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1 Peter 1:3-9

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SEIZE THE FUTURE

What difference does Easter make to you? Does it merely mean that because one individual survived death there is the hope of life after death, and if we put our trust 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 present? Does it have any relevance with regard to world rulers and powers, politics or the environment? Does it have anything to say about the future of creation, the cosmos, and the end of history? Unless you understand the future you'll never be able to live fully in the present.

Some of you may remember the movie "Dead Poets Society" from almost twenty years ago. Set in 1959, it tells the story of John Keating, an inspiring English teacher, and the impact his life made on teenage boys. Keating arrives at Weston Academy, a stodgy prep school, as a midyear emergency 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 the photographs of former students rigged out in the same enforced haircuts and uniforms. With their own reflections staring back at them in the glass, Keating asks the haunting question, "Where are they now?" "Feeding worms!" is the reply. These once vibrant youths were now reduced to the dust of the earth and were feeding worms.

With that end in view he whispers the now popular Latin phrase, *Carpe Diem* ("Seize the day"). If death shapes the future, wouldn't today be a good time to start living? With that image seared in their minds, Keating begins to unlock new passions inside the boys to teach them how to live. One by one they start to step out of their comfort zones to risk themselves in the moment. Whether it is found in ripping the chapter of Pritchard's rigorous rules of understanding poetry out of their textbooks, risking romance with a girl out of their league, or joining the secret Dead Poets Society, these boys all become united in their search for life in the moment. Because they are forced to look with eyes wide-open into a future where death has the final word, their outlook on the present is markedly changed. With bold acts of individualism, *Carpe Diem* becomes infused in all of them.

To an even greater degree, when the disciples of Jesus encountered the bodily resurrection Christ, their worldview was shattered and their lives radically altered. There was something so revolutionary about the resurrection that the apostles made it central to every other doctrine. It even altered their view of time. They changed their day of worship from the Sabbath, the seventh day, to Sunday, the eighth day, the first day of the week, as if the resurrection had inaugurated a whole new creation that the world had been anxiously waiting.

This morning we will examine Peter's reflections after he had lived in the power and presence of the risen Christ for some thirty years. Like most Jews of his day, Jesus' announcement that the "kingdom of God was at hand" ignited centuries of prophetic dreams and hopes of how Israel's God was coming to inaugurate his reign on earth.

The faithful in Israel had been clinging to age-old promises of a new and greater Exodus, in which Israel's enemies would be defeated, the land would be thoroughly cleansed of idolatry and injustice, a new temple would be built, and new world order of peace established, where "everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid" (Micah 4:4 TNIV).

So when Peter heard the announcement it stirred him to the core so that he forsook all to follow Jesus. But surprisingly, after he made his confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord instructed him not to tell anyone. For though Peter had grasped the first secret of the kingdom of God, that Jesus was king, he did not know "the way" the king would inaugurate the kingdom of earth. The second secret of the kingdom was that the king must die.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:31-33 TNIV)

As Jesus was speaking of the matter quite plainly, Peter was stunned. How could Israel's king inaugurate God's kingdom on earth by dying? Was Jesus going to end up like the scores of false messiahs whose revolutions were crushed by the Romans? So repulsed was he by the idea that he took Jesus aside and got in his face.

Jesus countered with a rebuke of his own, but it was not so private. He told Peter in front of the rest of the disciples that he was serving the purposes of Satan and he needed to get behind and follow him - the appropriate place for a disciple. Wanting the right thing the wrong way is demonic! To usher in the kingdom of God through violence, politics or coercion of any sort is demonic. After that stunning rebuke, Jesus announced,

"There are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." (Mark 9:1)

Enough talk about the future; the disciples needed to “taste the future.” Jesus takes his blind disciples out of the lecture hall into the laboratory of experience, on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, where he will be transfigured before them. The scene is reminiscent of the events following the Exodus, when Moses took three men, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and, together with the seventy elders, ascended to meet with God on the mountain. Upon their arrival, they stepped into the horizon of history.

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Exod 24:9-11)

Then Moses and Joshua went up the mountain itself and a cloud enveloped them. So intense was the glory of God on the mountain that when Moses descended, his face was radiant, so much so that the sons of Israel were fearful of coming near him. Now on the slopes of Mount Hermon, isolated from the crowds, with Peter, James, and John, Jesus is suddenly transfigured. Not just his face, like Moses, but his entire being is transformed. Even his clothes are so radiant that Mark can only stumble over his similes: “as no launderer on earth can whiten them!” What were these disciples seeing? Tom Wright explains:

The glory which shone from Jesus’ face on the mountain is the glory of a human being, made in God’s image, and now totally open to God, totally possessed by God, totally on fire with God. Seeing this human being, we are seeing God, God in a mirror, God through the looking glass, God present as in the burning bush but now in the shining face, and even clothes, of a man amongst men.¹

This is the glory of one like the “Son of man.” It was the glory for which Jesus was destined as our representative man in heaven, the same glory we all are destined for - the glory of the resurrection. The disciples saw the beauty of the future.

Yet, even with that experience of the glorious King in that new dimension of the kingdom to come, Peter still did not have the capacity to internalize the vision of the future into his everyday life. At the climactic moment when Jesus is betrayed in the garden, Peter fails miserably. He attempts to combat evil with the sword, cutting off the right ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant. Peter is once again serving the purposes of Satan. In response, Jesus restores the damage Peter has done by healing the servant’s ear; then he commands that all swords be put away so that he can drink the cup that the Father had prepared for him.

How many of us can identify? We believe that Jesus is the Christ, and on occasion we get glimpses of heaven, but there is no integration of heaven in our lives, much less in our world. Often our feeble initiatives to bring God’s rule to earth result in the servants of this world being deaf to the gospel we preach. Resurrection remains simply a vague and distant hope that we will go to heaven when we die.

What finally changed Peter? What ended his blindness? It was his consummate failure that crushed him after he denied the Lord before a servant girl, who happened to be a relative of Malchus

(John 18:26). On the one hand, with his impulsive violence, all Peter could manage was a servant’s bloodied ear; and on the other hand, when courage was called for, he caved in to cowardly silence and denial. He could not even speak one word of truth before a servant girl. Left alone in his damaging initiative and paralyzing fear, he “wept bitterly.” Peter is finally broken. He has not an ounce of confidence left in human initiative or politics or anything else to bring God’s rule to earth. For the first time in his life he is open to another way.

Like Peter, it is when our dreams die as we are crushed by the shock waves of damage that we have done to others, or in the screaming silence of our cowardice, that we are finally at the place to experience the power of the kingdom of God in our life. Now, some thirty years later, Peter gives a completely different perspective of the joy in living life an entirely new “way.”

I. A Future that is Secure (1 Pet 1:3-5)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet 1:3-5 TNIV)

Except for the Sadducees, most Jews believed in a resurrection of the dead at the end of history, followed by a judgment of their deeds. At that time the shape of one’s *future* would be determined by one’s choices in the *present*. The righteous would reign with God in the age to come, while the wicked would be condemned. The hope was that you had enough “good” to put on the scale to outweigh your evil deeds.

If we are honest, most of us don’t like to think about judgment. Deep down we know we haven’t measured up. Most of us have experienced the terrible apprehension of having to face someone we have wronged. Yet when we consider giving an account of our lives before a holy and righteous judge at the end of history, one who will not only bring to light all our deeds but also our motives, our apprehension turns into dread.

But in the gospel we learn that the judgment that was supposed to occur at the end of history has surprisingly happened to Jesus in the middle of history. Jesus Christ became a curse for us. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s proclamation to the world that the payment has been made in full. There is absolutely no penance to perform, no condemnation to carry, no shame to shake off. We are clean. Thus the future has invaded the present and pulled off a brilliant coup over the prevailing powers and world forces of darkness. Evil no longer has any power over us, as Jesus has permanently secured a “way” to this new world for all who wanted to enter in. The Spirit of Christ that dwells within us imparts to us the life of the age to come while we live in this present age. The radical implication is that the past no longer shapes our destiny; instead, for the Christian, it is the future that shapes our present. Paul writes that this gives us incredible 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)

Thus the resurrection of Jesus was a foretaste and guarantee of a future beaming with life. So the disciples went everywhere with the glorious announcement that *“the kingdom of God is at hand. Our God reigns!”* Instead of the dead poets’ rallying cry of *Carpe Diem*, we might imagine the disciples exclaiming, *Carpe Futura* (“seize the future”).

The second radical transformation that took place in Peter’s thinking was his attitude toward suffering. He finally embraces it because it is the doorway to the future.

II. The Doorway to the Future (1 Pet 1:6-7)

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Pet 1:6-7)

Though Christ has secured our future in a new creation, the only way we have access to it is by faith. Faith is the ability to utterly let go of human manipulation, idolatry, and initiative and trust fully in God. Yet our self-dependence, pride, and idolatry are very resistant to death, so that without divine aid our faith remains weak and feeble. So how does God get us to open the door? The simple answer is PAIN. It is the grace of God that he designs life to make us suffer. Just as a goldsmith puts his precious metals through intense heat to remove impurities, so God removes earthly blessings so that we do not trust in anything that will not last. Paul explains that this was the lot of all the apostles. Their lives were designed by God to serve as supreme examples to the church through the ages of the “way” of the kingdom.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings...To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment. (1 Cor 4:9, 11-13)

How preachers can preach a “prosperity gospel” when the apostles lived exemplary lives of persecution and pain is beyond me. Suffering is not just our yoke to bring heaven to earth, but the whole cosmos has also been subjected to futility and groaning that is intimately tied with our redemption.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustra-

tion, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Rom 8:19-22)

Paul describes this process as “birth-pangs—a well-known Jewish metaphor for the emergence of God’s new age...This is no smooth evolutionary transition, in which creation simply moves up another gear into a higher mode of life. This is traumatic, involving convulsions and contractions and the radical discontinuity in which mother and child are parted and become not one being but two...[this] is not the unmaking of creation or simply its steady development but the drastic and dramatic birth of new creation from the womb of the old.”²

These cataclysmic contractions will also impact the history of nations and international politics. The trauma purges the nations of their idolatry (Isa 42:17; 44:9-11), just as God did to Egypt in the Exodus, and leaves them yearning for the one true God (Isa 49:12). So rather than fearing the trauma of economic upheaval, tsunamis, earthquakes, wars or rumors of war, believers remain sober and alert, knowing that God’s new age is breaking in, destroying idols in its wake and purifying our faith.

Now with a living hope of a secure future and proper framework to comprehend our personal and global history, Peter concludes by testifying how living in the presence of the risen Christ for thirty years has wrought great gifts within his soul.

III. JOY that Transcends Sorrow (1 Pet 1:8-9)

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:8-9)

The apostle highlights one of the supreme paradoxes of the Christian life that is designed to confound the world. Though his lot as an apostle was one of continual suffering, grief, and loss, the hallmark of his life was “inexpressible and glorious joy.” How is this possible? How can you have indescribable joy when there is no visible source of joy? Is this just an ancient form of denial, suppressing sorrow by refusing to articulate the pain? Or did sorrow, honestly acknowledged and firmly embraced, open the gateway to resurrection life of the future age, life that was a foretaste of our consummate salvation? After thirty years of experience, Peter testifies that this had been his experience on every occasion of suffering. At no time did God prove unfaithful; in fact, sorrow only served to increase his capacity for JOY.

Beneath Peter’s joy was an unquenchable love for Christ, burning hotter and brighter the older he got. But there again is the paradox. How did he love someone he could not see, and how could his readers love and trust someone they had never seen? The answer is given in his final encounter with Jesus in John’s gospel. After the resurrection, Peter went fishing with several of the apostles, an act that suggests he was once again trusting in his old ways for security instead of trusting Christ who had called

him to leave his former occupation to be a “fisher of men.” And like an old rerun movie, “they caught nothing.”

By morning when they are at their end, Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. Immediately it fills with fish - a “new creation”! Filled with shame, Peter swims to shore to be greeted by Jesus, who has already made a fire of burning coals to prepare his “ordination breakfast.” After they have eaten, Jesus asks him, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” The question is asked not once but three times to counter his three denials. With no self-righteousness, Peter responds with “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” In response, the Lord commands Peter to demonstrate his love for him by feeding and caring for his flock. For three decades now Peter has been feeding Jesus’ sheep, with no thought to his retirement, and it has filled his soul with more love and joy than he can imagine. The promise that Jesus spoke to Peter that a life of sorrow would actually increase one’s capacity for joy had indeed come true.

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:28-30)

I can fully concur. I have served as a pastor for over thirty years and I must confess that Emily and I have not had to suffer much. But whatever loss we did incur, whether it was the loss of our first two children, or the promise of earthly security, we have received back one hundred fold in the creation of a new world wide family that has increased our capacity for joy beyond our dreams.

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,” commits the ultimate act. In order to “seize the day,” he takes 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 their lives as if the future were already present. The twelve who fled the Romans and denied Jesus at his trial and crucifixion were transformed by the resurrection into fearless witnesses who gladly took up their crosses to love with abandon. And when confronted with suffering and even death, they did not flinch, but embraced it, knowing their future was secure. That doorway remains open to you, if you will but open it.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

1 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 71.

2 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 103-104.