

What Difference Does It Make?

John 20:19-31

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, there was a theological gathering known as "The Jesus Seminar." It was composed of about 50 scholars and 100 laypersons with the stated goal of evaluating whether Jesus actually said and did the things attributed to Him by the Gospel writers.

One of the leaders of this gathering was Dr. Marcus Borg. He was an Anglican for most of his adult life, but he was raised in a good Lutheran family in North Dakota. As was true of almost everyone in the Jesus Seminar movement, Borg was from the very liberal side of Christianity. As an example, in one of his lectures, Borg said this of Christ's resurrection:

"As a child, I took it for granted that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the dead. I now see Easter very differently. For me, it is irrelevant whether or not the tomb was empty. Whether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant. What difference could it possibly make?"

What Borg calls irrelevant—the physical resurrection of Christ's body—the apostle Paul considered absolutely essential to the Christian faith. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins ... (and) we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Corinthians 15:17-19)

The physical resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our salvation. Without Christ's resurrection, there is no Christianity. And there certainly can be none of the life transforming activity of Christ that we see in today's text or in the lives of everyday people in 2022.

On the cross, Jesus conquered sin. In the resurrection, Jesus conquered death. By conquering death, He brought life – real, abundant life – to everyone who believes in Him. Good Friday was about sin. Easter Sunday was about death and life.

On the grand and deep theological level, it is important to know and believe that the resurrection is one of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. But even though I disagree fully with the conclusions drawn by the Jesus Seminar, I am drawn to the question posed by Dr. OBorg.

What difference could it possibly make...for me?

Most people I know – whether they are currently Christians or not – aren't so much interested in a faith that only makes a difference at some macro level – at some grand and deep theological level. Most people I know are looking for a faith that makes a difference for them – for me – right now. Right here, in the midst of all that is going on in my life today:

- Someone I love just died. What difference does the resurrection make?

- My spouse and I aren't getting along anymore. What difference does the resurrection make?
- My place of employment is closing its doors. What difference does the resurrection make?
- My kids are getting into trouble at school. What difference does the resurrection make?
- My life is spinning out of control. What difference does the resurrection make?

That is what I see when I read today's Gospel lesson. Not just a theological truth about a risen Savior, but also the good news that because of the resurrection Jesus makes a difference in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Let me show you what I see:

I. LIVES THAT ONCE FILLED WITH FEAR TRANSFORMED INTO LIVES FILLED WITH PEACE

Look at verse 19:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19)

We do not know the secret location where these ten frightened men hid behind locked doors, but Jesus knew, and He came to them while they were hiding. Of all the things Jesus could have said to them in that moment, He simply said "Peace be with you." In fact, that was so important Jesus would repeat that line two more times in the next seven verses.

Peace. The Hebrew word is *Shalom*. It has to do with well-being in the midst of turmoil.

As you may know, my favorite hymn is *It Is Well With My Soul*.

This hymn was written Horatio Spafford after several traumatic events in his life. A very successful lawyer, he had invested significantly in property in the Chicago area – all of which was lost in the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, leaving him financially ruined. Then, two years later, as he was beginning to rebuild, there was a major economic downturn. He and his family had been planning to travel to Europe and he didn't want to disappoint his children, so he sent them on ahead while he made other financial arrangements so he could join them later.

While crossing the Atlantic, the ship carrying his wife and four daughters collided with another ship. His daughters all perished. His wife survived and sent him a simple telegram that read "Saved alone ...". Shortly afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters had died.

*When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, It is well with my soul.*

When the storms are raging all around, it is possible to know a peace deep down inside your soul. That peace – that sense of well-being despite all that surrounds – is what the Apostle Paul calls “a peace that surpasses all understanding.” It is possible only because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By dying and coming back to life He has proven once and for all that nothing is beyond His power.

I see ...

II. HEARTS FILLED WITH QUESTIONS TRANSFORMED INTO HEARTS OF UNSHAKABLE FAITH

Where was Thomas when the other disciples met on the evening of Resurrection Day? We don't know. We do know that Thomas was a man who was always in search of answers. When Jesus told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them, Thomas was the one who asked:

Where you are going? (John 14:5)

Thomas wasn't content simply to hear what Jesus had done for others. He needed to “be there” when it happened. He needed to experience it for himself.

Because Thomas was not there, he missed seeing the resurrected Jesus. He missed the words of peace. As a result of his absence Thomas had to endure a week of fear and unbelief when he could have been experiencing joy and peace experienced by the other disciples!

But one week later, Thomas was there, and he had his own personal experience with the resurrected Jesus. And his response was prompt and decisive:

“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

When I was growing up, one of the hymns that we would sing every Easter went like this:

*I serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today.
I know that He is living, Whatever men may.
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer,
And just the time I need Him, He's always near.
He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and He talks with me Along life's narrow way.
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.*

What difference does the resurrection make? Having a personal relationship with the risen Christ switches the focus from the questions about our faith to the object of our faith. No more questions. I have experienced it for myself.

I see...

III. SEE PEOPLE FACING DEATH TRANSFORMED INTO PEOPLE WITH ETERNAL LIFE

John ends his Gospel with a very simple statement:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

We must not look at Thomas and the other disciples and envy them, as though the power of Christ's resurrection could never be experienced in our lives today. *That was why John wrote this Gospel*—so that people in every age could know that Jesus is God and that faith in Him brings everlasting life.

John makes it clear. It is not necessary to “see” Jesus Christ in order to believe. Yes, it was a blessing for the early Christians to see their Lord and know that He was alive; but that is not what saved them. They were saved, not by seeing, but by believing.

You and I today will not see Christ in physical form. Those appearances came to an end with the Ascension. We will also not see Him perform the miracles that John wrote about in this book. But the record is there, and that is all that we need.

John was not content simply to explain a subject. He was not writing a biography to entertain or a history to enlighten. He wanted his readers to believe in Jesus Christ and to know for certain that they had eternal life. Earlier in this Gospel, He quotes Jesus as saying:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24)

What difference does the resurrection make? Because of the resurrection, we can know that if we die tonight we will spend eternity in heaven with God. Because He lives, we can live.

APPLICATION

Danny had been a fighter his entire life. He was now in prison for murdering a man named John Gilbert. While in prison someone gave Danny a Bible. As he read it, he found himself being attracted to the Jesus he was reading about. In fact the more Danny felt drawn to Jesus, the more he saw himself in a new light. He was used to comparing himself to the guy on the next bar stool or in the next cell. That way he usually didn't look so bad. But when he compared himself to Jesus, he started to feel afraid. This man who never raised his fists scared him as nobody else ever had.

Danny also read the passages about people being “cast into outer darkness,” where there was “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Danny knew something about darkness... Lying on his bunk at night, Danny began to review his whole life, horrified by the person he had become. He saw himself living for his next drink, his next coke party. He saw himself using women. His last girlfriend had been good to him, but he would have thrown her away for the next quarter ounce of coke. In fact, he probably had.

That next Sunday, when the guard called out for people who wanted to be let out of their cells to attend chapel, Danny shouted, "Cell 16." He sat like a stone through the service, hearing very little. He was there to ask a question. Afterward, he approached the chaplain and asked if the passages he had read about outer darkness were really about hell.

"Yes they are" said the chaplain. "Then I'm in big trouble," Danny responded.

"When you get back to your cell, get on your knees by your bunk," said the chaplain. "Confess your sins to God, and pray for Jesus Christ to come into your heart."

Danny did just that. In his cell, he knelt, confessed that he was a sinner, and asked Christ to be his Lord. As he did, he kept remembering horrible things he had done, and the memories brought both pain and an eagerness to be forgiven. Talking to God seemed like carrying on a conversation with someone he had missed all along without knowing it. He could almost hear God replying through a silence that echoed his sorrow and embraced it. Danny not only felt heard, he also felt understood, received. He slept that night. And every night afterward."

Eventually, Danny was released from prison, got married and had five children. He then graduated from Wheaton College and was ordained. He went on to work with troubled kids in Boston, and then was offered a job as prison chaplain. He had been very far from the Father, but turned around and began to work in the Father's vineyard.

That's the difference the resurrection makes. In Danny's life. In your life. And in mine.

Amen.