

EASTERTIDE

Easter is the opening of the season of Eastertide. With the cry, “The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed”, the church celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The celebration of Christ’s resurrection continues for forty days, commencing with Easter itself and concluding with Pentecost Sunday.

It is important to note that Easter is not the close of the Lenten season; it is the opening of the Easter season. Lent officially concludes at noon on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as the church keeps vigil, awaiting Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Easter – the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ – is the greatest and oldest celebration of the Christian Church, both in the Western (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) and Eastern (the Coptic and the national Orthodox churches – like the Greek Orthodox) traditions. The long preparation of Lent and the resulting forty nine day celebration of the resurrection following Good Friday indicate the central importance of Easter. It – and not Christmas – is the most important celebration of the Christian year.

The church has celebrated Easter and Eastertide in many ways. In the earliest church, catechumens were baptized early on Easter Day, joined the church and received their first holy communion. In the middle ages, the night before Easter was celebrated by the illumination of the churches awaiting the Day of Resurrection. In both the eastern churches and in many Reformation churches, the congregation would gather on Saturday night, as they waited for the dawn that would signal Christ’s resurrection. Picking up on the theme of awaiting the dawn, an Easter Sunrise Service was added to the church’s liturgy by the Moravians in the early eighteenth century, and that tradition spread across all of Christendom. The liturgical color for Easter is white.

What is the derivation of the name, “Easter”? The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) stated that it comes from an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, “Eostre”. There is no doubt that, like Christmas, the church “baptized” a pagan spring fertility holiday, adapting it to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The remnants of that pagan holiday are reflected today in “Easter bunnies” and “Easter eggs” – both reminders of fertility.

Unlike Christmas, the date for Easter is movable. It is determined by the Pascal Full Moon (or the date of the full moon in the latter part of March or in early April). Thus, Easter will fall in any given year between March 21 and April 25.

Easter Sunday

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12 has at least four basic themes within it, anyone of which could stand as its own sermon or Bible lesson. We will now explore these four themes.

Theme 1: The Second Beginning. Luke 24 is the final chapter of the Gospel of Luke. But in a profound sense, it is not the final chapter; rather, it is prelude to the continuing story as related in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke). This chapter both ends the gospel account and begins the account of God's continued work through God's people who have been transformed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The life and work of Jesus does not conclude as do all other biographies – with the death of the subject. Luke's story ends with an empty tomb and with a present Christ! The word of the angel to the women coming to Jesus' tomb was "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen" (Luke 24:5b).

The text then continues, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (24:6-7).

The resurrection was not unanticipated. Jesus had spoken of its predicted occurrence at least three times in the gospel account. But, obviously, his listeners didn't hear it – likely because they didn't want to hear it! It was a statement so outrageous from their perspective, and so outside their experience and imagination that they likely dismissed it or ignored it. It didn't fit into their paradigm of the world, and therefore they couldn't consider it. How often this is how we respond to the Word of God!

But now what Jesus had declared would happen did happen! He did indeed rise from the dead. He spoke through the angel to the women who came to the tomb (24:5-8). He appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (vss. 13-32). He met with his disciples (vss. 36-49). His resurrection was now irrefutable. But even in this account, some doubted. It would take a direct encounter with Jesus to bring all of Jesus' followers to the place where they could all accept it. Such is the difficulty of shifting one's conceptual framework!

But the impossible had happened. And a new world was being born. The kingdom of God was coming. The Christ had not been defeated by the political, economic and religious systems of the city, nation or empire – nor had he been defeated by the spiritual forces behind those systems. He had won – and the advent of God's kingdom had now come into the world!

Joel Green beautifully summarized the second beginning of the Gospel of Luke, when he wrote, "As one might expect from the last chapter of a narrative, Luke 24 draws together many of the main threads of his book. At the same time, this final chapter of the Gospel anticipates the opening of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, and propels the reader to move on to "the rest of the story". In a series of scenes, Luke emphasizes that (1) Jesus' suffering and death are not a contradiction of God's redemptive purpose; rather they bring God's purpose to realization; (2) Jesus' resurrection and ascension are grounded in Scripture and constitute God's vindication of Jesus' life, his identity, and the nature of his ministry; (3) the Scriptures of Israel are understood best in the light of Jesus' career, including his death and resurrection; and (4)

Jesus' followers not only must be enabled to interpret the Scriptures faithfully but also must carry on the ministry of Jesus to the whole world".¹

Theme 2: It is the Marginalized Who Best Tell the Story. The women followers of Jesus who go to the tomb following the Sabbath day in order to prepare his body for burial make the discovery that Jesus rose from the dead. Luke spends considerable time developing this story (24:1-12).

The sequence is as follows: (1) The women go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial (24:1); (2) they find the stone removed from the tomb entrance, and the tomb empty (vss. 2-3); (3) two angels appear and tell them that Jesus has risen from the dead as he had prophesied he would (vss. 4-9); (4) the text tells us that the women are named: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James "and the other women" (vs. 10); (5) they tell the disciples, who do not believe them (vs. 11); (6) but Peter runs to the tomb, sees Jesus' grave clothes there, and believes (vs. 12).

What is intriguing about this story is that it is the women who are the first both to discover and to announce Jesus' resurrection. This fact is reported in all four gospel accounts. But in Matthew, it is only two women (Mary Magdalene "and the other Mary": Matt. 28:1), in Mark it is "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome" (Mk. 16:1), and in John it is Mary Magdalene alone (Jn. 20:1). It is only in Luke that the writer reports that it is a much larger group of women – in fact, all those who followed Jesus. So it is to a marginalized group in Israel, a grouping who "does not matter" either to the Jewish/Roman systems or to the mass of men in Israel to whom God imparts the initiating knowledge of the most significant event in the history of the world!

As one would expect, the testimony of the women is not believed. In Jewish society, the testimony of any two men on any item would be sufficient for adjudication in any Jewish court. But not that of two women – or even a whole group of women! Their testimony could be dismissed, as the disciples dismissed it, as "an idle tale".

This is significant. Luke has demonstrated quite clearly, through the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus, the betrayal of Judas, the denial by Peter, and the abandonment of Jesus by all his disciples, how truly marginalized the disciples were. Only the women stood by Jesus, Luke reports. It was the women who mourned Jesus on the Via Dolorosa (23:26-31). It was the women who remained at the scene of the crucifixion, watching him die (23:49). It was the women who followed his corpse to the tomb and planned to return after the Sabbath to anoint his body for burial (23:55-56). Only the women stood by Jesus at the moment of his greatest need.

Yet Luke is careful to point out that it is these same women who testify to Jesus' resurrection who are not believed by the disciples. Of all people, they should be the ones most believed, precisely because they alone proved themselves most faithful. Yet their testimony to the resurrection is dismissed by the disciples as "an idle tale". Only Peter, in Luke's account, grasps

¹ Joel Green, "The Gospel of Luke", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 1901-1902.

at the hope that it might be true, and runs to the tomb to check on it himself. But the others simply do not believe.

What Luke is demonstrating is that, even among those who have proven themselves both marginalized and faithless, the women are even further marginalized in spite of their faith. ***The marginalized marginalize*** – even in the disciple band, even in the face of their own fear and lack of courage, even at Jesus’ time of greatest need. They cannot accept that God announces God’s greatest intervention in human history through the most marginalized people in their society – whether it is women at the resurrection or shepherds at the birth. Even at this both apparently darkest but in reality greatest moment in the history of the world, unconscious prejudice and conscious rejection reign. Jesus’ work of redemption, even among his own people, is not yet completed.

But in spite of the disciple’s reactions, God gives to the most marginalized of that marginalized disciple band, the privilege to proclaim, “Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!”

Theme 3: Angelic Bookends. The account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is intentionally paralleled by Luke with the beginning of the gospel story, in the announcement of Jesus’ birth to another Mary (1:26-38) and to shepherds (2:8-20) of God’s miraculous intervention in human history. Thus, Luke’s telling of Jesus’ story is “book-ended” by two angelic visitations, announcing both the birth and the resurrection (or re-birth) of Jesus. Luke is the only gospel narrative to do this.

The first “act” of Luke is the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus. The last “act” of Luke is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Both segments begin with an angelic visitation. Thus, Luke intends to both begin and end his story with a miracle – with the intentional intervention in human history of a visit by an angel, announcing what it is that God has just done in order to bring about the transformation, redemption and deliverance of humanity. No other gospel writer encapsulates his narrative in such a way. It is therefore important that we pay attention both to this literary device and to the two stories told through it.

The parallels in the two stories are striking. First, the angel announces to women God’s intervention in human history and the miracle that accompanies that intervention. In Luke 1:26-38, the angel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will carry the Christ child. In Luke 24:1-12, the angel announces to a group of women that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Second, in Luke 1, the women are specifically named. It is not humanity in general or even women as a gender to which God reveals God’s intervention in human history. It is certain specific women that become “the handmaid of the Lord”. In Luke 1, it is Mary and Elizabeth. In Luke 24, it is Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James “and the other women”. And, intriguingly, the two primary women are both named “Mary”. The name “Mary” means “bitter”, from the Hebrew “marah”. In what is revealed to both Mary’s, there is the bitter with the good in God’s intentions.

Third, in both situations, the angel announces birth from a womb. In Luke 1, it is a literal womb. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (1:31). In Luke

24, it is a figurative womb. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (24:5). The Christ has gone forth from the womb of the earth – his tomb – into new life. A new birth has occurred in each instance.

Fourth, consider the message of the angel in each instance.

In Luke 1, the angel declares, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:30-33).

In Luke 24, the angels announce, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (24:5-7).

Both messages exist to make clear what it is that God has just initiated. In the first, it is the declaration that life has now sprung into existence in a virgin’s womb – the life of the “Son of the Most High”. This baby, to be born from this particular virgin’s womb, will establish God’s kingdom upon this earth – a kingdom that will never be annihilated. And this he will do by bringing about an inner transformation to people and to their systems. This is symbolized and given witness to by the very name Mary is commanded to give to this baby – “Jesus” or “God saves”!

In the second message, God has just acted through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. New life has sprung into existence in the cold and dark of a tomb, as God’s power flows into Jesus’ body – and the “dry bones” live! The baby, born to establish God’s kingdom, has done so through his crucifixion and resurrection. It is not that crucifixion happened to Jesus, demonstrating the superior power of the Roman and priestly political, economic and religious systems over the hapless victim of a deceived would-be messiah! It is, the angel declares in Luke 24, that “the Son of Man” was “handed over to sinners and (was) crucified, and on the third day, rose again”. His death and resurrection were intentional, orchestrated by Jesus and controlled by him – precisely to demonstrate that the systems did not hold the power nor Satan behind those systems. Rather, God through Christ holds power over life and death and therefore can intentionally lay down that life when he so chooses, the systems (and even Satan) thereby being reduced into a puppetry that follows the choreography. Thus, it is that obedient and freely offered death that establishes the new political, economic and religious reality – the kingdom of God. And the fact of that establishment is the acting out of what Jesus had predicted months earlier would happen – that he would rise from the dead!

Finally, in both instances, a response is required. In the first story, the Virgin Mary must be willing to assume pregnancy out of wedlock, and to be the living host for the Son of God. And that assumption of responsibility will not be all joy, for “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35). In the second story, Mary Magdalene and the other women must assume the responsibility of making known this good news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Such proclamation is an extremely dangerous act, a political act, inevitably revealing both Pilate and

the high priest as villains who use power for their own ends, and announcing both God's vindication of Jesus and condemnation for the systems. And such a proclamation is bound to be disbelieved – not only by the systems and their representative, but even by those who had been closest to Jesus. The women will not be believed, but will be dismissed as the teller of “idle tales”. And the long-term result will be dismissed by and moved into increased obscurity by a disciple band that cannot afford to build a church around the women who were the first witnesses of a risen Christ.

So, these are the “book-ends” of two stories about women and angels, and God's amazing intervention into human history. The Gospel of Luke is encapsulated by these two stories, and the Gospel itself is so encapsulated, as well. For both stories declare the primary theme of Luke – that God has acted through the life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to establish God's Order – his Jubilee system – upon the earth. And the world will never be the same again!

Theme 4: Where to Look for the Living! In the story of the women's discovery of the empty tomb, the angel asks of them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (24:5). This is the only gospel account in which this question is asked. It appears nowhere else.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” This is precisely the issue, as perceived by Luke. The Gospel of Luke is about the establishment of God's kingdom through the intervention of Jesus the Messiah in human history. That kingdom is modeled on the Deuteronomic vision of what Israel was called to be and do in its social institutions and in its corporate life. But it was not simply a resuscitation of that vision. It was something much more than that – both individual life and a society's political, economic and religious life built upon God's grace and justice. It was not about putting new wine into old wineskins, but in creating a new structure for a new order.

Jesus had preached a return to the Deuteronomic vision of society as God intended it to be – a vision that is best encapsulated by the Hebrew word, “shalom”. Jesus had sought to call both Israel's leadership and its people back to embracing that shalom community. But Israel's leaders had made it abundantly clear that they would have nothing to do with it. They had the world arranged in exactly the way they wanted it – a way that guaranteed them staying in the primary positions of power, wealth and influence while having that reality covered over by the religious veneer of Yahweh worship.

So it was that Jesus abandoned the conversion of Israel's leadership to a confrontation and exposure of the systems for what they really were, while introducing the nation to a new society – the kingdom of God – as lived out in his life and modeled by the disciple band. That change in strategy cost Jesus his life, and the apparent victory of the systems. But his resurrection had made it clear that it was God who had won, it was Jesus who ultimately controlled the systems, and it was God's kingdom that would come upon the earth.

So the question is well put by the angel. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” It is not in a cemetery that you will find the risen Christ. And it is not in systems dedicated to

exploitation, oppression and control – no matter how much god-talk they speak – that you will discover the Kingdom of God. New wine requires new wineskins. And God, through the resurrected Christ and his kingdom, will supply both the new wine and its containers.

So the question comes to us. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” What are the dead in our lives, our commitments, our priorities – those places, causes or concerns – to which we presently give our allegiance? And where is the living into which God would call us both as individuals and as God’s people, the church? How has God moved on and how is God calling us to follow Christ into God’s new intentions for the world, God’s people and for each of us? How are we to get on with the “living” as a resurrection people? This is a crucial question that Easter Sunday requires us to answer, and to keep on prayerfully answering. For on that answer depends that mission and work into which God would lead us as the church, as we seek to act out God’s resurrection power in the world!

John 20:1-18. The initial resurrection story in John is one of unfolding awareness of what God has done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The stage is set in the opening line of the narrative. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” (20:1a). That to which we will be exposed in the opening story of the resurrection (20:1-18) will be the movement from darkness through dawn to light, from resignation to curiosity to awareness of what God is doing, from close-minded doubt to inquiry and then to firm belief as the Christian community becomes aware that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead!

The story begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb and discovering it is empty. She runs to the disciples with the message, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2b). The first step in the transformation of Jesus’ disciples is Mary’s conclusion that Jesus’ body had been stolen. That is the most logical conclusion for an empty tomb. But who are the “they” who took the body? The Jewish clerical aristocracy? The Romans? Grave robbers?

Peter and the “other disciple” (likely the unidentified “disciple whom Jesus loved” of John) race to the tomb. The other disciple wins the race, peers into the tomb but doesn’t enter. He notes “the linen wrappings lying there” (20:5). This is the second step from darkness to light. If it had been grave robbers who had invaded the tomb, the linen wrappings wouldn’t be lying there. Those wrappings, together with the myrrh and aloes in which they had been wrapped, would be far more valuable than the body itself. Grave robbers would have left the body and taken the spice-impregnated linen wrappings, or they would have taken the body with the wrappings! But no self-respecting grave robber would have taken the financially-worthless body and left the extremely expensive spice-impregnated linens. So, second, this disciple would have concluded that robbers had not invaded the tomb.

The text then tells us that Peter arrives, rushes into the tomb itself, and notices not only “the linen wrappings lying there, (but also) the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself” (20:6b-7). This, to both disciples, is extraordinary. The linen clothes are lying there almost like a cocoon – but the face cloth is lying off by itself, *neatly folded!* What is the significance of John’s specific noting of this arrangement of cloth?

The face cloth was placed over the face of the deceased before he or she was wrapped, so that as the body was wrapped, the face cloth would be held in place by the surrounding wrappings of the body and around the head (like a turban). If the Jewish rulers or Romans had removed the body, they would likely have taken it in the wrappings. If they hadn't, they would have torn the body out of its wrappings (because their objective wouldn't have been robbery of the valuable spices) and torn off the face cloth, tossing it into the pile of linen wrappings (as the final article to be removed). They wouldn't have taken the time to remove it, neatly fold it, and place it aside from the other cloths.

The text tells us that the two disciples "saw and believed" (20:8). But it is careful to make clear that what they believed was not that Jesus had risen, because "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (20:9). What, then, did they believe? What they believed was that Jesus' body could not have been taken by the chief priests or leaders of Israel nor by the Romans nor by grave robbers.

So the first step from darkness to light is the conclusion that Jesus' body was stolen. The second step is the determination that it was not grave-robbers who took the body. The third step is the realization that neither Israel's religious leaders nor the Romans had taken the body.

But if none of the "usual suspects" could have taken Jesus' body, where did his body go? What happened at the tomb? Mary, who obviously had returned to the tomb with Peter and the other disciple, remained behind at the tomb as they "returned to their homes" (20:10). Still curious and hoping for any clue that would unravel this mystery, Mary peeks into the tomb again – and is stunned by what she sees. Inside the tomb are "two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying" (20:12). They ask her why she is weeping.

Mary's reply to the angels is similar but not identical to her initial report to the disciples. She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (20:13; cf. 20:2). The difference in her two statements is one word. In her first statement to the disciples, she called Jesus "*the* Lord". In this statement to the angels, she calls Jesus "*my* Lord". She is moving from the objective to the subjective, from a distant relationship to personal commitment and loyalty, from doubt to faith.

She then turns and sees a man behind her. Perhaps *he* took the body! He asks her a question somewhat different from the angels. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking" (20:15)? This is the essential question throughout the Gospel of John -- "Whom are you seeking?"

She supposes this man to be the gardener or care taker of this cemetery, and says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (20:15). Mary still cannot believe the unbelievable. If neither the Judean leadership nor the Romans nor grave robbers had taken Jesus' body, perhaps this gardener had. This is the fourth step!

Now comes the fifth step. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni'" (20:16)! Jesus is alive! Jesus has risen from the dead! And here he is, directly

speaking to Mary! And Mary is overwhelmed with joy and exultation (she even hugs him in verse 17). The light has dawned!

But the process is not yet complete. There is a sixth step. “Go to my brothers and tell them”, Jesus instructs her. So Mary runs to the disciples to announce, “I have seen the Lord” (20:18)! The spread of the good news that “He is risen! He is risen indeed” is given to a woman, just as the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans was entrusted to a woman (John 4:29). And resurrection life now pours into the Church!

Isaiah 65:17-25 is perhaps one of the most exhaustive statements in the Bible of the society that God intends for all humanity – the world as God created it to be, for which Christ died, and toward which God’s people are to work. It is God’s vision of society that permeates both the Old and New Testaments, that which Jesus meant when he spoke of “the kingdom of God”.

What should the kingdom of God look like? Isaiah begins, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come or mind” (Isa. 65:17). The prophet tells us that God’s intentions for society, when fully enacted, will radically alter the present reality of existence, so that it will be as if we are in “new heavens and a new earth”. This is a motif throughout the second part of Isaiah (42:9; 43:18; 51:6). In much of that book, it is a promise for Israel (42:9; 43:18), but in this portion the prophet takes a radical step, and envisions this “new heavens and a new earth” for all humanity. This, of course, is the passage that is used in Rev. 21:1 to introduce its vision of the “New Jerusalem”.

This prophecy deals with the author’s dream of what human society ought to be like – “the New Jerusalem”, “the kingdom of God”, “new heavens and a new earth”, “the shalom community”. In order to describe society as God intended and created it to be, Isaiah uses the metaphor of a city – much as does John, the author of Revelation in chapters 20 and 21 of that book. But, of course, the author is speaking of human society as a whole, and not simply a defined geographical urban space.

The value of studying Isaiah 65:17-25 is that it helps us to understand the society that Jesus was reclaiming for Israel and for his disciple band when he spoke of “the kingdom of God”. Thus, it enables us to more clearly know what should be the extent of our vision for humanity and the world, and toward what it is that we should be working as the church. This passage presents us with God’s agenda for human society, and consequently what the agenda of God’s people ought to be, as well.

“Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” (vss. 18-19).

We do not often think of our society as the City of Joy! But that is what God wants it to be. God wants to delight over the world and wants God’s people to find joy in it, as well. The church is called to be a cheerleader to the city. It is also called to name all that is evil and dark about our society, and particularly to confront society’s systems and structures when they act in exploitive

and oppressive ways. But in order to be truly effective in the world, the church cannot allow itself to be overwhelmed by its evil. It must take delight in its city, in the people surrounding the church, and in each other in the community of faith. There is much to love in every city.

“No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be” (vss. 20, 22b).

The city is to be a place of health and longevity, and the church has the responsibility to work for that longevity and health care of its inhabitants. To live in the kind of health conditions that foster infant mortality, deprive people of adequate health care or take adult life prematurely is unacceptable. The work of the church must include advocacy for adequate health care for all society’s inhabitants. That means not only dealing with direct health care, but with the very conditions of a city or society that produce ill health. That means a concern with the issue of stress. It also means a commitment to environmental issues. Health care means more than adequate medical care for all; it also means dealing with the variegated stress of the city and with the city’s environmental degradation. The Bible indicates that such concern needs to be part of the work of the church in society.

“They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall not build and another inhabit” (vss. 21a, 22a).

Isaiah instructs God’s people to be concerned about how people live in their society. Housing, he says, is a right for all people, irrespective of their wealth or poverty. That means adequate housing for all, so that everyone has a home and no one is forced to live on the street. It means just housing, housing fairly distributed to everyone, whether one is powerful or a “nobody”, whether one is rich or poor. Isaiah states it magnificently: “They (the common people) shall not build and another (the wealthy) inhabit (the homes)”. And finally, it means safe housing. The church is to work for safe and well-built housing so that there are no tenements, no slums, no cardboard and tin shacks!

“They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not plant and another eat. My chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain” (vss. 21-23).

A dominant theme throughout both Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deut. 15:4-12; Acts 4:32-37) is the equitable sharing of wealth. “Give me neither poverty nor riches”, goes a Jewish proverb, “grant me only my share of bread to eat, for fear that surrounded by plenty, I should fall away and say “Yahweh – who is Yahweh”, or else, in destitution, take to stealing and thus profane the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:8-9). One should neither be too rich nor too poor, the author of Proverbs states; it is enough to have only my fair share of wealth – and no more!

Scripture stresses the importance of building an adequate economic base under an entire people – not for a few to hoard wealth while others go hungry. Scripture passages like Jer. 22:3-5 and Eph. 6:9 indicate how both Old Testament Jews and New Testament Christians were seeking to deal with economics justly and equitably. Although many of these particular economic

recommendations are irrelevant to us today, their operating premise can be instructive as we seek to build an urban economics for the twenty-first century. Isaiah calls us to bend our godly efforts to the development of a secure, balanced economy that enables each person to work and to make a valuable contribution to the furtherance of the well being of the city, while eliminating all poverty.

“They shall be offspring blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well. Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear” (vss. 23b-24).

Perhaps that which most separates a biblical vision of the kingdom of God from the utopias of dreamers such as John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith or Karl Marx occurs precisely at this point. Each such visionary builds his utopia on the premise that such an ideal world is achievable. Each utopia is built on the premise that humanity is essentially good and if the formula devised by the visionary is followed, then society will reach that utopia.

Scripture is different. It operates on the premise that although humanity is made in the image of God, that image is implacably scarred by the existence of sin (thus humanity is redeemable only by the action of God). Human beings will therefore corrupt every good plan humanity devises. Only God can make society work, as God redeems us and then creates in us a new community (Jesus’ “kingdom of God”). The difference therefore between the utopias of visionaries and the kingdom of God is that the first is centered on the perfectibility of humanity and the latter is centered on the graciousness of God. Relationship with God is the center of the transformed biblical city.

Isaiah brings out this insight most clearly in this passage on the idealized Jerusalem. In the city as God intends city to be, God will be in such close relationship with his people that “before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear”. Relationship between God and God’s people will be so intimate that God will respond to their longing for him even before they have placed that longing into words. The description is almost one of a lover responding to his beloved at the moment before she reaches for his reassurance, or of a mother anticipating the needs of her baby even before the baby begins to cry. This is the intimacy God covets between Yahweh and the people of the city. And it is the task of the church to cultivate that intimacy between the people of its society and God.

Isaiah completes his vision with the words, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent – its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (vs. 25).

The chief end of human existence in Isaiah 65 is “shalom”. God’s intentions for society end with that which proves whether this city is indeed the city of God – whether or not its populace lives in shalom. It is the responsibility of the church to work for this shalom wherever that church may be placed. This is perhaps most dramatically stated by Jeremiah the prophet as he instructs the Jewish exiles living in the hated city of Babylon, “Work for the shalom of the city to which I have sent you; pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its shalom your shalom depends” (Jer. 29:7). The most appropriate worship of God is the service of humanity. A primary responsibility of the church is to seek the reconciliation and shalom of all humanity.

Isaiah 65 provides for us one of the clearest and most concrete statements in scripture of what the biblical writers and leaders mean when they speak of the New Jerusalem or Zion or the shalom community or the kingdom of God. A society of adequate health care, the end to infant mortality, healthy longevity, elimination of stress and of environmental pollution, adequate and fairly distributed housing for all, jobs for everyone at levels of skill that cause people to find fulfillment, economic development, legal systems that are just, relationship of all society's people with God, and an entire society living at peace with one another encapsulates God's intentions for the world. This is what the Old Testament prophets longed for. This is what Jesus gave his life for. And this is what the church, empowered by Christ's resurrection, is called to work for. This is the shalom community!

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 is a song of victory, built around the opening and closing refrains, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (vss. 1, 29).

Psalm 118 was originally intended to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. The high priest calls the people to worship with the cry, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever". The term "steadfast love" is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means God's unconditional, "grace-filled" love that is totally loyal to us and which then expects of us comparable "loyal love". But whether we respond with such loyalty, God will remain committed to us because God has promised so to be toward us.

The psalm then describes a magnificent procession of king, priest and people (vss. 19-25) to the Temple. Once arriving at the temple court, the high priest then moves to the altar (vss. 26-28) to place upon it a cluster of branches (Lev. 23:40). The liturgy then ends with the entire people praising God through the words that were their call to worship and now becomes their benediction. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever"!

The overarching theme in the psalm, stated in many different ways throughout the hymn, is captured best in verse 14: "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation". Therefore "with the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me" (vs. 6)?

Portions of this psalm are among the best-known in the Psalter. They are meant to march in order with each other, with one inevitably following the other. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (vss. 22-24).

This Psalm reminds us that acting out his *chesedh* love, God take that which is rejected or despised, "things (and people) who are not" and make them "things (and people) who are." God takes the rejected and marginalized ones – even a prophet sacrificed on a cross and the peasants who hopefully followed him – and builds an entire shalom kingdom upon them. Such resurrection is something that engenders our praise, so that each day becomes a new resurrection day where God's great reversal can once again burst forth into human society!

Acts 10:34-43 is the sermon preached by Peter to Cornelius and his household upon his conversion to Christ and the baptism of his family. It expresses Peter's new understanding that God intends salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews, and thus signals the most profound breakthrough in earliest Christianity that converted it from being a Jewish sect to becoming a worldwide religion.

In this sermon, Peter proclaims that the gospel is to go to the Gentiles (vss. 34-36). He then summarizes that gospel in a confessional statement about Jesus (vss. 38-43) that includes a significant emphasis upon Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his appearance to those "who were chosen by God as witnesses" (vs. 41). Peter concludes the sermon by stating that the church, God's people, are now commanded by Christ to share this good news "to the people" throughout the world.

One of the most intriguing parts of the sermon is Peter's opening statement, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (vss. 34-35). The Greek phrase translated "shows no partiality" is literally "one who lifts faces", so that Peter is saying "I truly understand that God is the one who lifts faces". This is a reference to an ancient custom in the Near East in which, when one greeted or petitioned a superior, he would "bow" or "hang" his head in order to symbolize submission. If the superior lifted up the person's face so that the inferior could look the superior squarely in the eyes, that would be a sign that the superior had thoroughly accepted the inferior and was now favoring him.² Thus, what Peter is saying here, is that God "lifts the face" of anyone who comes to Him (as had Cornelius), beseeching to be accepted and forgiven. In every nation, there are those who have a receptive nature to God and want relationship with Him – and God will not ignore them!

I Corinthians 15:19-26 is the great statement of resurrection theology that appears in the Bible. But in order to appreciate it, one must begin with Paul's earlier argument in I Corinthians 15.

Paul has earlier demonstrated that 525 people over several years have all had first-hand experience of being with the resurrected Christ (15:1-11). Therefore, Paul argued, we *know* that Jesus rose from the dead (just ask these eyewitnesses)! Then, in vss. 12-18, Paul takes the next step of logic as he addresses the real issue within the Corinthian Church that must be addressed. "Some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead". And why do you argue that? You argue that because reason tells you that no one has ever come back from the dead!

Oh, really? Then how do you explain the 525 eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus? You Corinthians don't deny his resurrection; in fact, you embrace it. Well, if you do assert Christ's resurrection, you cannot deny the resurrection of those who believe in him.

What Paul is addressing here was his assertion that Jesus' resurrection could not be separated from the resurrection of those who believe in him. To do so is to assert an unbiblical understanding of the human body (vv. 35-49). If these Corinthian sophists insist that Christians

² Examples of the action of "lifting the face" in scripture would be II Kings 3:14 and Lev. 19:15.

are not resurrected, then logically they cannot argue that Jesus rose from the dead (as long as they perceive Jesus as a human being – which, of course, he was).

To build his case, Paul uses a negative argument that demonstrates the illogical consequences of maintaining their position. If there is no resurrection of the body because human beings don't come back to life after their death, then Jesus was not raised from the dead. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the Christian message that is built upon the authenticity of his resurrection is not true. And if it is not true, then your faith is in vain. If your faith is in vain, then you have believed all this time in a lie, and you have lived your life for no purpose at all.

With this negative argument, Paul now brings the Corinthian Christians and his readers to today's Epistle Lesson. It begins, "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19). One could argue as a pragmatist, "Even if what you believe is a lie, if believing it helps you to live a more fulfilled and purposeful life, then what is the harm of that?" What is the harm of that? Certainly one may have lived a more meaningful life. But that life was built upon a deception! It wasn't true. And therefore, all in which you trusted was found to be false. That would be the most cruel and greatest of deceptions. And you ought to be pitied for such a naïve belief.

But, Paul continues, the fact is that "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (15:20). By "first fruits", Paul is referring to the Israelite practice of bringing an offering to God of the first part of each crop (Lev. 23:10; Deut. 26:1-15). That offering of one's "first fruits" was associated with Israel's annual recital of their belief that God had called them out of slavery as a people, had liberated them and had provided for them sustenance for life (Deut. 26:5-10). And it was at the ceremony of the first fruits that both the Israelite nation and each Israelite family acted out their commitment to not only be good stewards of all that God had given them but to use that wealth to create economic equality throughout their nation and to eliminate poverty, as they pledged themselves afresh to their obedience of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee (Deut. 26:12-14; Lev. 25:18-24).

Thus, Paul argues here, as the first fruits was the offering of the Hebrews that symbolized both who they were as a nation and how they were to act (justly, equitably, relationally), *so it is that Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruits" offering for the Christians*. Jesus' resurrection was not a single, solitary event, never to be repeated. Rather, Jesus' resurrection was "the first to rise from the dead" (Acts 26:23). So we, too, have and will rise! We have already been raised into a new way of life – a life of becoming a new community of reciprocal love (love for one another and for God), the equitable sharing of wealth (so that there is no poor among us) and working for a world of justice and elimination of poverty. And we will someday rise into eternal life through the One who has given us life – the one who is our first fruits. This is the assurance in which we as Christians live and move and have our being!

Paul's argument here is like Jeremiah's argument in Jeremiah 17:5-10. There, Jeremiah argued that where a person or a society places its trust determines the priorities of that nation or person. Thus, Paul argues, if you place your trust in the resurrected Jesus, then you have the means to live a loving, just and equitable life and join with those who also work for such a society. But if, on the other hand, you choose to trust in anything other than Jesus' way (that is, you choose

allegiance to the nation, the economy, the family or even the intellect in rejecting the reality of resurrection), then you have chosen to be separated from God and the mission in life of working for God's Jubilee!

Building his case upon this strong argument, Paul continues today's Epistle Lesson. "Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (vss. 21-26)!

Paul uses two metaphors in this passage which are hard for 21st century people to understand, but would have been very meaningful to Jews and even Gentiles in the first century (this is a reminder to us that the Bible wasn't initially written for us; it was written for the first people who read it! So unless we can put ourselves back into those people's world and thought-systems, we can't truly understand it). The two metaphors are "first fruits" (vss. 20, 23) and the unique role of Adam (vss. 21-22).

We referred to the "first fruits" above – an annual festival which each Jew was to observe within his family (just as he would the Passover). Many other cultures also had a "first-fruits" festival, so the idea would communicate to Gentiles uninfluenced by Jewish thought as well as to Jews and Jewish-influenced Gentiles. But no other culture put the twist on the "first-fruits" festival that the Jews did – because it was not only a celebration of the first of the year's earliest harvest, but was also a means to redistribute the wealth of Israel as part of Israel's worship. The Hebrew legislation on the first fruits festival is found in Leviticus 23:9-22 and the entirety of Deuteronomy 26.

When the barley harvest was about to occur, the farmer would harvest the initial ripe sheaves. He would then take the initial sheaves to the Temple where it would be threshed with soft canes (so as not to bruise it), parched over a fire so that each grain was dried, and tossed so that all chaff would be blown away by the wind. It was then ground in a barley mill into flour. It would be that processed barley that would be offered to God as the "first-fruits" of the harvest. Not until it was so offered could the farmer then harvest the remainder of the crop for sale. Thus, the first-fruits was a sign of the harvest to come, a "foretaste"; the quality of that offering was an indication of the likely quality (and, consequently, the price that could be expected) of the entire harvest.

Further, the first-fruits was a reminder to that farmer and his family of how they, too, were the "first-fruits" of the family of Israel, responsible not only for themselves but for their village (no farmer lived on the land he farmed; rather, he lived in a village and commuted to the farm) and, consequently, their nation. Here is how the farmer and his family were reminded of being "first-fruits":

At the Temple, when he offered the first-fruits he had brought to the Temple in sheaves and had processed there into flour, each head of each Israelite family making that offering would declare,

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien” (Deut. 26:7), and would then tell the story of Israel’s liberation from Egypt by their God “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”, culminating in God delivering his ancestors into the Promised Land. The recital then ended, “So now I bring the first of the fruits of the ground that you, O Yahweh, have given me” (26:10). Thus, by this ceremony, each Israelite farming family (and the vast majority of the Israelites were farmers) reminded themselves that this foretaste of the wealth that would come from his field that season was a gift from God, was given to him as a part of the community of Israel of which he was an integral part, and had therefore been given for the welfare of the entire community. This ceremonial assertion was then to be lived out by the farmer by his holding a feast in his home, and inviting to it selected poor, marginalized and powerless of his village not only to share in that feast but also to share in the wealth of that family over the ensuing year toward the end that they might become free of their poverty and become productive members of that village, as well (26:12-19).

When Paul calls Jesus “the first-fruits”, he includes in that term the richness that the people of Israel meant when they used that term. He meant that Jesus, in his resurrection, was a sign of the resurrection harvest that was to come for all those who were the chosen of God, an indication of the likely quality of all those so redeemed. Further, Paul would have meant that this “foretaste” of the great resurrection to come was the resurrection, not simply of individuals, but of an entire community, chosen, called, redeemed, and blessed by God – a community that included in its midst the “the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans and the widows” as well as those “good and faithful “farmers” whose faithfulness provided the economic backbone of the community.

The second metaphor that Paul used was that of “Adam”. Of course, this is not a reference simply and solely to the first human. It is, rather, the act of perceiving that human as the fountainhead of the world’s sin. Ancient Jewish and Gentile thinking would follow this train of thought: biologically, one could say that all of us were in the “loins” of Adam, in that it was his procreation of offspring and Eve’s bringing them to term in her body that made of them the progenitors of the entire human race. In the same way, Adam and Eve would have been the progenitors of sin, for just as our human DNA was transmitted from them to us, so our spiritual DNA was also transmitted. And that transmission would be a sinful transmission. The whole world of humanity was in Adam, and when Adam sinned, that sin nature was transmitted, eventually and inevitably, to every one of us. And the incontrovertible sign of that transference of original sin is our inevitable physical death (Gen. 3:19). This was part of the solidarity of the human race that every first-century Jew believed was true. Thus, “in Adams fall, we sin-ned all”. And because of that inherited sin, we di-ed all!

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (15:20-23).

Christ, as the “first fruits” of the new creation is a sign of the profound harvest that is yet to come. He rose from the dead! Thus, we can live in the hope that we, too, will rise from the dead. Both as individuals and as part of that great community of God’s chosen people, we will rise from the dead! The curse of Adam is broken; the eternal sin that has corrupted us and all

humanity for millennia has been erased, and therefore eternal death has been erased. First, it is Christ who was set free by God from the constraints of sin, then it will be all those harvests that have occurred since the crucifixion of Jesus that will be set free.

“Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (vss. 24-26)!

The transformation into the world into “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” is not completed with Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Nor is it completed with our resurrection. There is still more to come – more, even, than a succession of resurrections into eternal life for generation after generation. There will be an end to that process. And that end will come, Paul is saying, when the entire political, economic and social order of humanity will be transformed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Israelite religious aristocracy, Rome and all its military and political power, the learning of the Greeks, the mystery religions of the Egyptians and Persians, and all the political, economic and religious systems of nations yet to come will one day be redeemed by the resurrected Christ. All these systems, and the powers and Powers behind them will one day be transformed into society as God intended it to be – political systems that are truly just, economic systems that care for the earth, steward the world’s wealth and eliminate poverty from the earth, religious systems that truly bring all humanity into relationship with God and each other! The salvation of the entire world will occur – not just its individuals – so that the world truly becomes God’s kingdom.

A magnificent metaphor that Paul uses to capture that comprehensive social transformation is presented in the words, ‘Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet’ (vs. 25). That was a metaphor that every first century person would understand – even more would understand than would understand “Adam” and “first fruits”. To “put all his enemies under his feet” was a Roman expression used of the Caesar’s act of domination over a defeated monarch. When the monarch and his defeated army would be brought before Caesar in a triumphal procession, the monarch would be forced to the ground and Caesar would place his foot on the prone defeated monarch’s neck. The man would then be given the choice of swearing fealty to Caesar or to die. If he refused, he was killed right then and there. If he submitted, he would be raised to his feet and (often, but not always, according to whether he could be trusted or not) returned to his throne to rule his country as a vice-regent under Caesar. What Paul is saying here is that the “true Caesar” of all the “Romes” of the world is Jesus, and God will continue this amazing resurrection transformation down all generations and in all kingdoms and systems until all their heads either swear fealty to God or die (also see Ephesians 1:22). Thus, just as the first-fruit ceremony of Israel was meant to be a collective ceremony that provided a way for the transformation of all the poor and marginalized in Israelite society, so Christ as the “first fruits” provides through his resurrection the healing of the nations as well as the salvation of individuals!

But it’s not over yet. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (vs. 26). This is the completion of the working of the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Not only will spiritual death ultimately be eliminated from human reality, but so will physical death. What that will mean, no one presently understands. But that such will happen is incontrovertible to the biblical message.

How Jesus rose from the dead is a mystery. How each one who physically dies in Christ is spiritually restored to divine life is a mystery. How all the world's systems that have been or ever will be will "be placed under the feet" of Christ until they choose fealty or death is a mystery. And how death will be destroyed is also a mystery. But it is a mystery at the very heart of the Gospel story. And it will be our privilege to one day solve that mystery for ourselves as we, too, experience eternal life!

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