NOT JUST TICKET STUBS AND PROGRAMS

Philippians 3:10

Shortly before Easter a man was driving home one night, tired at the end of a stressful week. As he was driving he received a text on his phone. There was little traffic so he did what we know he shouldn’t, and looked at the text. He glanced up and seeing no problems typed in a quick answer, but as he was finishing he looked up and to his shock saw a figure in his headlights. He swerved in an effort to avoid the figure but he failed and hit it. He stopped his car and in near panic and dread ran back to see what he had done, hoping against hope that he hadn’t killed anyone. What he found lying on the pavement was a big rabbit, but not just any rabbit. It clearly was the Easter bunny. There as a basket nearby with chocolates and decorated eggs scattered all about. He checked the bunny’s condition and found to his horror that it was clearly dead. He had killed the Easter bunny! He felt terrible, and began to cry. Just at that moment a woman who had been driving by and seeing the situation had stopped, ran up and asked what was happening. The man wailed, “I’ve killed the Easter bunny! What am I going to do?” She checked the bunny and confirmed that it was indeed dead. Then she said, “Wait just a minute. Maybe there’s hope. I’ll be right back.” She went to her car, opened it and got something out. She came back with a large spray can. She sprayed it all over the dead rabbit, emptying almost the entire can, then she stepped back. Suddenly, the seemingly dead rabbit quivered, then, to the shock of the grieving man, it jumped up, gathered up the chocolate and eggs in its basket, waved, and began hopping away. It went about 50 yards, stopped, and waved. Then it kept going, but stopping periodically to wave. The man was stunned. He said to the woman, “I can’t believe what just happened! That was a miracle. I don’t understand. What was that spray you just used on him?” She held up the can for him to see. It said, “Hair Spray: restores life to dead hair and adds permanent wave.” Hmm, I suspect that story might be apocryphal. But wouldn’t it be awesome if there was a spray that could restore life?

February 27, 1991 was a day Ruth Dillow of Kansas will never forget. That day she went through a parent’s nightmare. She said it was the worst day of her life. Her 23 year old son, Clayton, was serving in the military. You might know that was the time of Desert Storm, when we sent troops into first Kuwait, then Iraq to defeat Saddam Hussein’s army. That day she received the horrible news that her son had stepped on a land mine and was killed in action. Her son was never coming home. She was grief stricken for the next 3 days. The pain was unbearable and overwhelmed her. Then after 3 days she received a remarkable and unforgettable phone call. She couldn’t believe her ears, for she heard Clayton’s voice. He was calling her! He informed her that there had been a mistake, he had not died at all and he was very much alive. She said to this day she cannot adequately describe the relief and joy of that moment.

Easter is about resurrection, about restoring life where it does not exist. It is about a power that we cannot completely comprehend. In Philippians 3:10 Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” What does it mean to know the power of the resurrection? The dictionary defines power as “the ability to act or to do something.” What does the resurrection have the power to do? Paul wanted to know, meaning to experience, the ability of the resurrection to do something in his life. So what is that power?

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION REVOLUTIONIZED PAUL

Let’s think about power for a moment. As I said the dictionary defines power as the ability to do something. That’s true, but doesn’t capture the full significance of the word. When Laurie and I first lived in this area as a newlywed couple we lived in an apartment in Solana Beach. We had a laughable financial condition. We looked for things to do that were free because we couldn’t afford anything. Going to the beach was a big favorite. It was fun and didn’t cost anything. Another one we did on several occasions was to go down to Lindbergh Field. Back in those days you could park your car in a lot at the end of the runway along Pacific Highway. We used to go there and watch the planes take off and land. I loved it when one of those big jets got clearance to take off. Sitting on the runway they’d rev the engines up to full power then begin their takeoff roll. Those screaming jet engines weren’t just loud, they were ear-splitting. You could feel the power of it down in your gut. It was awesome. That kind of power has impact. It is something you can feel and it is unforgettable. Paul was talking about the resurrection having power like that, something that has impact.

Think about Ruth Dillow of Kansas. The day she was told her son, Clayton had been killed in combat was the worst day of her life. I can assure you from personal experience her grief was overwhelming. I have no doubt she had trouble sleeping at night, and when she finally did sleep when she woke up she would have briefly forgotten what had happened, and then she would remember that her son had died. The sorrow and grief would come flooding back in. The pain of it would have dominated her life for those following days. And then she got that life changing phone call from her son, assuring her that he was very much alive. How do you suppose that affected her? Devastating grief was instantly transformed into indescribable joy and relief. I am sure that she found herself saying repeatedly, “I can’t believe it.” Her heart was filled with gratitude and joy that would have overflowed. No matter what else might be happening in her life, it would have been totally eclipsed by that incredible great news of joy. That phone call had power, power to change her entire outlook.

How did this dynamic power impact Paul? Earlier in Philippians 3:7-8 he said he counted all the things he used to live for as loss compared to knowing Christ. Encountering the risen Jesus Christ caused him to think and feel completely differently than he had prior to encountering it. It literally gave him a whole new life. In this new life he thought about God in a totally different way. He thought about how to relate to God in a radically new way. It totally changed how he thought about himself, about how to relate to other people, about what matters in life, and about the kingdom of God. It changed how he thought about life after death. He became a totally different person.

How powerful is the resurrection from the dead? The power of the resurrection is essentially the power to create life where it does not exist. God has that power, as evidenced when he created the world and living beings. In Jesus that power appeared again, bringing a totally dead person to life. We don’t have words to express how immense that power is, nor even to fully grasp the idea. But it clearly is an awesome power.

There are many who scoff at the idea of this power. A man rising from the dead looks to them like that story of the dead Easter bunny living again or maybe like any story about the Easter bunny. A fairy tale. Dead people don’t come back to life. Yes, that’s kind of the point. Jesus did the impossible to show that he was the only one who has that power, the Creator. Oh, you don’t really believe that happened do you? Yes I do.

I’m not going to spend time going through the evidence that Jesus did rise from the dead. There is a lot of it. I assume you’re here because you already believe it. But just to remind you that what you believe is reasonable, let me share a few quotes with you. Wolfhart Pannenberg was a brilliant German intellectual who was an atheist raised in Nazi Germany. Later he became a believer in Jesus. He did so because, “The evidence for the resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things. First it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened you have to change the way you live.”

Dr. Paul Yamauchi, history professor at Miami University of Ohio, says that the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, “Is as strong as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly 2000 years ago.” In other words, it is one of the most supported facts of ancient history. J. Warner Wallace is a hard-nosed homicide detective with a great deal of training and years of experience. He was an angry atheist, describing himself as “a skeptic who dissected Christians and the Christian worldview.” But through the efforts of Christian friends he accepted the challenge to use his skills and investigate the death and resurrection of Jesus. He ended up writing a book titled *Cold Case Christianity*. He painstakingly sifted through the evidence and his conclusion was that Jesus did rise from the dead, that “this explanation of the events of Jesus’ life best fits the evidence, is superior to all alternative explanations and is the reasonable explanation of the events.”

There is no explanation for the existence of the Christian faith and the church apart from resurrection. There is no explanation for what happened to Paul apart from the power of the resurrection. His life took a violent U-turn that astounded people. It made him a completely different person. But what does that have to do with us?

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION CHANGES US

Romans 6:4 says, “We were 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.” The resurrection has the power to give life where it did not exist. According to Paul in that verse it has the power to give us a new life that didn’t exist before.

Obviously we are all alive. So when Paul said we have a new life it meant that through the resurrection we have a life that is different than what we had before believing in Jesus. Jesus said that he came to give us this new kind of life, and that it would be life to the fullest. Everyone wants that. Brilliant French physicist, mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end…This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.” No matter what we do, every bit of it is aimed at happiness. We may be pursuing it in hopelessly futile ways, even in ways that are guaranteed to prevent happiness, but whatever we do is because we think it will produce happiness. But what is happiness? It is really the full life that Jesus talked about. But what is that full life? How is this new life different? What is it like? Think about what life would need to be like for it to be life to the fullest.

Our tendency is to think it terms of circumstances. The best life would be to have good health, to have people who love you, to have those you care about be in good health, to have plenty of money, to have some success in a meaningful career. Most of the time we think it would be having a lot of resources so you can have the best things in life. But there are a couple of problems with that thinking. The first is that no one is going to have that permanently. No matter how many resources you have, eventually your health or the health of people you love will fail. And fear of that will stalk you even when you have all you think you want. But the bigger flaw with this thinking is that you can find people who have all those things that we think make the “good life,” the fullest possible life, and they are not happy, not completely satisfied. You can also find people who have little to none of those good circumstances but they are happy and fulfilled.

That tells us that this fullest life, this happiness we all seek, has to be something that is independent of circumstances. What does the full life, the life the resurrection has the power to give, look like? It must have hope, it must have peace, it must have meaning, it must have love and it must have joy. A life with all those things will be a happy life, the fullest possible life, no matter what the individual’s circumstances.

Consider hope, for example. To be hopeless is to be despairing. That is not the fullest possible life. No one who is hopeless is happy. So we must have hope. The resurrection brings hope. We need hope in the face of death. This year over 56 million people will die. Today 155,000 people will die. Movie producer Woody Allen said of death, “It is absolutely stupefying in its terror and renders anyone’s accomplishments meaningless.” You are not going to have the fullest possible life if you live in stupefying terror.

Unfortunately death is coming. We know it. It is inevitable. We do everything we can to avoid it, but it is going to happen. And it is grievous and painful. Ray Kurzweil is a famous, computer scientist, inventor and futurist. He has made many predictions and has been remarkably accurate. He has predicted that advances in medical science will render humans essentially immortal. It will cure aging and death by 2030! I have a prediction. His prediction will prove wrong. Kurzweil has had a strict regimen in life and takes massive amounts of supplements in a long effort to extend his life. I fear his prediction is driven by some wishful thinking, because he doesn’t want to die. He’s 75; and he’s hearing footsteps. He’s running out of time and he knows it. He wants hope.

But the resurrection means death is not the end of hope. Jesus said if we will believe in him we will live even though we die. And Paul saw proof that Jesus defeated death. He knew there is life in God’s kingdom ahead. In Philippians 1:19-23 Paul was contemplating the very real possibility that he might be sentenced to die by Caesar. He didn’t know what was going to happen. But in verse 21 he said, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” He was so certain of living again after death, living in great joy and glory, that he could say that if they executed him he would gain. It would be better. In verse 23 he said, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” Not just better, but better by far. That is the hope we have through the resurrection. It is not wishful thinking or pretend or a myth. It is real, and it is what we need in the face of death.

How can we believe heaven is real? We’ve never seen it. Little Hunter and his big brother Wesley are going to Hawaii next month. They’ve been told it’s a wonderful place that they will love. But they have no idea what Hawaii really is. They can’t picture it at all. But that doesn’t mean it’s not real. It is quite real, and just as wonderful as their parents claim. So it is with heaven. The resurrection guarantees that.

But not only do we have hope of life after death, we have hope even in this life. J. R. R. Tolkien said, “The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus means that everything sad will come untrue.” It means that Jesus is with us even now, that he brings his wisdom, power and love to every situation we face and he will work good out of all of it. On top of that he will give us the strength to get through all that we face in this world. Not just get through it, but conquer over it all.

The late Ray Stedman wrote in his book, *The Need To Belong*, “The most basic quest of our lives is to belong to someone, to be identified with them, to be loved by someone…and nothing is more pitiable and pathetic than someone who feels that no one loves him, no one cares for his soul.” We need to be loved. We all know it. Without love our souls shrivel and die a bitter death. But we also need to love others. To not love other people is to live the emptiest possible life. It is to become only the shell of a human being.

The resurrection shouts to us that God loves us. That he cares about us to a degree that we cannot begin to comprehend. It tells us that his love will go to unimaginable lengths to bring us into relationship with him. And his love will never end. Romans 8:38-39 tells us that nothing will ever be able to separate us from his love. In addition, the resurrection has the power to enable us to love others. God will give us the same kind of love he has. That means we will be able to love them even when they are less than lovely to us, even when they don’t love us the way we want them to. In the end, it is that kind of love that is the only kind that will enable us to joyfully live with other people, because inevitably we will find flaws in them. That’s because there are no perfect people.

The resurrection has the power to give us real meaning in life, and without meaning our lives will completely lack passion and fullness. The question is, how often in life do we feel truly alive, passionate about what we’re doing, completely in the moment, 100% present? Most of us would say that’s not the norm. Most people go through much of life doing what they have to do, but not feeling fully alive. A crucial component to full life with passion comes from having a mission in life, from knowing that our lives mean something important and eternal. Our culture tells us that life has come about as a result of an absurdly long series of truly fortuitous accidents. We exist because of random forces and accidents and for no other reason. That means our whole existence is an accident. But accidents don’t mean anything. I recently had an unfortunate encounter with a cement pillar as I was backing our car out of a parking space in the parking garage. I spent some time looking at the results on the side of our car and contemplating its significance. What did this mean? I realized it had no meaning, other than I’m an idiot. It has no other meaning, it was just a random accident. It had no point. And if our culture’s narrative is true, neither do we. There is no point to our lives, no meaning in any of this. And when we realize that we doom ourselves to lives devoid of passion. That passion comes from meaning and mission, and we don’t have any. Oh, we can make something up and convince ourselves we are doing something meaningful, but if life is only an accident, in the end we will realize it’s all pretend. And all a pretend mission can produce is pretend passion.

The resurrection means life is not an accident. We are not here simply through random chance. There is a point to all of it. In his book, *Abba’s Child*, Brennan Manning wrote in this new life in the risen Christ, “Everything great, small, important, unimportant, distant and near has its place, its meaning, its value…Nothing is wasted, nothing is missing. There is never a moment that does not carry eternal significance.”

The resurrection has the power to bring joy and peace, and without those life will never be full. But they are very much a product of the resurrection and its work in us. We can have joy and peace in every circumstance that we encounter. Joe Eszterhas is a very successful Hollywood screenwriter. He has hit movies like *Flashdance*, *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls* to his credit. He was a profane wild man who lived for partying, alcohol, sex and drugs. He thought believers in Jesus were idiotic, deluded losers. And then through a battle with cancer he had a personal encounter with God and became one of those idiotic losers. He experienced the power of the resurrection. He said his friends thought he’d lost his mind. Maybe all the drugs had fried his brain. He even wondered if they might be right. But he said, “I was happier than I’d ever been in my life. It was like I’d always had a hole in my heart that was finally filled. There was a joy in my heart that had never been there, a joy that contained an inner peace that I had never known, but had always been seeking."

Before our son, Toby, went to medical school he worked for a time as an EMT. He drove an ambulance. They did emergency calls, of course, but a lot of their work involved transporting patients in non emergency situations. Toby said many of the people they transported were difficult to deal with. They were old, they were sick, they felt bad, life was hard for them and they were often testy and complaining. He said there was one older woman that stood out. She had kidney disease and was going through dialysis. He said she felt terrible most of the time and life was tough for her. But he said all the EMT’s loved this woman. They would transport her several times a week. She was invariably cheerful despite her personal travails. She got to know the names of all the EMT’s. She took interest in them, loved them, encouraged them, asked about their lives and always asked how she could pray for them. This lady was a believer in Jesus. She had experienced the power of the resurrection giving her fullness of life despite her situation. And because of it she was a delight to those she was around. She had a life with power and meaning, joy and love.

IMPLICATIONS

Eminent New Testament scholar N. T. Wright said, “Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven, but to colonize earth with the life of heaven.” Those who have experienced the power of the resurrection will begin to experience and exhibit traits of the life of heaven. Jesus said that comes from believing in him. Not from keeping rules, working harder, but from trusting him, resting in his totally sufficient gift in his kindness and grace. What do you do to get a gift? You receive it with gratitude. That’s what we do to experience the power of the resurrection.

Unfortunately, for many Christians that life of heaven seems to be barely detectible. There is a gap between what they claim to believe and how they actually live. Yes, they believe in the resurrection, and they claim that by believing in Jesus they have been given new life. But that new life doesn’t look much like the life I’ve just been describing.

Back in 1949 a new play hit Broadway and was a raging success. It was a musical called *South Pacific*. Every show was sold out far in advance. Back then you couldn’t go on line and buy tickets. Many tourists came to New York hoping to somehow get tickets and see the show, only to be disappointed because none were available. Some enterprising young people saw a business opportunity. They collected ticket stubs and discarded programs from people who had been fortunate enough to gett tickets and see the show. They offered these for sale. Tourists could buy them, then go back home and tell their friends about how much they enjoyed this terrific show as they displayed their ticket stubs and programs, never giving a hint that they actually had been unable to get into the theater at all. The last thing we want is to be people who talk about the power of the resurrection, but who don’t actually experience it. How can we more experience the power of the resurrection and fullness of life it should produce?

Go back to the truth of believing in Jesus. Remember that what changes life is knowing Christ as Paul shows us in Philippians 3:10. There is no position, accomplishment, pleasure, possession, experience on earth that can give the hope we need, can give eternal life, can give meaning, joy, peace and love. Only the power of the resurrection can do that. Let’s trust in Jesus and thank him.