

“Resurrection Life”

Romans 6.4; Matthew 5.48

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So what difference does Easter make? Jesus died on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven. Jesus rose from the dead so that ... *what?* What *difference* does the resurrection make in our life today?

To answer that question, I want to take you first to Romans 6.4: “We were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life.” There are two parts to that sentence. The first part has to do with *Christ’s death*. The second part has to do with his *resurrection*. Listen to it again. “We were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life.” What connects the two parts is *baptism*. What happens in baptism – what happened to Nick – is that spiritually, symbolically, we *die*. We die to our old life. We are raised to a new life, a new life in Christ. If we were Baptists, we would go down into the water, *all the way down*, our whole body *soaked* by both water and Spirit. In that moment when we are completely submerged, our old self dies, and our new life in Christ begins.

But is your life after you become a Christian *any different* than it was before? Do you follow Jesus perfectly from that point forward? Are you *free from sin*? If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you’ve probably realized: no, you *don’t* follow Jesus perfectly; no, you’re *not* free from sin ... as much as you wish it were otherwise. So did baptism make any *real difference* in your life? If our old self *died* and we’re living a *new life* in Christ ... then why does the new life look so much like the old?

Sometimes we think we just need to *try harder*. “Okay, God, I’ll be good, I promise.” We try *really hard* to be a “good Christian.” Then, when we screw up, we feel all the *more* guilty. We chastise ourselves, and re-double our efforts. We *think* we’re walking the Christian life, but what’s really going on is that we’re caught in a downward spiral in which we’re trying to do it all through *our own effort*. You’re reading along in the Sermon on the Mount, you’re listening to Jesus tell you what he expects of you, and you feel like you have to muster up the ability to do it all on your own. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder,’ but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or a sister will be subject to judgment.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I tell you that anyone who looks at another person lustfully has already committed adultery in their heart.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5.21-47) Jesus keeps upping the ante, raising the bar

higher and higher. Then you get to Matthew 5.48, the very last verse in that chapter, which says: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5.48) I gotta tell you: that verse nearly killed my Christianity, earlier in my life. I looked at that verse, and I looked at my life, and I found myself *woefully lacking*. I was painfully aware: I’ve got flaws, I’ve got bad habits, I struggle with temptation – *I’m not perfect*. I think anyone who’s *honest* with themselves would come to the same conclusion. I threw up my hands in despair and nearly gave up. I thought, “I can’t do this. I can’t do what Jesus is telling me to do.” It’s like you’re in the weight room, bench-pressing a hundred pounds, and then you read these words of Jesus, and it feels like your load has suddenly increased from a hundred pounds to a thousand. Deep in your heart, you know: *There is no way I can do this. NO WAY. I can’t live the life that Christ is calling me to live. I just can’t. I’m simply not capable of being that good.*

And you’re right. When you think, *I can’t do this*, you are absolutely right. *Absolutely* right. We *can’t* live the life that Christ is calling us to live ... *on our own*. We will *never* be able to measure up to Jesus’ standards ... *on our own*. When we’re trying to press that thousand pounds of spiritual weight and thinking, *I can’t do this*, what we are forgetting is that *we don’t have to lift it on our own*. See, the resurrection of Christ has *given* us something that we didn’t have before. We die and rise with Christ in baptism, and when we come up, there’s a *gift* that we have been given. It’s called the *Holy Spirit*. If you’re trying to live up to Christ’s expectations on your own strength, *you will never get there*. But if you’re willing to invite the Holy Spirit into your life ... you will be utterly *amazed* at the results.

I hit that point where I was ready to give up. I thought, *I can’t do this. I can’t live a perfect life*. What I learned much later on is that most translations for Matthew 5.48 aren’t very accurate. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Greek word is really not about *perfection*. The Greek work is really about bringing something to *fullness*, to *completion*. In other passages in the New Testament, that same Greek word is often translated as *mature*. “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully *mature* in Christ.” (Colossians 1.28) “That you may stand firm in all the will of God, *mature* and fully assured.” (Colossians 4.12) “Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become *mature*.” (Ephesians 4.13) “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be *mature* and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1.4) The Greek word is about *making steady progress towards a goal*. What Jesus is talking about is a *process* – a process of *growing into full spiritual maturity*. It is not an instant transformation. It is a *process* that involves the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As we follow the Holy Spirit’s lead, two things happen: first, the Holy Spirit shows us what aspects of our life stand under the judgment of Jesus Christ. Do you struggle with anger? Lust? Jealousy? Resentment? Do you have trouble forgiving people? Do you complain a lot? Are you impatient? Do you lack generosity? Are there people you have trouble loving? Keep reading the holy scriptures, and the Holy Spirit will keep showing you more and more aspects of your life that stand under the judgment of Jesus Christ. But, then, as we follow the Holy Spirit’s lead, a second thing happens. When we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, *it will show us the path to freedom*. That may unfold gradually over time. You don’t get over anger or lust or jealousy or whatever all in a moment. More than likely, there are some steps you’ll need to take. Some conversations you’ll need to have. Some old wounds that may need to be healed. The process is very individual. Your journey isn’t exactly the same as anyone else’s. Just

keep trusting the Holy Spirit's lead. Sooner or later, you'll find that you're following Christ's path more faithfully than you used to. You're bench-pressing two hundred pounds instead of one. Keep trusting the Spirit, and eventually that two hundred will become four, that four hundred will become six, and then, *years* down the line, you'll joyfully discover that you're bench-pressing a thousand, that the life you are living now is *so much more faithful and fruitful than you ever imagined was possible* for you.

Now, some of you may be here today just because it's Easter Sunday. Maybe a family member dragged you, or maybe you felt that you just needed to be here today. Maybe you're buying what I'm saying; maybe not. If you're feeling skeptical, what I want you to know is *it is real.* I've seen it happen in my own life, time and time again. The Christian life is not about following a list of "do"s and "don't"s. Nor is it about following a set of empty rituals. It's about *inviting the Holy Spirit into your life.* Jesus is offering you *life and joy* beyond your wildest imagining. If you're willing to open the door, you will be *so incredibly blessed.* Just make sure that it's really *Jesus,* not some cheap imitation. If it's really the *Holy Spirit* that's taking up residence in your life, you won't – you *won't* – be disappointed. I *guarantee* it.

Others of you may worship here regularly, but still struggle to let the Holy Spirit come into your life. Christianity can become a ritual practice of going to church on Sunday mornings, of saying the prayers and singing the songs and listening to the sermon, sometimes accompanied by doing things to help out in the life of the church. Friends, if that's all Christianity is for you, *you are missing out on so much.* So *incredibly* much. If you are doing those things and the Holy Spirit isn't *real* in your life, it's like you are trying fix your favorite recipe for Easter dinner but lacking the most important ingredient. *Jesus rose so that you could LIVE!* Not just *come to church.* Not just *practice a religion.* *If you come to church but you're not allowing the Holy Spirit to work in your life, you are completely missing out.* What's holding you back? Are you *afraid?* Ask God to give you courage. This is the *Holy Spirit.* It is *not* going to lead you astray! *Let the Holy Spirit invade your life.* Just like I said a minute ago: if it's really the Holy Spirit that's taking up residence in your life, you won't – you *won't* – be disappointed. I *guarantee* it.

Then there are those who have been diligently trying to follow the Holy Spirit's lead for some period of time. Maybe you've seen progress, real growth in your maturity in Christ. Or maybe you've gotten discouraged. Sometimes, we get stuck for a while. Sometimes, what the Holy Spirit does in our lives can be very disorienting. Sometimes, God asks us to step out in faith to do something unfamiliar or challenging or frightening. Sometimes, we can see the next few steps in front of us, but we have *no idea* where the journey is eventually going to take us, and it's probably best that we don't, because if we knew we might balk and say, "No way, God. I'm not going *there.*" If you're somewhere in this category, my message for you is: *keep at it.* Trust the process. Trust the *Spirit.* It is not – absolutely *not* – going to lead you astray. God has never yet led someone down a wrong path ... and *he won't start now.*

I want to leave you with one final verse, from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul is talking about the goal of the Christian life. "The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3.13-14) That's the goal for *all* of us: *pursuing the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.* That's what the resurrection of Jesus Christ enables us to do, through the power of the Holy Spirit. So there's really only one thing we need to do: we need to *pray.* We need to invite *the Holy Spirit in....*

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