. Dr. Campolo is a great communicator, perhaps one of the best I've ever heard. He was born and raised in Philadelphia. When most of the white families in his neighborhood were moving out to the suburbs, his stayed. They stayed on in their Baptist Church as it changed from white to black. He still attends a Black church today.

Tony says that even though he preaches all over the country, he would rather preach in his home church than anywhere else. The people there really know how to worship. When you preach, they yell "Preach." And when you are really going, they help you out by saying, "Keep going." So different from white churches where they say "Stop." And the dear older ladies who sit down in front, they wave their white hankies in the air and say, "Well."

A unique custom that had evolved his home church is that every Good Friday, they have church all day long. They begin around 9:00 a.m., and have one service right after another until 9:00 or 10:00 at night, broken only with a covered-dish lunch and then dinner. Tony was scheduled as the next-to-last preacher at one such Good Friday preaching convention. He says, "The people yelled, 'Preach' and I preached. They shouted out, 'Keep going,' and I kept going. The dear ladies in the front row said, 'Well, well,' and I did so well that I wanted to take notes on myself."

Feeling good about how well he had done, he whispered to his senior pastor, who was to bring the last sermon of the day, "Well, pastor, do you think you can beat that?" The old African-American pastor stroked his chin for a moment and then whispered back, "You just watch."

And then he preached the greatest sermon Tony had ever heard. Its power was in its simplicity. At first, the old pastor said nothing. Just looked at his people until all conversation, all talking died down. You could hear a feather drop in the huge sanctuary. Then he whispered, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." Over and over again, he simply repeated, low and slow, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming."

Then after a while he said,

It's Friday: Mary's crying her eyes out 'cause
her baby Jesus is dead.
...but Sunday's coming.

It's Friday: The disciples are on the run,
like sheep without a shepherd.
...but Sunday's coming.
It's Friday: Pilate's strutting around 'cause
he thinks he's got all the power and the victory.
...but Sunday's coming.
It's Friday: Satan's doing a little jig saying,
"I control the whole world."
...but Sunday's coming.

After forty-five minutes, that old preacher was shouting out, "It's Friday!" And all the people were shouting back, "Sunday's coming!"

Wow! Wouldn't you like to have been there? Well, why don't we try that? I'll be the black pastor and you be the black congregation. Are you ready?

"It's Friday!"

"Sunday's coming." (Three times).

Beloved, I don't know why Fridays come tearing and ripping into our lives like a tornado. I don't know why health suddenly fails, marriages split up, children break parental hearts, careers are destroyed, jobs lost. I don't understand why these things happen even to the best and most conscientious believers. Jesus understands our Fridays. He's been there. He's been there with us on the cross.

I don't understand Fridays. But this I do know: because God raised up Jesus from the grave, Fridays do not last forever. Sunday's coming! It always comes to those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus, who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he die, yet shall he live!" Hallelujah! That's the good news!