



Catalog No. 7300

Easter 2011

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April 24, 2011

AN INVITATION TO NEW LIFE

EASTER 2011

Last week marked the 150th anniversary of the bombing of Ft. Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, the event that triggered the Civil War, the bloodiest war in United States history; a war that resulted in over 600,000 deaths. Over the next four years reenactments of various battles and commemorative ceremonies will take place across the eastern part of the nation. But unless you are deeply interested in the historical events of the war or had ancestors who figured prominently, I doubt you will take much notice, especially out here in California. Certainly this event changed the course of our nation dramatically, but after 150 years we are removed from this epic event.

In contrast, today we gather to remember and reflect upon an event that took place some 2000 years ago. This event featured the death of only one person, but that death is remembered and reenacted every year around the world. And then a couple of days later people all over the world gather to remember the resurrection of this man from the dead. The death and resurrection of Jesus changed everything and ever since has had a dramatic impact on people's lives.

Yet we are so familiar with the story and celebrating the event of the resurrection that we can easily remember it in a somewhat removed and objective fashion. We can be more concerned about the ham dinner and decorating eggs for the children. But, what if you had lived in the time of Jesus? What if you had never heard the story or heard the whole story? What if you had been in Jerusalem in the weeks following the death and resurrection of Jesus? What if you had been walking through the streets of Jerusalem near the synagogue and suddenly you heard the voice of a man booming out over the crowd:

Everyone, please gather around. I have a story I would like to share with you. I would like to tell you about a man I came to know by the name of Jesus and how he changed my life.

My name is Peter. My brother Andrew and I grew up in Galilee. We were simple fishermen without a great deal of education. I became intrigued by a man named John who was calling people to repentance, and from him I learned about Jesus, who also grew up in the region of Galilee. One morning, after an unfruitful night of fishing, Jesus came to where we were putting away our nets on the shore. A crowd had gathered nearby, wanting to hear him speak, so Jesus took my boat and stood in it just off the shore and began to teach. When he finished, he told me to put the boat out into deep water and drop my nets. I had been out all night fishing and was dead tired, but I did as Jesus suggested. You can't believe what happened. The nets filled with a huge catch of fish. When we got to shore, Jesus told Andrew and I to follow him, as if we had a choice. He said he would make us fishers of men. We left everything and went with him. He told me that he would change my name from Peter to Cephas (Rock).

That began a three-year journey of being with Jesus night and day. There were twelve of us, including my brother and our fishing

partners James and John. From time to time others joined us, but eventually they dropped off. We witnessed some amazing things—Jesus teaching huge crowds, performing amazing miracles, and casting out demons. Nothing had happened like that since the days of Elijah and Elisha.

We saw Jesus feed a huge crowd with five small loaves and a couple of fish. One night, when we were in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, we saw Jesus coming toward us walking on water. He told me I could do it too. I actually got out of the boat and started walking toward him, on the water! It worked for a short time—until I looked down and began to sink. James, John, and I witnessed Jesus bring a little girl who had died back to life and we saw him transfigured into something glorious and heavenly, standing alongside Moses and Elijah. Some of you probably have heard tales of some of these adventures.

Being with Jesus was really confusing. There were times when he was nice to us and other times when he scolded us for unbelief. Of all the guys, I got in trouble the most because I kept putting my foot in my mouth. He was also very nice and welcoming to the lowest kinds of people—like sinners and tax-gatherers, prostitutes and lepers, women and children. But then he could really have a cutting tongue when he talked with the Jewish religious leaders.

Jesus often taught in parables. That was confusing too. But then later he would try to explain to us what the parable was all about. We came to believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the Anointed One, the Expected One of Israel. We believed that it was the time for the Kingdom of God to come in all its glory and we were going to have a front row seat.

One of the things that Jesus kept talking about was going to Jerusalem and dying. That really confused us and made us upset. How was he going to bring about this glorious new kingdom if he died? It did not make sense. On one occasion I tried to tell him that he would not die. Boy, did I get in trouble for that one.

Just a few weeks ago we came to Jerusalem for the Passover. None of us were excited about this since things with the Jewish authorities had really gotten heated. We gathered in a small room for the Passover meal. Jesus did something incredible. He took some water and a towel and washed our feet. Again I said the wrong thing. During dinner he told us that one of us would betray him. All of us pledged our support and said we would die with him. He told me that I would deny him three times during the night.

Later that night Jesus was arrested and then questioned by the Jewish authorities. I waited outside and was terrified. When people asked me if I was with Jesus, I denied it. By morning, Jesus' prediction came true. I was so horribly ashamed. Eventually Jesus was taken before Pilate. The chief priests and elders manipulated Pilate and the crowd to crucify him and that is what happened. It was horrible. We were all devastated. All our hopes and dreams for

the kingdom of God were destroyed. We thought that we would be next in line to die.

Then a couple of days later something amazing happened. Some of the women who had followed Jesus with us from the beginning had gone to visit the tomb early in the morning. But they came running back and told us the stone that covered the opening of the tomb had been rolled away and Jesus' body was not inside. We couldn't believe it. So John and I went to check it out and sure enough the tomb was empty except for his burial linens folded up neatly in the corner. John was very excited but I wondered what this all meant. I wondered if someone had stolen the body.

Later, while we were gathered in the upper room, Jesus appeared to us. He didn't knock or come through the door. He just appeared. At first we didn't recognize him. He looked so different. But when we saw his hands and feet, we knew it was Jesus and we believed that God had raised him from the dead.

A few days later some of us were in Galilee fishing. We had been out all night and had not caught anything. As we headed back to shore, we could see that Jesus was waiting for us. He told us to put out nets into the water. I bet you can guess what happened—another large catch of fish. I still felt horrible about denying him three times. But he loved me, and restored me, and commissioned me to preach the good news of salvation. Now this Jesus whom God raised from the dead has ascended into heaven and he sits at God's right hand.

Just last week, the Holy Spirit was poured out on us who believed and we began to understand all the things Jesus had spoken to us. Jesus is the Messiah and the kingdom of God has come on earth. It is just so much different than we imagined. For us Jews, Jesus fulfills all of our prophecies and all of our feasts and all of our sacrificial system. He is the Passover Lamb, the lamb that was slain so that we do not have to die. Jesus is the firstborn of the new creation. Life in the age to come has begun. He is the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). I am inviting you to believe and to have a new life—to become part of the new creation.

A voice cried out in the crowd:

"Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37 TNIV)

Peter answers:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38–39 TNIV)

What if you had been there to hear Peter tell his story? How would you have responded? For you who believe, this is the invitation that you accepted. For you who are in the process of believing, the invitation is for you, today, to receive forgiveness of sin and a new life.

On Good Friday we remembered Jesus' death and the meaning of the cross, the sacrifice that paid in full the debt of our sin. Today on Easter we remember the resurrection and reflect on its meaning.

First, resurrection means that Jesus was validated as the Messiah, the Son of God, and vindicated before his enemies. He ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand as the supreme, sovereign ruler of all of creation. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would come to know God's power and he said:

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Eph. 1:20–21 TNIV)

There may be death and evil in the world but it is all bounded by Jesus' sovereign reign. Nothing happens outside of his control.

Second, the resurrection means that the power of death has been broken. Death creates in us great fear and robs us of our joy and freedom. Without the resurrection we are held in bondage to these fears. But when Christ was raised from the dead, he defeated once and for all the enemy of death. Death is not the final word. God has conquered death in Jesus. Death no longer has power over those who believe in him. Jesus said to Martha:

I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. (John 11:25–26 TNIV)

Paul wrote the Corinthians:

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55–57 TNIV)

Third, the resurrection means that Jesus has gone before us to prepare a permanent dwelling place for us.

My Father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:2–3 TNIV)

This is what our hearts hunger and yearn for – we long for home; a place where we belong, a place where there are no tears and no suffering, a place where we feel love, joy, and peace. God himself has set this desire in our hearts. We know that we were made for something special, for someone special, for something beyond this world.

What we lack in our earthly homes, God offers us – a heavenly home in the face of his son Jesus. This is what gives us hope in the midst of suffering and struggles. God was faithful to Israel. He was faithful to his son. And he will be faithful to us. We will not be disappointed.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 5:1 TNIV)

Fourth, the resurrection means that the new creation has begun. Paul tells the Colossians, "he (Jesus) is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Colossians 1:18 TNIV).

When Jesus appeared to the disciples and to the women and to others after the resurrection he was different. Why was he different? He had a resurrected, redeemed, glorified body. And this means that what Israel had looked forward to in the future had invaded the present.

Finally, resurrection means that since the new creation has begun we can have the life of the age to come now. We do not have to wait for heaven to go to heaven. God raises us from the dead not only in

the future but now in the present. God will give us an eternal home in the future, but he also gives us that home now in our hearts. When we hear the voice in our heart calling us the beloved, whispering to us that we are God's beloved sons and daughters, we have the experience of being at home. "... (If) anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17 TNIV).

The gospel doesn't promise us a patched up version of our old life; a life that is welded back together, fixed with glue and duct tape. Even though we have our old body that is subject to decay, our inner parts have been replaced, made new. This means that sin no longer has power or control over us. No longer are we a slave to sinful habits. The truth has set us free and we can live a new life. How does this happen?

We are

...buried with him (Christ) through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:4 TNIV).

Our sinful self dies with Christ and we are then raised with Christ in this life here and now. Resurrection happens every day when people turn to the Lord. God has the power to bring life out of death. Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed.

"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." (1 Peter 1:3-4 TNIV)

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