

Concealed and Revealed

Colossians 3:1-4

It's been said that if the stories of Easter were erased from Christianity, if the resurrection of Jesus didn't occur or wasn't proclaimed in the Gospels or referenced in the rest of the Christian canon, it's quite possible our faith would be a great deal easier to understand and to embrace. The assumption being, of course, that few people would have difficulty with the ethical teachings and example of the Jewish prophet from Nazareth; most would accept his wisdom and insights as a spiritual man.

If this were true, then I as a teacher and preacher could confine Jesus to his historical context in ancient Galilee as a wise sage or political firebrand, drawing lessons for us all from his experience, as well as inspiration from his message. Should I need to convey comfort and healing to soothe a person's body or soul, I could imagine his miracle touch that would take someone's brokenness and make it whole.

Without the resurrection (and all that was implied by it), Jesus could be as acceptable to agnostics and atheists as he is beloved by believers. Apart from the stories of Easter, few people of any religion would have reason to dismiss, let alone despise, this remarkable man of history. The problem, you see, began with the Easter stories and the idea that Jesus was something more than mere human. Yet, without these accounts, if there was no resurrection, if he had departed this world in an ordinary manner, it's unlikely anyone in our time would have ever heard of him!

Now, this isn't to say Jesus' entire value to human civilization rises and falls on what occurred after his death by Roman crucifixion—that without the Easter stories he would be but a footnote in the annals of history. But, on the other hand, what would set him apart from any other wise sage throughout the centuries other than the belief he rose from the dead? Much of what he proclaimed was said by others, either before or after his time. Many of the miracles attributed to him were common to other folk healers of his era.

Without the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth would have remained Jesus of Nazareth—likely forgotten by time and circumstance, because what we know about his life was only magnified by the religious beliefs that emerged following his death. Because of the resurrection, those who once viewed him as an extraordinary man—even a prophet of God—came to recognize that somehow, in some way, the divine Presence was uniquely revealed in him in a way they might not be able to fully grasp but could enthusiastically proclaim.

Because of the Easter story, in the words of historian Bart Ehrman, a “lower-class Jewish preacher from the backwaters of rural Galilee...a crucified peasant [came] to be thought of as the Lord who created all things...”¹ —as God in the flesh! It was an amazing theological leap to make—from human to superhuman—from mortal to divine! Based on the beliefs of what occurred following Jesus' death, Easter is likely the only reason why you and I are Christian and why our religion has the largest number of adherents globally and

¹ Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 2014, pg. 1.

why what Christians believe Jesus represents impacted most people over the past two thousand years, regardless of their own beliefs, culture, or circumstances. Positively or negatively, morally or immorally, inspirationally or oppressively, what arose religiously, politically, culturally, and psychologically as a result of the resurrection of Jesus had an effect on the population of this planet perhaps unrivaled by any other event in human history!

Honestly, it's strange that so much rides on so little. As I've often said before, historians and skeptics have a field day questioning the facts, beliefs, and assumptions made by Christendom down through the ages, based on the stories presented in our Scriptures. A curious eye will notice there's much to argue with when reasonable people look at the evidence. The Gospel accounts of Easter don't match up; many details conflict, anecdotes and impressions vary. There are no original manuscripts to study, accounts were written decades after the events, and stories were shaped by the pious interests and literary style of the writers. Once historians strip away the theological claims of these early evangelists, there is much less to draw upon as to who Jesus was and what he did. If we weren't talking about something that was held dear by so many, much of what Christianity claims and stands upon would be dismissed as fabricated myth by reasonably objective people. It's as simple as that! It is what it is. The Bible is less a reporter's journal and more like a believer's manifesto.

So why then does the resurrection of Jesus even matter to us? Why can't we eliminate it from our tradition or let it go as little more than a myth? Why does this spark belief—a faith that stirs our souls,

inspire us to be better than we might be and provide a measure of hope that helps carry us through time? Those are very good questions that probably could be answered in a variety of ways.

Personally, I think it's because it speaks deeply to our human need and vulnerability. However it is interpreted, the story of the resurrection is a tangible expression of new life—a fresh start, a hope for redemption, a sign of deliverance from what harms us, a sense of security that addresses our fundamental fears of death. Whether or not we can grasp what happened or didn't happen in the closing chapters of the Gospels, the Easter story still speaks to our human desire to overcome the suffering and angst that, at some point for all of us, results in death. We want a way out and the pulse of life rising out of Jesus' death beckons us toward something more. It's what we want to believe so that the meaning of our human existence isn't completely vanquished when our bodies are destined to return to the dust of the earth.

Maybe you're a person who doesn't yearn for existential hope or spiritual aid. Perhaps you have made your peace with the boundaries of your mortality—you don't worry about death, you don't need the promise of an afterlife or redemption for your soul. You are comfortable with what you know is real here within the confines of this present life and you're okay with that. When you die, you'll die without a flicker of fear or angst in your spirit. You are ready to no longer exist as a living being; if you should be proven wrong by some cosmic surprise, you'll take it as it comes, no worse for wear. If this sounds like you, then perhaps Easter is little more than religious

ceremony, a family tradition even. That's fine. May you be blessed through your pragmatism.

But what if this faith isn't mere ceremony? What if the resurrection story isn't just a mythic tale about overcoming the fear of death? What if it's also meant to touch something deep within all of us that we cannot even acknowledge, let alone understand or appreciate, until we are grasping for life? This isn't just in reference to foxhole faith or swan song spirituality—the type of religion that reserves its value for when we're at death's door.

What if it's more about discovering the value and spirit of life in the midst of our present existence? What if it's about finding and feeling the pulse of life throughout our human experience from birth to death, from age to age, and stage to stage—particularly when whatever vitality is there is concealed by the evidence of brokenness and death that robs us, or those around us, of usefulness, functionality, value or meaning?

With all that we see and sense, experience and agonize over, that proves to us that human existence is hard and difficult, meaningless and painful, violent and crushing, oppressive and defeating, every individual needs assurance that life exists, that it's worth experiencing, that good can be found, that evil doesn't control our days or determine our destiny, and that we can still discover the part of a person to love and care for regardless of the state or condition they are in. This isn't merely a quest of the religious; this is a human yearning for purpose and what Viktor Frankl called our “search for meaning.” So often the value and purpose of individual lives gets hidden behind circumstances that would render their life

meaningless and expendable. Sometimes it's only the resurrection hope that reveals what is concealed and affirms the image and presence of God within them.

When my father and brother Tim were living, this was one of my struggles. In my mind so much was concealed that I had difficulty at times having any sense of connection with them. For my father, it was because of his decade-long battle with Alzheimer's—the terrible disease of the mind that robs an individual of his personality, awareness, and memory. For my brother, it was because of my anger at him for what he had done to the family, to others, and to himself. So often I couldn't bring myself to extend much mercy or open my heart to him because he had broken it once too many times.

Over the years, I knew my father was slipping away into dementia—this fragile state of death within life, where so many others exist—people I visit all the time in my pastoral role—those who are alive, but not really present; conscious, but not lucid—a shell of a person hiding the vitality of the person once known. Love and care are harder to sense when they're not reciprocated in a manner that's evident or meaningful.

In the case of my father I could still hold onto the memories of when he was aware of his surroundings and responsive, but I know when I walk through the halls of nursing homes now and see so many lost in the fog of forgetfulness, I have to remind myself of the presence of Christ within them—to view them with value and vitality—so that I will be sure to smile and express some care to those who cannot reciprocate. Somewhere concealed by their brokenness is the resurrected Christ who is not letting go of life even in a body that

is slowly giving way to death. It is the way I remember there is value to that existence even when it's not apparent; a soul that survives and is hidden behind the blank countenance and confusion of dementia.

With Tim, and every other troubled person I've known through the years, I had to search for the good in him that allowed me to care about his life and his future. The good can be hidden at times, concealed behind crimes and in those who are broken in whatever way that renders them incapable of acting responsibly, morally, wisely, and productively—the ones who need forgiveness and mercy even when they don't deserve it. Searching for the good in them at times seems futile—like discerning only death—a life that becomes more expendable because of the bitter poison that has made your own feelings toward them toxic. The only hope for those we have given up on is in being open to the glimmer of life within them—the Christ presence within them—which may seem like an unrealistic hope, but it's precisely what is needed for our mutual redemption. It's much too easy to make judgments about another person's worthlessness, enough to render them as expendable for all the justifiable reasons that they deserve. For Tim and I it was a matter of mercy for both of us to claim the resurrected Christ within him—even when I couldn't articulate it or feel like it. But it is what softened my heart from allowing him to be dead to me long before his life eventually was over.

We have people in our lives in whom we need to recognize the pulse of life and the image of God, especially when it's concealed behind something that makes them appear virtually dead to us. It may be concealed by mental or physical disabilities, by terminal conditions or agonizing addictions, by social isolation or cultural

prejudice, by geographical distance or political identity, by religion or race, by anything that devalues the life of another person for whatever reason.

The purpose of Easter, the value of believing in the resurrection, is in reclaiming and redeeming a life that has become dead to us—to spark in us the desire to discover what is good in another person’s life, especially when we cannot see or appreciate it. The promise of resurrection allows us to imagine a person’s renewal and restoration to its best state—one that we can embrace and love again. It allows us to live with hope, instead of stand at a grave of futility, believing that the world is better off without them. It helps us to find the pulse of life even when we have given up on it ourselves.

You and I need the resurrection of Jesus to remind us that life is greater than death, in all aspects of our consciousness. I know I want the sense that grace is God’s way of never giving up, no matter how hopeless things are or how fragile life may be. I like to imagine God’s view of life as being akin to a recycling plant, where nothing is worthless or without value, where the tarnish and dirt gets cleaned off and a person’s purpose and value is restored. It gives me a sense of hope to believe that God is too possessive and jealous of the divine image imbedded in each person’s life to ever let it go to waste. Now some souls require more work than others, but every life has eternal value and can be redeemed even beyond all human understanding!

I believe what is concealed in the present someday will be revealed in the fullness of time, because I cannot place limits on God’s love and grace. I embrace the spirit of Easter, even if I cannot grasp or comprehend its mystery, even if some dismiss it as a mere fairy

tale, for it heals my own soul from giving up on life. I want to believe that the divine welcoming word for every living being—those who have believed in resurrection and those who have not, those who embrace its truth and those who cannot, those who are conscious of it and those who are not—is that though

...you have died...your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.
(Colossians 3:3,4)

For the resurrection proclaims that life is greater than death, that mercy delivers us from judgment, that meaning and value exist even if they're hidden by hopelessness and concealed by crime. For the ancient Easter promise continues to be: what is concealed shall be revealed—in time, in grace, and in us!

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