



Let's Celebrate Easter - Christ is Risen!

Dear Friend,

Anxiety has a way of choking all the joy of living out of us. It piles worry upon worry until we are tempted to become hard and cold. The uncertainty of the future bombards us with doubt after doubt as insecurity wraps its arms around until we can't see any way out of the pits of hopelessness. That's why our very survival depends upon us living in the reality of the good news of the resurrection. It's a fact Christ is Risen. Thank God, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"(Col. 1:13-14).

In John 12:3-5 we see how Mary expresses her thankfulness for the forgiveness that Jesus extended to her. She didn't want to anoint Jesus, we read in John 12, with just a little bit of cheap oil here and there. She didn't receive the grace He extended that way and she wasn't going to give that way. Mary poured the sweetness, worth at least ten thousand dollars in today's currency on the object of her love. Judas said it was a waste of money. But Jesus knew better. He knew here was one person who was expressing her gratitude for being resurrected from the coldness of sin and experienced the new life that only He can give.

Every spring the message of the resurrection bursts forth from the cold death grip of winter. Because of the good news of the resurrection, you and I are free to absorb and appropriate Phil.4:6. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." I have learned that I will never be able to grasp the plain truth of this verse as I try to figure the how, when and where of the needed miracle. At some point I must turn loose of all anxiety related to the need I am facing. Instead of worrying I am required by this mandate of Scripture to take the need to God with thanksgiving, knowing that He will meet not only this need but any I may face in the future.

Accepting the reality that the love of God, demonstrated through the resurrected Christ, extends to the need I am now facing releases me from my anxiety and frees me to pray. This is not a form of escapism but a new understanding that through prayer I am able to cast all my anxiety and problems on the Lord as I renew my trust in His faithfulness to meet every need I am facing. (Matt. 6:25-34) The end result of such trust is God's peace, which guards my heart and mind as I fellowship with Christ in a new and powerful way. "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

As we absorb the reality of the good news of the resurrection manifested through the wonders of His works of creation, the inspired words of Scripture, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, God's peace begins to flood our troubled hearts. This peace gives the firm assurance that Christ is present and God's love will prevail (Romans 8:28; Is.26:3). The peace this provides puts a guard at the door of my heart that keeps the anxiety and the uncertainty of the future from wiping me out. My hope and the shield of faith it provides enables me to fight off the fiery darts of doubt the enemy would shoot at me (Eph.6:16). The end result is the peace of God resulting from being united with Christ in active faith.

The good news of the resurrection isn't something we enjoy for just ourselves. When we experience it we will want to be a part of Jesus' mission to share His love in word and deed. Jesus sums up His mission on earth in Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to

proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Pilate's question in Matt. 27:22 is one that each of us must ask ourselves, "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" We can follow Him from a distance like Peter did in Matt. 26 and end up denying him, or betray Him as a result of our lusts for power and money as Judas did. Another way of dealing with Jesus is to crucify Him as the crowds demanded in Matthew 27:22, 23 by doing our own thing or wash our hands to Him, declaring self righteously, "I am innocent of this man's blood" as Pilate proclaimed in Matt. 27:24. That's how most people deal with Jesus Christ in one way or another. The crowds may have mocked Him, but it was our sins that crucified Him. As He died, the curtain of the temple (representing the OT covenant of the law) "was torn in two. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life" (Matt. 27:51).

When the resurrection of Jesus becomes a reality in our lives our hearts of self-centeredness are ripped open and we are resurrected from our tombs of materialism as we are converted. Jim Wallis in his book, The Call to Conversion, states, "The result of prosperity based on injustice is anxiety. Gloom, cynicism, despair, and hedonism are all fruits of the fundamental anxiety that characterizes the cultures of the wealthy nations. The spiritual crisis of the rich countries directly corresponds to the economic crisis of the poor countries. The rich hunger in spirit while the poor hunger for bread. Our spiritual malaise is the consequence of affluence in the face of deprivation. Conversion in our time is to liberate the poor and to make the blind see. The poor need justice, and the rich need restored sight."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described the power of the resurrection in our communities this way, "the cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community." The brokenness of our community can be found in the face of each hurting, homeless and hungry person. It can be found in the loneliness of the jail cell, the nursing home and the hospital bed. This brokenness is all around us. Dr. King further stated, "We have lived under the agony and darkness of Good Friday with the conviction that one day the heightened glow of Easter would emerge on the horizon."

The good news is, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 4:16, 17). To repent means to turn around and not keep engaging in the same self-destructive behavior. Living in the Kingdom of heaven, also called the Kingdom of God, involves living a life of faith freed from being possessed by our possessions. Dom Hilder Camara stated, "I used to think when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when He warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips and hearts."

To proclaim and live an alternative life style in this age of materialism is to many an act of extremism. Those who crucified Jesus said he was an extremist. Believers today, who have died to themselves and have been resurrected unto Christ Jesus, to the extent that what touches His heart also touches theirs, are also called extremists. Lillian Smith, in her speech on the first anniversary of the Montgomery bus boycotts, declared, "for all America to see that in times of crisis, only the extremist can meet the challenge. The question in crisis is not: Are you going to be an extremist? The question is: What kind of extremist are you going to be? The time has come when it is dangerous not to risk. We must take risks in order to save our integrity, our moral nature, our lives and our country."

Jesus was considered an extremist because His proclamation found in Luke 4:18, 19 was not just a proclamation of good news but an actual acclamation of the good news shared in good deeds among lepers, despised women and other marginalized people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry and cast out demons from the possessed. Jesus completely

identified with the poor and homeless to the extent that in Matt.25:31-46 He clearly states that refusal to be good news in the form of feeding, sheltering, clothing and visiting results in eternal damnation. Now that's bad news for those who refuse to repent and let the Spirit of God move them from the darkness of their self-centered lives into the Kingdom of Heaven. Ronald J. Sider in his book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, writes, "For Biblical Christians, the only correct response to sin is repentance. We have become entangled, to some degree unconsciously, in a complex web of institutionalized sin." Thank God we can repent. God is merciful. God forgives but only if we repent. And Biblical repentance involves more than a hasty tear and a weekly prayer of confession. Biblical repentance involves conversion. It involves a whole new lifestyle.

The One who stands ready to forgive us for our sinful involvement in economic injustice offers us His grace to begin living a generous new lifestyle that empowers the poor and oppressed." Now that's the good news of the resurrection. Good news is expressed in Eph.2:8-10, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." These good works resulting from a response to God's grace revealed through the resurrection is good news to those in need. It is the light Jesus speaks of in Matt. 5:16, which results in deeds of kindness which is good news to the hurting. Jesus challenges us to not only share the good news in word but also in deed when He says, "Let your light shine before men (and women), that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

When, instead of living in the light of the good news of the resurrection we succumb to our own selfish, self-serving interests, we end up being bad news not only to other human beings but also to creation itself. As a result, in Romans 8:22 we read that the whole creation groans. Much of the destruction of creation we see today is directly related to human development efforts that put profits over people and the protection of the environment. Paul, in his writings, expresses that conversion and the preservation of creation are directly related. "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time"(Romans 8:19-22). The bad news is that creation is groaning now more than ever before. Are we willing to be the good news that creation is groaning for at this hour and let the Spirit of God work through us to be earth-keepers rather than earth-breakers? Ronald Sider states as Christians, "We face a painful choice. To maintain and expand our material abundance, we are polluting our air and water and destroying our lands and forests. We simply cannot continue these present economic patterns, and reduce global poverty, and preserve a livable planet all at the same time. We could choose both justice for the poor and a livable planet--but only if we give up rampant materialism and make hard choices to reverse environmental destruction."

It isn't easy to proclaim the radical good news that resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Yet it is this revolutionary act, resulting in the resurrection of Jesus that offers us life in the midst of this culture of Death. For we are told, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:13-15). Wow, that's good news! Good News that we have been entrusted with to share in word and deed. The resurrection is more than just good news it's the greatest news in human history. It means that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and then rose from the dead to give us new life both now and for all eternity.

Its this good news of the resurrection which empowers us to live our lives in such a way of direct service to the least of these that, in the not too distant future, we shall hear the King of Kings, Jesus Christ, say to us, "Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you give Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me. I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did for Me'" (Matt. 25:34-40). That is good news. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ you and I will also be raised from the dead and spend eternity with Him. What a divine privilege this is. It means we no longer have to fear death. We are free to proclaim in word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

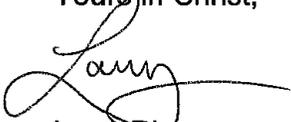
Never forget that the goodness of the gospel is a result of the fact that Christ is Risen. Jesus Christ has proclaimed, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mark 13:31). To have faith means to believe in Jesus and "stand firm to the end" even as our faith is challenged and opposed. Jesus has told us, "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over.... On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:9-13). Such enduring to the end does not earn salvation for us, but marks us as already saved. This assurance of salvation provided through Jesus Christ (Eph.2:8,9) will keep us going in spite of the circumstances. Remember, "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only He who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (I John 5:4,5). The good news is because Christ is risen you and I have not only hope but also victory both now and for all eternity.

My dear brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you through the good news of the Resurrection in every way to "stand firm." Remember "we live by faith, not by sight" (I Cor. 5:7). I pray you are beginning to understand what Paul means when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Now I must challenge you to, "be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be a people of courage; be strong. Do everything in love" (I Cor. 16:13,14).

The fact that Christ is risen changes everything. It means I am not alone when it comes to facing my problems. The reality of His presence enables me to obey Paul's command and rejoice in the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" Phil.1:4. This joy is possible because I know the good news that Christ is Risen.

Now lets go forth and live in the light of the good news that Christ is Risen, as we let our "light so shine before men and women that they will see our good works and glorify our Father in Heavens" (Matt. 5:26).

Yours in Christ,



Larry Rice