



CARPE FUTURA! SEIZE THE FUTURE!

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Brian Morgan

What difference does Easter make? Does it merely mean that because one individual survived death there is the possibility of life after death? Does it mean that through faith in Christ we can endure this present evil age because we have an insurance policy for paradise? Does the resurrection of Christ have any transforming power for the here and now? Does it have any relevance with respect to world rulers and powers, or politics? Does it have anything to say about the future of creation, the cosmos, and the end of history? If we do not understand the future, we will never be able to live fully in the present.

The movie *Dead Poets Society* is the story of an English teacher's impact on teenage boys. He arrives at Weston Academy, a stodgy prep school, as an emergency mid-year hire. His first act as professor is to march his poetry class out of the classroom to the trophy case of Weston's proud history. Through the glass the young boys stare at photographs of former students, all with the same haircuts and dressed in the same uniforms. With their own reflections staring back at them, the teacher asks the haunting question, "Where are they now?" "Feeding worms!" is the reply. These once vibrant youths are now reduced to the dust of the earth. With that end in view, he whispers the Latin phrase, "*Carpe diem! Carpe diem!*" ("Seize the day!") If death shapes the future, wouldn't that very day be a good time to start living?

With that image seared in the students' minds, the teacher begins to unlock new passions inside them to teach them how to live. One after another they step out of their comfort zones to risk themselves in the moment. Whether it's ripping out of their textbooks the chapter on Pritchard's rigorous rules of understanding poetry, risking romance with a girl from another league, or joining the secret Dead Poets Society, the boys become united in their search for life in the moment. Because they are forced to look into a future in which death has the final word, their outlook on the present is markedly changed.

To an even greater degree, the unexpected experience of encountering the resurrected Christ on that first Easter morning radically altered the worldview of the disciples. Belief in the resurrection was nothing new. Except for the Sadducees, most Jews believed in a bodily resurrection and judgment of the dead at the end of history. But there was something so revolutionary about Jesus' resurrection that the early Christians made it central to

every other doctrine of the faith. It even altered their view of time. They changed their day of worship from the Sabbath (Saturday) to Sunday, the first day of the week, and their action raised no controversy.

What was so radical about the resurrection of Jesus? It was this: in the middle of history, God did with Jesus what the Jews expected to happen at the end of history. In heaven's trophy case was the resurrected Lord at the right hand of the Father. The good news was that through God's Spirit, a doorway to this future was now open to all who wanted to enter in. The resurrected Christ would send his Spirit to dwell within believers to impart the life of the age to come, while they live in this present age. In a brilliant *coup d'état* over the prevailing powers and world forces of darkness, the future had invaded the present. The resurrection of Jesus was a foretaste and guarantee of a future brimming with life. Everywhere the disciples went they made the glorious announcement, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Our God reigns!" The resurrection offers a view into the future, shaped not by death, but by life. Their cry was not "*Carpe diem!*" but "*Carpe futura!*" Seize the future!

I will make seven observations about the implications of Christ's resurrection.

1. The resurrection was God's vindication of the work of His Son.

It's important to understand that it was not just any Jew, but Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead. It's not as though one person survived the grave and came back to declare that there is an afterlife. No, the resurrection means much more than that. The resurrection was God's vindication of the person and work of his Son. It validated everything that Jesus as Israel's messianic King ("Son of God") claimed to be. Writing in Romans, Paul says,

[Jesus] who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 1:3-4 NASB)

In Jesus had not been resurrected from the dead, then he was just another failed Messiah, another martyr among scores of Jewish revolutionaries. With the resurrection, however, Jesus is declared to be God's Son, and Lord.

2. The resurrection testifies not only to Christ's vindication but to ours as well.

Speaking of Abraham's faith and justification, Paul says in Romans,

Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. (Rom 4:23-25)

In the resurrection of Jesus, God proclaimed to the world that through the cross of Christ we are forgiven and reconciled. The judgment that was supposed to occur at the end of history came in the middle of history. Christ became a curse for us. The debt was paid in full. Now there is no penance to perform, no condemnation to carry, no shame to shake off. We are cleansed. The radical implication is that the past no longer shapes our destiny. What shapes it is the future, which Christ has secured for us. Paul says that this gives us wonderful freedom to move beyond our past and walk into our future with confidence:

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:12-14)

3. The resurrection dealt the fatal blow to the rulers and powers of darkness.

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Col 2:13-15)

The resurrection was the culmination of a revolution of cosmic proportions. As Tom Wright suggests about the Christians of Paul's day:

They need to understand in particular that through the events of Jesus' death and resurrection there has burst upon the cosmos a new world order which, like the unveiling of a mystery, confronts the powers of the present world with the news that their time is up...The 'wisdom' which the gospel unveils, the 'understanding'...is about things which have only just begun to break upon the world; it is not a new way of organizing the concepts and wisdom-teaching of the present world...The Spirit is the gift of the creator

god, coming from the future where the divine plan for the complete new age is already secure...and the Spirit is breaking into 'the present age' which still rumbles on, unaware that the future has decisively invaded it.¹

The prophecy concerning the "Son of Man" in Daniel 7 was a favorite text of the Jews during the inter-testamental period. Living in that fierce world of pagan idolatry, Daniel had supernaturally survived the lion's den (Dan 6). Following his dramatic escape, he received a vision of the "coming of one like a Son of Man," who survived the beast-like kingdoms of the earth, and like an animal tamer, conquered them all (Dan 7):

"As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time.

**I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.**

**And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every
language
Might serve Him.**

**His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed." (Dan 7:12-14)**

It was no accident that the term "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite self-designation. The Jews had no doubt about its significance. Jesus claimed to be the rightful human being who would deal the fatal blow to the rulers and the forces of darkness of this world. When his work was completed, the coming of the Son of Man (his entry into heaven, not his return to earth) would signify that he had been given power and dominion over all nations. This is why he announced to the disciples after the resurrection, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Therefore the disciples were to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, knowing that through the resurrection the enemy's day was over.

4. The resurrection opens the doorway to a future that is absolutely secure.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet 1:3-5)

Not only is the future ours to enjoy in the present by the life of the Spirit, our complete inheritance to come is

totally secure. No one can rob us of it, since both it and we remain under God's complete protection – and it is imperishable. This means that we can live our lives with bold abandon. No matter how much we risk in this life there is nothing to lose, including life itself.

5. The resurrection gives a radical, new understanding for ethics.

Under the Old Covenant, the basis for ethics was gratitude for what God had done in the past. Israel was to love God with her whole heart, and her neighbor as herself, because God had redeemed her from slavery in Egypt. Obedience to God's laws was based on appreciation and gratitude for God's grace. And obedience would determine Israel's future, whether a blessing or curse. So Moses pleaded with Israel in his final sermon:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them." (Deut 30:19-20)

Sadly, however, even when she was motivated by gratitude, Israel could not love God with her whole heart. The nation fell under the curse of the law. But the prophets announced a new age of a New Covenant when God's Servant would take Israel's curse upon himself. Then, by the Spirit, God would take his laws, which formerly were written on tablets of stone, and write them on human hearts, so that everything he asks of us he would do in us by his Spirit. What the resurrection does with regard to ethics is cause us to transcend the present age, and by the Spirit we are allowed to taste the life of the future age where, as Isaiah wrote,

"The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain," says the LORD." (Isa 65:25)

As people of the future, Christians enter into good works "which God prepared beforehand" (Eph 2:10). The basis of our ethics is doing the things that will remain, things that outlast the present evil age and endure forever. When Paul challenged hurtful behavior he often did so in light of the resurrection and the age to come. If he found Christians suing one another in law courts ruled by pagan judges, he exhorted them that they had no understanding of the future. Why would they sacrifice a relationship that is eternal for money that has no lasting value?

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we

will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? (1 Cor 6:1-3)

Taking the issue of Christians competing for leadership in the church based on their particular endowment of spiritual gifts (whether "tongues" or "prophecy"), Paul says,

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away...But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:8-10, 13)

As Tom Wright suggests, "Love, however, is not just a signpost [of the future age]. It is a foretaste of the ultimate reality. Love is not merely the Christian duty, it is the Christian destiny."²

6. The resurrection is the first-fruits of a whole new creation.

Following the resurrection, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). This was an act not unlike that of the first creation, when God breathed into man's nostrils and he became a living being. The resurrection signifies the birth of a whole new creation. As Paul writes,

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:19-21)

And in this new world order all the boundary markers that once defined the people of God—circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and the dietary laws—are now deemed obsolete and transcended in a new world order. As Paul writes,

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Gal 6:15).

If Christians truly understood the significance of the resurrection there would have been no arguments about days of worship, modes of baptism, or what we eat or drink. Christians would not have taken sides in the battle for the Holy Land (let alone launched the detestable Crusades), for Christ was making the whole earth holy. Living in the shadow of the resurrection our horizons should expand to embrace the whole world.

7. The resurrection changes the way we boast.

The world teaches us to boast in our strengths and accomplishments. These are the things that commend us: our education, our athletic accomplishments and professions. But, sadly, there is no future in these things; they just don't last. By contrast, the resurrection took place in a graveyard, at a time when everyone had given up hope. We should look for resurrection in our lives

precisely at the point of our weaknesses, not our strengths. Asked by the Corinthians to put his credentials forward and update his resume with his recent heroic spiritual accomplishments, Paul reluctantly agreed. If they wanted him to play the role of the fool, he would. However, because of his understanding of the resurrection, the irony is that he boasted of all the wrong things. To the untrained ear the list is rather shocking: "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness" (2 Cor 11:30).

Paul lists, as though they were civic appointments, honours and triumphs, the multiple 'achievements' of his apostleship, knowing them to be the very things that were making the Corinthians ashamed of him: beatings, imprisonments, stoning, shipwrecks, constant danger, deprivation, anxiety (11.21-9). His crowing achievement is a wonderful parody of the *corona muralis*, the highest Roman military honour, gained through being the first besieger to climb over the wall of a city. When he, Paul, was himself under threat in Damascus, he was the first one over the wall – let down in a basket and running away (11.30-33).³

When we understand the resurrection, our balance sheet in life will drastically shift. Like Paul, we will consider all our gains to be losses and all our losses gains.

For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4:11).

"*Carpe diem!* Seize the day!" was the rallying point of the Dead Poets Society. But tragically, one of the students, unable to cope with his father's rejection of his new "life," committed the ultimate act. In order to "seize the day" he took his own life. If death is the final word to our story, perhaps suicide is the ultimate act of defiance. But for those early disciples, their encounters with the resurrected Lord changed all that. Death was not the end; it was only the beginning to a future that was immediately open to them. Each of them walked through that doorway and, with undaunted courage, lived as if the future were already present. In the resurrection, the twelve who fled the Romans and denied Jesus at his trial and crucifixion were transformed into fearless witnesses who gladly took up their crosses to love with abandon. Confronted with suffering, even death, they did not flinch. They embraced whatever came, knowing that their future was secure. That doorway remains open to you too if you will but enter it. *Carpe Futura!*

1. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 281-282.

2. Wright, *Resurrection*, 296.

3. Wright, *Resurrection*, 308.

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