

Sermon Notes/Follow-up

4/26/09

Resurrection Implications: New Creation, New Culture

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The gospel accounts agree that Jesus rose at dawn on Sunday morning. He rose at sunrise – but it was not just the beginning of a new day, it was the beginning of a whole new creation. Easter was not just the first day of the week; it was the first day of a new world order.

This new creation has already been inaugurated. It will be completed at the last day, at the final coming of Jesus. Even as we already raised up with Christ (Eph. 2), but still await our bodily resurrection, so the new creation is already present, even though it awaits full, physical consummation.

Dorothy Sayers shows us that the gospel story, from the Incarnation to the Resurrection, from Christmas to Easter, is the best story ever told. There is nothing dull or boring about it:

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which its [that is, Christianity's] relevance stands or falls. If Christ were only man, then he is irrelevant to any thought about God; if he is only God, then he is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.

...the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he had laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero.

If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore; on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek

and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies....

Sayers then shows us how understanding the gospel (again, the story told by Christmas and Easter) can help us cope with suffering and disappointment in our lives. When God's people suffer, it does not mean God is absent, nor does it necessarily mean God is punishing us. The incarnation shows that suffering is ultimately part of God's good plan for us:

For what it [that is, the Incarnation] means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile....

And here Christianity has its enormous advantage over every other religion in the world. It is the only religion that gives value to evil and suffering.

What do we find God 'doing about' this business of sin and evil?...God did not abolish the fact of evil; He transformed it. He did not stop the Crucifixion; He rose from the dead...

The Incarnation is utterly unique. Only the Christian gospel makes the claim that the Absolute God became a man (a baby, no less!) in order to suffer and die for his people. No other religion has a God who "plays fair" or who has "taken his own medicine." No other religion has a God who "plays the man." Further, the resurrection gives us a unique affirmation of God's commitment to the transform the material world in a way unmatched by any other philosophy or religion.

If we believe in the miracle of Christmas, the miracle of the Virgin Birth and God-made-man, it will completely reshape our lives. If we believe the Easter miracle that Jesus rose bodily, it will transform the way we view life in the world.

The incarnation means that *God has a body*. The resurrection means *Jesus has a transfigured body*. And if we really believe that, it means we can't just be concerned with people's souls. We have to be concerned with their bodies as well. Jesus sanctified life in the body, including work, suffering, and everything else. He showed that God is going to bring the world of matter to beauty and glory.

Certainly, the church should always be concerned with sin, guilt, and forgiveness. We have to teach others the way of salvation. We have to communicate these concepts to people. But we must *also* be concerned with safe streets and justice for the oppressed. We have to be concerned with poverty and education, with music and art, with work and recreation, with building friendships and helping the sick, elderly, and weak. In short, we have to be concerned with *cultural transformation*, not just *individual salvation*. Why? Because bodily life matters to God!

This does not mean we look for "political" solutions to our social ailments. Indeed, usually our way of doing "politics" creates more problems than it solves. But my point is this: The incarnation and resurrection show us that God is not only concerned with the soul; he is determined to redeem the body (and indeed, the whole physical creation) as well. And if that is so, we need to have a passion for justice and peace and beauty (as the Bible defines them) in the world. We cannot content ourselves with the realm of ideas. We have to engage the whole arena of culture. We have to embody God's vision for human life, as revealed in the life of Jesus. We have to "incarnate" the gospel story in our community and in our families. *Nothing less will do*.

We live in a world of false dichotomies. There are many today who care only for people's bodies. They want to minister to physical needs, but they can never deal with systemic spiritual disease that caused the poverty or oppression in the first place. Others just want to minister to the soul. They want to communicate truth, but it stops there. The story of Christmas -- the *historical fact* of the incarnation of the Son of God in a human flesh -- shows us that we must always minister in both word and deed. The story of resurrection -- the *historical fact* of the empty tomb and Jesus' trans-physical re-embodiment -- shows that we must live in such a way that we produce signs of new creation in the world right now.

As I said in the sermon, this vision of the future based on the resurrection of Christ gives us a high view of work. But it also puts work in its proper place. Work neither defines life, nor can it be left out of the definition of life. Work does not give life its significance, but because God gives life significance, work has significance too – indeed, eternal significance!

All of culture has been broken by man's fall into sin, including work. But God is fixing all of culture in Christ, restoring and maturing it – including work.

Work is vital to human fulfillment – we cannot be satisfied without having a job (or jobs) to do. Take work away, and we lose something at the core of our identity. (Consider how many English names derive from vocations – Fisher, Baker, Smith, etc.). If we make an idol of work, it becomes destructive. But if we understand that God ordained work as a blessing and a means to human flourishing, then we can get true joy from it.

In one sense, it would be wrong to say, "My job is who I am. My job defines my identity." But in another sense, if we put work in its proper place, this can be entirely true.

Because work is so fundamental to who we are as God's image bearers, we must continue working in the resurrection state. Why would God bother to give us renewed bodies unless he also planned to give us jobs to do in those bodies?

Work cannot be made an end in itself. Profit cannot be made an end itself. Status and recognition cannot be made ends in themselves. But if we place work within our wider relationship with God, all those things fall into place. We get our security from the gospel, so we don't base our sense of worth on success in the workplace. We find contentment in God, so we are set free to be generous with the monetary fruits of our labors. Etc.

There are a lot of other theologians who have developed the same ideas I dealt with in the sermon concerning a renewed creation, including human cultural products. The Dutch Reformed tradition (e.g., Abraham Kuyper) has done a lot of work in this area. A fine treatment of the new earth can be found in Anthony Hoekema's book *The Bible and the Future*.

More recently, Tim Keller, Christopher Wright, and Randy Alcorn have addressed these issues. Keller's sermon entitled "Culture" and his book *Reason for God* have a lot of helpful insights regarding the transformation of culture and creation. Wright's book *The God I Don't Understand* has an excellent section on eschatology/new creation and I chose to quote him extensively in the sermon. Alcorn's *Heaven* is helpful in some ways. Alcorn writes (http://www.epm.org/home_mainPage.php):

God never revoked His plan to entrust the earth's care to us. Romans 8 makes clear that the whole creation fell on our coattails, and, in our resurrection will rise on our coattails—all the more reason that we should care for it.

Elsewhere Alcorn writes:

I think redemption is first and foremost return to a prior state. That's why I emphasize all the re-words. Now, resurrection, also a re- word, is an improvement on original state, but the emphasis is on continuity. In his resurrection, Jesus prepared meals, ate and drank with his disciples. He walked and talked with them. Certainly there are things we do now that we will not do. For instance, since we won't be married, presumably we won't have sex. But there are many things we are clearly shown we will do, such as eat and drink and serve and rule and stand and walk and talk and have relationships. There are so many of these things that I think it puts the burden of proof on why we wouldn't do something we do now, rather than on why we would. (The answer to why we *would* is that we are still human, we still have bodies. There will still be human society on what will still be an earth.) Part of what we need to ask ourselves is *why* we would assume that we would not do many of the same things. You question whether many of the things we now do "will seem rather boring and mundane in the light of being redeemed." I think that's certainly true of a number of things; say, of spending the day watching sports on TV, etc. But what about reading books or building or inventing things or creating art or participating in sports, utilizing to their fullest the capacities of our God-given resurrection bodies? We won't have to do such things, of course, but does that mean we won't? Or is doing such things simply acting in light of the way God has made us, and in which He is glorified? Does culture exist because of sin, or did God build it into what it means to be human? Will be less human, or just human without the bad stuff?

Since God could make our resurrection bodies to not need food and water, why will we eat, which Scripture clearly shows we will? What is more mundane, if you think about it, than having to eat and drink? And why walk if you can fly or just materialize? Yet the New Jerusalem is explicitly said to have streets.

There is a difference between *wrong* things and non-essential things. We won't do wrong things, but it appears we will do any number of non-essential things. God created Adam and Eve to do many non-essential things. Why? Because that's the best they could do since they didn't know God? No, they *did* know him. And God was delighted with them getting their hands dirty and "puttering in the garden" He made for them. We are of earth, and our resurrection bodies are genetically linked to the bodies we have now.

Brother Lawrence, in *Practicing the Presence of God*, related to his profound worship of God in cleaning the kitchen, food preparation, etc., as he did many things that would be considered mundane, but in which he glorified God.

Suppose we were fashioning a sculpture or building a boat or riding a bike and each moment that we were conscious of the greatness and wonder of God, seeing him not only in the stars but in ourselves, as his image bearers, and in all the image bearers around us as we do the marvelous thing of building a boat for God's glory.

Martin Luther King said, "If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who did his job well.'"

The danger of not seeing ordinary life activities as having a place in eternity is then concluding that it's not spiritual enough to do in the resurrection, how spiritual can it be to do it now? This is where the unbiblical division of the sacred and the secular comes in.

A Bible college professor asked me, "Why would we desire to do anything else when we can see God's face?" Well, because Scripture makes clear we will serve Him and reign with him and eat and drink and do all kinds of things. So when Scripture says we will serve God and reign with him, it is telling us that we *will* do many familiar things; serving and reigning are not new concepts. Of course they will have significant differences in a world without sin, but still as basic concepts they carry over to the world to come.

Alcorn again:

Think about it: As the entire creation, including animals and plants and nature itself, fell on humanity's coat-tails, so the entire creation shall rise on our coat-tails, the beneficiary of Christ's redemptive work and resurrection.

As goes humanity, so goes all creation: the Earth, the animals, and all creation. As creation wasn't only about us, so redemption is not only about us.

The "redemption of our bodies" refers to the resurrection of the dead. Paul says that not only we but "the whole creation" longs for and cries out for the earth-wide deliverance that will come with our bodily resurrection.

Do you find yourself sighing and groaning? Have you seen the look in the eyes of a suffering animal, and thought, the creation cries out for deliverance?

We know instinctively there's something better than this. We catch glimmers of greatness, we have foretastes of joy, but they are elusive.

We groan for what creation groans for—redemption. Genesis 3 shows us God put the Curse not only on mankind but also on the earth and animals. Human beings and the Earth are inseparably linked. The Earth fell on our coat-tails. And it shall rise on our coat-tails. Together we fell, together we shall rise.

We will glorify Him by ruling over the physical universe, showing respect and benevolence for all we rule. The righteous potential of humanity will at last be revealed at our resurrection. We'll be righteous people with incorruptible bodies. We will not be inhuman in eternity, we will be more fully human than we've ever been. Sin and curse are not intrinsic to humanity—they are foreign to it. They are invaders, to be defeated.

God will transform the fallen human race into a renewed human race and the present Earth into the New Earth. It's a place that won't be ruined by tsunami and floods and earthquakes and typhoons.

The text obviously includes the only beings besides humans that walk the earth that are capable of true suffering: the animals. Isaiah 11, 60, and 65

all depict animals on the New Earth, as does Ezekiel 47. Animals will not kill each other. There are two chapters on animals in my book, Heaven.

The entire creation fell under us, and the entire creation longs for a deliverance from suffering that will one day come—in the resurrection. As the creation fell on our coat-tails it will rise on our coat-tails.

We will have new bodies, not non-bodies. We will live on a new Earth, not a non-Earth. A new car is first and foremost a car. It is not a non-car. A new Earth will be first and foremost an Earth, not a non-Earth. That means we have a reference point by which to understand the New Earth. The current Earth is bursting with clues suggesting what we will find on the New Earth.

"Joy to the World"
No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

How far does Christ's redemptive work extend? Far as the curse is found. If redemption failed to reach the farthest boundaries of the Curse, it would be incomplete. Our spirits, our bodies, the earth itself, the animal kingdom, all are under the Curse, and will be delivered from the curse. God will not abandon his creation—he will redeem it.

The Re-words:

- * Redemption: buying back what was formerly owned.
- * Reconciliation: regaining a friend.
- * Renewal: making new again, restoring to an original state.
- * Resurrection: becoming physically alive again, after death.
- * Regeneration: being born again, having a new beginning.
- * Restoration: bringing back the lost

God is the ultimate salvage artist. He loves to restore things to their original condition—and make them even better. A phrase from the hymn "Hallelujah, What a Savior!": "ruined sinners to reclaim."

Reclaim is another re-word. It recognizes that God had a prior claim on humanity that was temporarily lost but is fully restored and taken to a

new level in Christ. Stripping old paint off an antique to restore to original.

At the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus, Matthew 19:27-28

He could have said at the destruction of all things. No, at the renewal. "All things" means that this Earth is bursting with suggestions of what the New Earth will be like. What will be gone is sin and death and curse!

"In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." 2 Peter 3:13

A New Earth is a renewed Earth, a reclaimed Earth, a redeemed Earth, a resurrected Earth.

"[Christ] must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Acts 3:21

God's plan to restore everything is found in the prophets:

Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession. The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together...and I will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler. No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders...the LORD will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end. Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land [erets, the earth] forever. Isaiah 60:11-21

"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth....But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more....21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit....The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox,

but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. Isaiah 65:15-25 He [Son of Man, Messiah] was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed....But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever— yes, forever and ever. Daniel 7:14, 18

God's plan is for Christ to rule over a heaven and earth that are unified and made into one. God's presence will be on earth (Rev. 21:3), and God's will shall be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, bringing Heaven to Earth:

He made known unto us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. Ephesians 1:10

Why do we love the great stories? Because they are pictures of the greatest story. There hasn't ever been a story yet with people living happily ever after, since people die. But one story will come out that way. It's a true story. And you and I are part of it. Our redeemer is our king, who took on death and Hell, and defeated them. He will destroy death and cast Satan into the lake of fire.

Alcorn yet again:

Eugene Peterson captures the universal implications of Christ's redemption when he paraphrases Colossians 1:18-20 in *The Message*: "He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms-get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross."

The power of Christ's resurrection is enough not only to remake us, but also to remake every inch of the universe—mountains, rivers, plants, animals, stars, nebulae, quasars, and galaxies. Christ's redemptive work extends resurrection to the far reaches of the universe. This is a stunning

affirmation of God's greatness. It should move our hearts to wonder and praise.

Do you ever sense creation's restlessness? Do you hear groaning in the cold night wind? Do you feel the forest's loneliness, the ocean's agitation? Do you hear longing in the cries of whales? Do you see blood and pain in the eyes of wild animals, or the mixture of pleasure and pain in the eyes of your pets? Despite vestiges of beauty and joy, something on this earth is terribly wrong. Not only God's creatures but even inanimate objects seem to feel it. But there's also hope, visible in springtime after a hard winter. As Martin Luther put it, "Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime." The creation hopes for, even anticipates, resurrection. That's exactly what Scripture tells us:

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 creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

The "redemption of our bodies" refers to the resurrection of the dead. Paul says that not only we but "the whole creation" awaits the earthwide deliverance that will come with our bodily resurrection. Not only mankind in general but believers in particular (those with God's Spirit within) are aligned with the rest of creation, which intuitively reaches out to God for deliverance. We know what God intended for mankind and the earth, and therefore we have an object for our longing. We groan for what creation groans for—redemption. God subjected the whole creation to frustration by putting the Curse not only on mankind but also on the earth (Genesis 3:17). Why? Because human beings and the earth are inseparably linked. And as together we fell, together we shall rise. God will transform the fallen human race into a renewed human race and the present Earth into the New Earth.

What does it mean that creation waits for God's children to be revealed? Our Creator, the Master Artist, will put us on display to a wide-eyed universe. Our revelation will be an unveiling, and we will be seen as what we are, as what we were intended to be—God's image-bearers. We will glorify him by ruling over the physical universe with creativity and

camaraderie, showing respect and benevolence for all we rule. We will be revealed at our resurrection, when our adoption will be finalized and our bodies redeemed. We will be fully human, with righteous spirits and incorruptible bodies.

John Calvin writes in his commentary on Romans 8:19, "I understand the passage to have this meaning—That there is no element and no part of the world which is being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, that does not intensely hope for a resurrection."

What is "the whole creation" that groans for our resurrection? The phrase appears to be completely inclusive of "the heavens and the earth" that God created in the beginning (Genesis 1:1). So it is the heavens and the earth that eagerly await our resurrection. This includes Earth and everything on it, as well as the planets of our solar system and the far reaches of our galaxy and beyond. If it was created, Paul includes it in "the whole creation."

Why does the creation wait eagerly for our resurrection? For one simple but critically important reason: As mankind goes, so goes all of creation. Thus, just as all creation was spoiled through our rebellion, the deliverance of all creation hinges on our deliverance. The glorification of the universe hinges on the glorification of a redeemed human race. The destiny of all creation rides on our coattails.

It's fair to say that most Christians believe there will be no carryover into Heaven of our present culture, art, technology, or the products of human creativity. Indeed, it's common to doubt if we will even remember our lives on Earth or the people whom God used to influence and shape us, including our families and closest friends.

If our assumptions about the end of the world were correct, what analogy would we expect Paul to use for what will happen to creation? An old man dying? A mortally wounded soldier gasping his final breaths? Those images would fit well with a belief that the universe will come to a violent, final end. But Paul doesn't use analogies of death and destruction. He uses the analogy of childbirth: "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up until the present time" (Romans 8:22). There are pains in childbirth for mother and child, but the result is a continuation, a fulfillment of a process that has long been underway. The pains of childbirth are analogous to the present sufferings of mankind, animals, and the entire universe. But those sufferings are temporary because of the imminent miracle of birth. A far better world will be born out of this one, and a far better humanity will be born out of what we now are.

The fallen but redeemed children of God will be transformed into something new: sinless, wise stewards of the earth. Today the earth is dying; but before it dies—or in its death—it will give birth to the New Earth. The New Earth will be the child of the old Earth, just as the new human race will be the children of the old race. Yet it is still us, the same human beings, and it will also be the same Earth.

Romans 8 contains a powerful theology of suffering. There's the groaning of those dying without hope, and in contrast, the groaning of those in childbirth. Both processes are painful, yet they are very different. The one is the pain of hopeless dread, the other the pain of hopeful anticipation. The Christian's pain is very real, but it's the pain of a mother anticipating the joy of holding her child.

It is no coincidence that the first two chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-2) begin with the creation of the heavens and the earth and the last two chapters (Revelation 21-22) begin with the re-creation of the heavens and the earth.

All that was lost at the beginning will be restored at the end. And far more will be added besides.

I encourage you to read Alcorn and these other theologians. But the theologian whose work towers over all others in this area is N. T. Wright. Wright takes up the new creation theme in many of his works, but I especially recommend his *Surprised by Hope*.

On the resurrection freeing us from tyranny, see Daniel Kirk's post (<http://sibboleth.blogspot.com/2009/04/tyrants-death-and-significance-of.html>):

Last week in *The Times*, N. T. Wright made a plea for the church to "Stop Trivialising Easter." He ended his editorial with this:

The world wants to hush up the real meaning of Easter. Death is the final weapon of the tyrant or, for that matter, the anarchist, and resurrection indicates that this weapon doesn't have the last word. When the Church begins to work with Easter energy on the twin tasks of justice and beauty, we may find that it can face down the sneers of sceptics, and speak once more of Jesus in a way that will be heard.

The notion that resurrection undoes the power of the tyrant lies deep within the reflections on resurrection that began in early Judaism. In 2 Maccabees 7 we find a chilling tale of seven brothers and their mother being tormented by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The verbal assault launched

at the king indicates that the followers of the true God would count on that God to bring justice to the world: they, the disembodied, would receive their bodies back, and the would-be king will find himself the recipient of justice from the hand of the True King.

Why would a man give his body in obedience to God? The third brother proclaims: "I got these hands from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." In the words of George Nickelsberg, justice requires *quid pro quo*: the one who gives his body must, if God be just, receive that body back. Resurrection means that the tyrant does not have the last word.

But there's more--and here's where I think we too often fall into the trap of being too "other worldly" even in our resurrection theology. Hope for resurrection does *not* lead these early Jewish martyrs to abandon the expectation that God will act within the current world order to bring about justice and vindication.

One brother taunts Antiochus with the threat that God will torment Antiochus in recompense for tormenting these faithful Jews (2 Macc 7:17). And, in fact, we discover several chapters later that Antiochus is tormented in his bowels even as he had dismembered other people's bowels (ch. 9).

Although the brothers' hope for themselves is ultimately tied to God's judgment of the world, such an expectation does not displace an expectation that God will act for good on the stage of current events.

As Wright says, resurrection must mean that we do not allow those with the power and keys of death to determine what we affirm. We must oppose injustice, we must advocate for beauty. And we must also hope, not only for an ultimate vindication of the Good, but also for penultimate vindications of the way of God.

We must act as those who would take hold of the future to which we have been called and bring it to bear on the present. And this all the more because the final resurrection harvest has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus.

On the resurrection as victory, see Daniel Kirk's post (<http://sibboleth.blogspot.com/2009/04/resurrection-god-wins.html>):

What we think we're looking back on makes all the difference for what we have to look forward to.

It took me a very, very long time of listening to the Easter story and hearing those words of the apostles' creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body," before it started to sink in. Christianity doesn't celebrate the natural continuance of the immortal soul after death. (And, of course, Christianity doesn't celebrate that Bultmanian rubbish that "Easter faith" "arose" in the hearts of the disciples.)

Why resurrection? In short, because resurrection is victory.

The biblical narrative contrasts God's purposes for humanity with "life". This doesn't only mean mental consciousness, nor does it only mean embodied existence. These are both necessary, but neither is sufficient for life. Life means a rightly ordered existence: in communion with God, obeying God; in communion with other people, loving them; in communion with the created order, tending, ordering, and ruling the world on God's behalf.

Death, on the other hand, is coterminous with sin and with the dissolution of the created order. "On the day you eat of it you will surely die": cursed are you in your relationships with one another; cursed are you in your relationship with God; cursed is the ground because of you; the fear of you will fall upon the animals. God tied the fate of creation to the fate of God's most cherished creature. And humanity unleashed a torrent of death and disorder. These are the powers fighting against the purposes of God.

So when we create visions of an eternity as purified, bodiless souls, we are conceding defeat: our bodies, created good, are forever lost to the insurmountable power of death.

So when we create visions of Christian hope as being up in heaven, we are conceding defeat: the earth, created good, is lost forever to the insurmountable power of disorder, decay, injustice, and violence.

If there is no resurrection, God loses his world--and evil wins.

Resurrection, though, is victory: victory over the power of sin, victory over the power of death. The forces allied against God and God's purposes are undone. God's most precious creature, humanity, is newly created and enthroned, once again, as the faithful ruler of God's creation on God's behalf. The rule of the resurrected one finds its consummation not only in the removal of all God's enemies, but in the restoration of all God's creation: with the redemption of *our* body comes the long-awaited renewal of all creation.

Resurrection means not only that every tear will be wiped away, but that there will be thousands upon thousands of eyes whose tears will never flow. Resurrection means not only that there will be no more pain, but that there will be full hearts and thriving bodies that will know true wholeness for the first time. Resurrection means not only that there will be no more war, but that there will be myriad peoples and nations and tribes and tongues living in true harmony. Resurrection means not only that the lion will lie down with the lamb, but that there will be lions and lambs and grass and dirt.

All was undone. But God declares, "Behold! I make all things new." If God were to have true victory, it would all have to start with people--God's chosen representatives upon the face of the earth. And so it has.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Ah, new creation! The old things have passed away. Behold! The new have come.

There are a number of books that work out the implications of the resurrection in various ways, directly and indirectly, including: Eugene Peterson's *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places* and *Living the Resurrection; What Does it Mean to Be Saved?*, edited by John Stackhouse; and Rodney Clapp's *Tortured Wonders*.

The new creation/new heavens and earth is an already present reality. A number of new creation passages speak much more to the messianic age of history than they do to the resurrection, including Isa. 60. Jim Jordan, following the great Puritan scholar John Lightfoot, has also made a good case for taking Rom. 8:17-25 as a passage about the conversion of the Gentile world, finding fulfillment in

the first century (though I remain unconvinced for now). For a study of “new heavens and new earth” language as it applies to the present, see my Rev. 21 sermon from 1/29/06 (<http://trinity-pres.net/audio/sermon06-01-29.mp3>).

No other religion or worldview gives such great incentives for poverty fighting. The promised new creation will be a world without poverty, hunger, crime, or unjust violence. There will be no more war, hunger, or sorrow, or sadness. God hates poverty in all its forms. And if God is determined to do something about it, we must fight it as well.

Likewise, no other religion or worldview gives such great incentives for opposing tyranny. The power of tyrants is death – they use fear of death to keep people in check, to control people. But resurrection hope breaks the fear of death (Heb. 2). Resurrection hope means the tyrant can never have the last word. It means tyrants can no longer bully or intimidate with the power of death. We can be fearless, even when doing what is right might bring suffering or persecution.

What happens when we live as God’s new creation people in a still fallen world?

As God’s people in the world, we are here to rock the boat, to make waves, to stir things up, to force issues, to bring change. We’re called to disciple the nations, which obviously includes renewing cultures.

James says faith without works is dead. Pope John Paul 2 used to say this means that faith that doesn’t become culture is dead. Faith that fails to shape and renew culture is dead. If we really believe Jesus is risen, if we really believe we will rise to be like him at the last day, then that must show itself in everything we do. Our resurrection hope should be continually revealing itself in our family life, in our work, in our politics, in our art and music – in every area of life. Resurrection hope should bear fruit in the form of truth, beauty, and goodness in our everyday lives.

God doesn’t need “nice” Christians who are privately pious but too polite to take a public stand for him. Resurrection hope should make us loving and generous and merciful, but also tough and bold and honest. God does not want us to be afraid of the world or seeking to escape the world. To do so would be to concede

defeat to sin, Satan, and death. God wants us to stand in the world and fight. He wants us to transform the world by living lives of faith, hope, and love.

The Resurrection means victory. It means life. It means we have a share in the indestructible life of Christ, life in communion with God, life in harmony with God's creation, as we wisely rule the creation in union with Christ. If there is no creation, death wins. But because Christ is risen, we will be raised with him, and all of creation and culture will be remade and glorified.

This theology of the new creation helps us cut through the false dichotomies of America's liberal vs. conservative debates.

Conservatives tend to say, "Take responsibility for yourself and don't worry about society. Try to live a good life in your own private way and let others take responsibility for themselves."

Liberals tend to say, "We need to solve the world's problems – usually through political means. Through government, we can take care of one another."

But neither one of these approaches fits with the kingdom of God. Certainly, we should take responsibility for ourselves, as much as we are able. But we can never ignore wider social issues. We have a social responsibility, social obligations. However, we should not think society's problems can be addressed primarily through political means.

The resurrection not only summons us to personal holiness, but living by a "new creation ethic" in the present also drives us to be socially responsible, compassionate, and engaged.

The Luther quote at the beginning of the sermon is from his commentary on Galatians. Here it is in full:

All the prophets did foresee in spirit, that Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, blasphemer, etc. that ever was....for he being made a sacrifice, for the sins of the whole world, is not now an innocent person and without sins....Our most merciful Father...sent his only Son into the world and laid upon him the

sins of all men, saying: Be thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged on the cross; and, briefly, be thou [that] person which hath committed the sins of all men; see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them. Here now cometh the law and saith: I find him a sinner...therefore let him die upon the cross.

N. T. Wright, giving us some of the most beautiful words ever written on the meaning of Easter, from his book *Following Jesus*:

Without Easter, Calvary was just another political execution of a failed Messiah.

Without Easter, the world is trapped between the shoulder shrug of the cynic, the fantasy of the escapist, and the tanks of the the tyrant.

Without Easter, there is no reason to suppose that good will triumph over evil, that love will win over hatred, that life will win over death.

But with Easter we have hope; because hope depends on love; and love has become human and has died, and is no alive for evermore, and holds the keys of Death and Hades. It is because of him that we know--we don't just hope, we know--that God will wipe away all tears from all eyes.

And in that knowledge we find ourselves to be Sunday people, called to live in a world of Fridays.

In that knowledge we know ourselves to be Easter people, called to minister to a world full of Calvary's. In that knowledge we find that the hand that dries our tears passes the cloth on to us, and bids us to follow him, to go to dry one another's tears.

The Lamb calls us to follow him wherever he goes; into the dark places of the world, the dark places of our hearts, the places where tears blot out the sunlight....and he bids us shine his morning light into the darkness, and share his ministry of wiping away the tears.

And as we worship, and adore, and follow the lamb, we join, already, in

the song of Revelation 5.11-14, the song that one day the trees and the mountains and the whales and the waterfalls--the whole world, reborn on Easter morning--will sing with us:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...

to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and blessing!

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and power
forever and ever, Amen."

Here is a portion of his 2009 Easter article

(<http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=10250>):

Easter was the pilot project. What God did for Jesus that explosive morning is what He intends to do for the whole creation. We who live in the interval between Jesus's Resurrection and the final rescue and transformation of the whole world are called to be new-creation people here and now. That is the hidden meaning of the greatest festival Christians have.

This true meaning has remained hidden because the Church has trivialised it and the world has rubbished it. The Church has turned Jesus's Resurrection into a "happy ending" after the dark and messy story of Good Friday, often scaling it down so that "resurrection" becomes a fancy way of saying "He went to Heaven". Easter then means: "There really is life after death". The world shrugs its shoulders. We may or may not believe in life after death, but we reach that conclusion independently of Jesus, of odd stories about risen bodies and empty tombs.

But "resurrection" to 1st-century Jews wasn't about "going to Heaven": it was about the physically dead being physically alive again. Some Jews (not all) believed that God would do this for all people in the end. Nobody, including Jesus's followers, was expecting one person to be bodily raised from the dead in the middle of history. The stories of the Resurrection are certainly not "wish-fulfilments" or the result of what dodgy social science calls "cognitive dissonance". First-century Jews who followed would-be messiahs knew that if your leader got killed by the authorities, it meant you had backed the wrong man. You then had a choice: give up the revolution or get yourself a new leader. Going around

saying that he'd been raised from the dead wasn't an option.

Unless he had been. Jesus of Nazareth was certainly dead by the Friday evening; Roman soldiers were professional killers and wouldn't have allowed a not-quite-dead rebel leader to stay that way for long. When the first Christians told the story of what happened next, they were not saying: "I think he's still with us in a spiritual sense" or "I think he's gone to heaven". All these have been suggested by people who have lost their historical and theological nerve.

The historian must explain why Christianity got going in the first place, why it hailed Jesus as Messiah despite His execution (He hadn't defeated the pagans, or rebuilt the Temple, or brought justice and peace to the world, all of which a Messiah should have done), and why the early Christian movement took the shape that it did. The only explanation that will fit the evidence is the one the early Christians insisted upon - He really had been raised from the dead. His body was not just reanimated. It was transformed, so that it was no longer subject to sickness and death.

Let's be clear: the stories are not about someone coming back into the present mode of life. They are about someone going on into a new sort of existence, still emphatically bodily, if anything, more so. When St Paul speaks of a "spiritual" resurrection body, he doesn't mean "non-material", like a ghost. "Spiritual" is the sort of Greek word that tells you, not what something is made of, but what is animating it. The risen Jesus had a physical body animated by God's life-giving Spirit. Yes, says St Paul, that same Spirit is at work in us, and will have the same effect - and in the whole world.

Now, suddenly, the real meaning of Easter comes into view, as well as the real reason why it has been trivialised and sidelined. Easter is about a new creation that has already begun. God is remaking His world, challenging all the other powers that think that is their job. The rich, wise order of creation and its glorious, abundant beauty are reaffirmed on the other side of the thing that always threatens justice and beauty - death. Christianity's critics have always sneered that nothing has changed. But everything has. The world is a different place.

Easter has been sidelined because this message doesn't fit our prevailing world view. For at least 200 years the West has lived on the dream that we

can bring justice and beauty to the world all by ourselves.

The split between God and the "real" world has produced a public life that lurches between anarchy and tyranny, and an aesthetic that swings dramatically between sentimentalism and brutalism. But we still want to do things our own way, even though we laugh at politicians who claim to be saving the world, and artists who claim "inspiration" when they put cows in formaldehyde.

The world wants to hush up the real meaning of Easter. Death is the final weapon of the tyrant or, for that matter, the anarchist, and resurrection indicates that this weapon doesn't have the last word. When the Church begins to work with Easter energy on the twin tasks of justice and beauty, we may find that it can face down the sneers of sceptics, and speak once more of Jesus in a way that will be heard.

In another place Wright writes:

The bodily resurrection of Jesus isn't a take-it-or-leave-it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish-fulfillment religion. Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity is a religion for wimps. Put it back, and you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud and Nietzsche as its prophets; you can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Those who celebrate the mighty resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, have an awesome and nonnegotiable responsibility. When we say "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" we are saying that Jesus is Lord of the world, and that the present would-be lords of the world are not. When we sing, in the old hymn, that "Judah's Lion burst his chains and crushed the serpent's head," are we ready to put that victory into practice? Are we ready to speak up for, and to take action on behalf of, those even in our own local community, let alone farther afield, who are quietly being crushed by uncaring and unjust systems?

Are we ready to speak up for the truth of the gospel over the dinner table and in the coffee bar and in the council chamber?

John Armstrong's recent series on Postmodern Apologetics has good thoughts on the new creation:

Heaven Is Not Our Final Destination

It sounds like heresy but it is precisely the truth that we find in the gospel of the kingdom in the New Testament. Heaven is *not* our ultimate resting place, or final home. We are not destined "to live above with saints we love" but rather to live as Christ's bride in the "new heavens and new earth," a place where heaven and earth become one glorious redeemed whole.

A friend of mine has put it this way. "God is in the universe business." His determination is to reign in grace over all that has been torched and ruined by the fall. The result will not be the end of this world but rather its re-creation. This is how Paul puts it in Romans 8:

That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy (*The Message*, Romans 8:18-25).

Some will point to 2 Peter 3:1-10 to say that as the world was once deluged with water so in the coming Day of the Lord it will be deluged with fire. This is precisely what Peter does say. But the question remains: "To what final purpose is this fire?" As the flood waters came in judgment, and those whom God redeemed were rescued to fill the new earth, so in the

coming judgment the world will be burned but not so as to destroy it completely, but rather to cleanse it and restore it to its original state.

Paradise lost will be paradise regained!

The apostle John writes, in Revelation 21:1, "I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea." And then in verse 2: "I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband" (*The Message*). The scene painted for us in the last chapter of the Bible, in Revelation 22, is a glorious portrait of a throne, a street, a city and a river. This is not "pie in the sky" eschatology in the least.

The World a Shadow of What We Shall See

N. T. Wright has repeatedly reminded us that the world is simply a shadow of the future. If we could capture this reality, he maintains, Christian discipleship would be turned upside down. The gospel of the kingdom is not about escaping this world for the next. It is about the continual renewal of this world by the work of the Spirit in and through the people of the new community. The vision Paul provides for us in his epistles is one which reveals how we become the agents of God's kingdom as it progressively reflects the truth, beauty and goodness of the God of love. We do not usher in the kingdom by our good works. We will not "bring in the day of brotherhood," but we are agents with God that the Holy Spirit uses as God brings about his eternal kingdom both now and in the final day.

Wright has correctly noted that the "Adam project" was not about God needing a special friend to repudiate the world he created. The world is not bad, it is good. In Adam God wanted to make image-bearers to the world, vice-regents who would display his creativity and special care for the whole world. The cosmos is not to be feared or rejected, but loved and enjoyed to the glory of God.

Two Great Enemies of the Kingdom

I believe the two greatest enemies of this gospel of the kingdom have been dualism and faulty pietism. In dualism we separate the world from our soul by saying the world is a bad place where nothing good and lasting can be enjoyed. This reveals itself in the various ways that we speak about the spirit as good and the world (material things) as bad.

In faulty pietism we stress that acts of private piety (e.g. devotion, prayer, fasting, etc.) are the true good, and acts that involve us in making culture

or enjoying creation are harmful to our spiritual well-being. This kind of faulty pietism is primarily concerned with *escaping* this present world. Resurrection, both Christ's and ours in the Day of Christ to come, means that God is running the show, not the devil. (Thus dualism is a terrible heresy.) Our last enemy, death, *has already been defeated*. "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you" (Romans 8:11). This is Paul's appeal to us regarding sin and our present mortal life. We can, and must, "put to death the misdeeds of the body" if we are to live (Romans 8:13). We are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). This also means that faulty pietism (our various efforts of body and spirit) to bring about godliness by hating this world will not bring what we long for, conformity to Christ in true holiness.

Reaching Postmodern People with This Story

The great story that we have to tell this post-biblical generation, this increasing secular culture, is not: "Trust Jesus to take you to heaven and stop sinning!" The narrative we tell is one of this big picture, the story of what God has done and will yet do to redeem earth in Jesus Christ. Donald Miller, a popular writer among younger Christians, has said this so well. He writes: "I began to slowly realize that the God of the Bible, not the God of formulas and bullet points that some have turned the Bible into, but the God of the actual Bible, the old one before we learned to read it like a self help book, had a great deal to say to me (Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004, 41). Many Christians feel inadequate to do evangelism today, much less apologetics. They lack the savvy to do it right and they feel it. But they can relate to the gospel of the kingdom and they can tell the story. Good pastors and teachers must come to grips with this simple truth and begin to build up the confidence of their people so they can once again share the hope that lies within them.

People are starving for hope. We saw in a recent presidential campaign how deeply this message resonated on a purely political and emotional level. They long to see justice worked out in an unjust world. They desire beauty but see ugliness all around them. They even hunger for deep spirituality if you observe the direction of this culture. And they long to see love really working in their families and community. They want to see their neighborhoods repaired and peaceful. But it is the people of God

who really have the grand story of hope that will give this generation a real reason to hope.....

The Justice Paradigm

A careful reading of the whole Bible, and the church has rightly accepted the whole canon of sixty-six books as the Bible, reveals that God is deeply interested in how people live out their human relationships with each other. He is Lord and thus calls all people everywhere to repent and submit to his Lordship in the kingdom. He calls them to begin by loving him and then by walking humbly with God and man and by loving justice.

Isaiah 61:1-11 makes it abundantly plain that sin destroyed the wholeness of creation. The result was a fragmented and broken world. The prophet says that the Messiah would come to heal this brokenness and thus restore our relationship with God and one another. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus says that he is the very Messiah that Isaiah foresaw.

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim 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.*

After quoting this text Luke told us that Jesus said to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).

Unbelievers hear us talking about going to heaven, and then about how *they* are all going to hell. This makes them wonder about us and our dogmatism. Their lives are broken, they long for justice and they crave hope. They hear us talking about something far off in the wild blue yonder and conclude, "These Christians have no message for us."

But if we pursue the Jesus paradigm of the kingdom, and preach *and* live this good news, the thing that the world will see plainly is that we love justice because we love God and man. We long to help people deal with real problems that rip their lives apart. We have a message of freedom that releases them from their prison of sin and its deadly effects; e.g. divorce, sexual brokenness, homelessness, poverty, disease and rejection. The kingdom of God has come into this world in Jesus Christ and he "proclaims the year of the Lord's favor." This message of the kingdom brings hope.

Don't take my word for this. Go back and read the prophet Isaiah for yourself. Don't push everything off into the future when you read these texts. Read them with this dramatic story in Luke 4 before you as you meditate on them. Ask, "What does this really mean for the people who have been truly set free by the gospel to *enter* the kingdom? What does this really mean for those who have been given sight by God to *see* the kingdom?"

"The Justice Generation"

An African-American student of mine, who serves with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, told me about a brother in Christ who has called this present generation "the justice generation." (I think this phrase is common but it was new to me.) Postmodern young people, he maintains, have a deep concern about oppression and injustice. They long to find people who demonstrate that they want to reverse the effects of these sins.

The truth of this observation can be seen in how younger people care about Darfur, AIDS and suffering of children. It explains why Bono and U2 can draw such huge crowds and generate such deep response. My student says that these are the real issues that move people when Christians show how the gospel of the kingdom really and truly addresses them. When they hear of the grace and power of God in this context they will listen. I would call this a powerful *missional apologetic*.

This same student argues that in the past the only "on ramp" we provided to non-believers was "full belief." If people accepted our message, especially as we presented it through our propositions, then they could join us and become a part of our church. But this student rightly argues that nowhere in Scripture does Jesus put up such barriers to unbelievers. What he did was invite sinners to follow him and see what he was about; i.e., to enter into life in him and then become his followers. Don't misunderstand me here, this gospel of the kingdom addressed sin, judgment and the world to come. And it specifically called on people to turn from sin and to follow Jesus in true faith.

But you say, "Jesus did put some huge barriers up in the four Gospels." I agree, but they were never designed to keep sinners from following him. They were meant to sort out the self-righteous religious people who pretended to be God's true children because they were so religious and devout. This is why Jesus hung out with the wrong people and offended the religious so often.

Just Follow Jesus

If we follow Jesus, as the Gospels plainly present him to us, we will also invite people to work with us in seeking the deliverance of people from oppression and the healing of human brokenness.

Some will say, "But this sounds like liberalism to me." Not so. It can become a form of "good works" religion in the hands of the self-righteous but such perversion of the truth should not hinder us from embracing the truth that we see here. The gospel that saves your body and soul (we are not dualists) also brings you into a kingdom where everything you do is to be done "for the glory of God." This makes all of life meaningful and Christ-centered. This is true eschatology!

Time and again Jesus met people where they were, in their state of brokenness and misery, and invited them to "follow me." Postmodern thinking leads people to believe on the basis of what they understand in a story that is being lived by others. This is precisely what God has called the church to be-a community living out the gospel of the kingdom for others. I can't think of a better apologetic than this one.

Isaiah 60 describes the kingdom of God as a kingdom of light. Jesus took cosmic darkness so we can enter the kingdom of cosmic light. Here is how David Cassidy describes it, in a timely, relevant way (<http://bythissign.blogspot.com/2009/03/why-only-hour-become-better-tree-hugger.html>):

The sight of darkness covering the cities of the world yesterday for 'Earth Hour' is singularly prophetic. One wonders how much energy was expended in getting out the word to do this kind of thing and then report on it in glowing terms - lots of word processors humming away in the candle-light. But more significantly...

Darkness for an hour once a year won't save the world. That took three hours once for all time.

"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour." - Matthew 27:45

If you are uncertain about the context of those words, read the entire chapter. The words of the Gospel will lead to authentic 'tree-hugging' - the embrace of the Cross and of the One who gave his life there to save

sinners and reclaim the entire creation, liberating it from the slavery of death. Turning out the lights is only an invitation to consider the darkness of the fallen society we blithely call 'culture'. Without repentance it won't come as any surprise that God will permanently turn out the lights on the rebellious City of Man. The darkness one Friday afternoon 2000 years ago brought Light to the world; the darkness for an hour on a Saturday in 2009 simply drives home the point of our sad, fallen idolatrous state.

"Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Behold darkness shall cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples. But the Lord shall arise upon you and his glory shall be seen upon you; nations shall come to your light, and kings shall come to the brightness of your rising." Isaiah 60

Archbishop Charles Chaput's "Feast of Corpus Christi" address from 2001, entitled "'Come to me: Be with me' – Relationships have consequences," (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/document.php?n=229>) was influential on my sermon prep. Here are some excerpts from this excellent address:

[Our relationship with God] has consequences. Christian faith isn't just a set of ideas or moral principles. It's an encounter with a living person, Jesus Christ. We meet Him in Scripture, in each other, and most intimately in the Eucharist. And when we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, it has consequences — very big consequences.

Jesus Christ is alive — here, today, now. He lives tangibly — flesh and blood — in the Communion we receive. That's why, following the lead of Scripture, we call Jesus "Emmanuel" — the Hebrew word for "God with us." The Eucharist is our bread of life. It's more than a symbol, more than a community meal, more than a sign of our unity. It's all of those things, but much more than those things...in the Eucharist, Jesus is saying to each of us today, "Come to me: Be with me."

We all like to be with Jesus at times like the Transfiguration, with sun rays streaming through the clouds and glory shining in the Lord's face. That's the easy part. Peter, James and John liked that part so much they wanted to set up tents and stay on the mountain. But Jesus led them back down

into the world, and that's where the story gets difficult. Not many of us want to be in Gethsemane when Jesus asks us to pray with Him awhile. Not many of us want to stay around when He asks us: Be with me, among the lepers and the paralytics. Be with me, when I stand before Pilate. Be with me, when I hang on the cross.

Let me give you a few statistics. We have 63 million Catholics in this country. Somewhere between 50 million and 80 million Americans claim they've been "born again." Ninety-six percent of Americans believe in God; 90 percent pray; 93 percent of American homes have a Bible; 87 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian; and more than 40 percent of Americans attend church weekly — which, on the surface, makes the United States seem like one of the most religiously active countries in the world. Americans spend \$4 billion dollars a year on CDs, books and bumper stickers honoring Jesus Christ.

But if that's true — if we Americans are so seemingly religious — then why is it that more than half of all Americans can't name the authors of the Four Gospels; 63 percent of us don't know what a Gospel is; 58 percent can't name five of the Ten Commandments; and 10 percent believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

Why is it that pornography is a multibillion dollar industry in our country? Why are a million unborn babies aborted each year? Why are hundreds of thousands of families locked below the poverty line; why are 200 million guns in circulation; and why do we live in one of the most violent cultures in the world?

A man can say he loves his wife, but he proves it by his actions. Men and women can say they love God, but they prove it by their actions. Relationships have consequences, or they're not real. Jesus tells us, "I am the bread of life"; "I am the light of the world"; "I am the way, the truth and the life"; "No one comes to the Father except through me"; "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." In saying these things, Jesus invites us into a relationship of love, and being in love with Jesus Christ means being with Him all the way — from the silence we share with Him at Communion, to the work we share with Him in the sanctification of the world.

We need to understand that the...faith is personal – intensely personal – because each of us is unique and unrepeatable, and God loves each of us uniquely and infinitely. But “personal” is not the same thing as “private.” Our faith is never private; it always has social implications. The Eucharist is not a pious retreat into the self. Our relationship with Jesus Christ begins and ends with a call to discipleship. And discipleship has a cost. The German Lutheran martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said that “cheap grace . . . grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . . is the deadly enemy of [the] Church.” He meant that comfortable faith, easy faith, is false faith. Relationships have consequences.

Hearing the Gospel isn’t enough. Talking about our faith isn’t enough. We have to do something about it. Each of us, in a personal way, needs to become what the Early Church called Mary — a kind of theotokos, a “God-bearer.” The seed of faith has to bear fruit in a life of Christian action, a life of personal Christian witness, or it’s just words — and talk is cheap....

The Eucharist is our food as a believing people — it’s meant to nourish and strengthen us in bringing others to new life in Jesus Christ. God doesn’t need “anonymous” Christians, Christians who blend in, Christians who don’t make waves. When Jesus told us, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19), He gave us a missionary mandate to convert the world — and He meant you and me, today, right now . . . not somebody else, tomorrow.

We’re here to rock the boat. That’s what it means to be leaven. The Epistle of James says that faith without works is a dead faith. John Paul II says the same thing with a slightly different twist: Faith which does not become culture is dead faith. By “culture” he means the entire environment of our lives. Our culture reflects who we are and what we value. If we really believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, it should be obvious in our families, our work, our laws, our music, art, architecture — everything...

Faith should impregnate everything we do. It should bear fruit every day in beauty and new life. And that’s why God doesn’t need “nice”

Christians, Christians who are personally opposed to sin, but too polite to do anything about it publicly. Mother Teresa was a good and holy woman . . . but she wasn't necessarily "nice." Real discipleship should be loving and generous, just and merciful, honest and wise – but also tough and zealous . . . and determined to turn the world toward Christ.

If God wants us to be His cooperators in transforming the world, it's because the world needs conversion. The world is good because God created it. But the world is also sinful, because we've freely made it that way by our sinful choices and actions

We need to understand the world as it really is...as a pattern of light and shadow, good and evil. That means we need to be actively involved in the world, for the sake of the world. We need to love the world as it needs to be loved – affirming its accomplishments, and redeeming its mistakes.

Listen to these opening lines from *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in [the] hearts" of the disciples of Jesus – and this is "why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history." And later in the same text, listen to these words:

" . . . Christians can yearn for nothing more ardently than to serve the men of this age with an evergrowing generosity and success."

Gaudium et Spes offers us an "examination of conscience" we can apply to just about every aspect of our lives – our personal choices, our parishes, our business activity, our political leaders, everything. For example:

Do we reverence and defend the dignity of the human person from conception to natural death?

Do we really love our enemies? Do we even try?

Do we teach our children to take responsibility for society, and to participate in building up the common good? Do we teach that by our own good example?

Do we preach, by our actions, the dignity of human labor and the value of human activity? Do we live our lives with a purpose – the purpose of co-creating with God a truly human world, a world shaped by the Gospel, a “new heaven and new earth”?

Do we promote the nobility of marriage and the sanctity of the family?

Do we work to ensure that our art, science, technology, music, law, entertainment media – all the elements of our culture – advance the real dignity of women and men?

Do we practice justice in our own social and economic relationships? Do we really try to root out the prejudices in our own hearts? And do we encourage justice in our friends, business associates and leaders?

Do we take an active hand in the political process? Do we demand that our officials promote the sanctity of the human person? And do we do everything in our power to correct or replace them if they don't?

Finally, do we create in ourselves and in our children a sense of international community? The word “Catholic” means universal. We live most of our lives in our families and parishes — and that's where our first priorities should always lie...We're all internationalists. That's why issues like hunger, economic development, the rights of migrant workers, religious persecution – even when they're happening on the other side of the world, they're happening to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. And so they involve us.

As Christians in the world, we have a sacred responsibility to the world – to be in the world as agents of the Gospel. We think too little of ourselves when we assume that we were made for nothing better than the “present arrangement” of things. We should never be slaves to the status quo.

God put us here to be agents of change. Woody Allen once said that “80 percent of life is just showing up.” He sounds funny — but he's wrong. That's a life 80 percent wasted, because there's so much need in the world crying out to be heard.

There's a Ghanaian proverb that goes like this: "God swats the flies of the cow with no tail." It means that God takes care of the poor, because the poor don't have the power to take care of themselves....

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "I'm puzzled about which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix." And the great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, once said that, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the world." And Vatican II never said, and never meant, that Christians should let the world go to hell because of some mistaken idea of good manners.

The *Letter to Diognetus*, which was written in the Second Century, says that ". . . the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world . . . They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven . . . It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly it is by Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together."

This is what the Gospel of John means in Chapter 17, verses 14-19. Jesus prays for a Church in, but not of, the world. He prays not that we be taken out of the world, but that we be guarded from the power of the world. We are to be distinct and recognizable as disciples of Christ.

Scripture calls Satan the "Father of Lies" for a reason. We need to get it into our heads that the Gospel is the real world, but again and again in daily life we hear that Christians are old-fashioned, or irrelevant, or inflexible or unrealistic. These are all lies. An interviewer once asked Mother Teresa, "Why are you so holy?" She answered, "You sound as if holiness is abnormal. To be holy is normal. To be anything else is abnormal."

C.S. Lewis once wrote that "heaven is an acquired taste" — but only because we've addicted ourselves to sin and its delusions. What some people call "the real world" is usually just the configuration of all those

forces which are organized against God. This is not the real world – but the devil wants us to think it is. The devil wants us to believe that the Gospel view is an idealistic dream.

That's insidious, because it traps us in the status quo of those "powers and principalities" who have the world in a death grip. So we constantly need to ask ourselves: Are we accommodated Christians?

Are we too comfortable? Have we assimilated too well? Socrates warned that we should be wary when people praise us. As Christians, we should be worried when nobody wants to persecute us.

Gaudium et Spes tells us that only through Jesus Christ can men and women find eternal life. Where do we find Jesus Christ? We begin in the Eucharist and Scripture, and we follow Him to the suffering and wounded.

In *The Odyssey* (Book XIX), when Odysseus finally returns home to Ithaca after years of wandering, he disguises himself as an old man. Not even his wife or son recognizes him. That night, just before bed, the aged nurse who cared for Odysseus in his youth bathes him . . . and she recognizes a scar on his leg. She couldn't recognize him until she saw his scar.

When you go home tonight, read the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, verses 19-31. The Risen Christ appears to His frightened disciples, and they recognize Him in seeing His scars. The Risen Christ has scars. So if you want to see the Risen Christ today, begin by looking for Him in the people who have His scars – the homeless person, the AIDS patient, the mentally handicapped child. The First Letter of Peter says, "By His wounds you have been healed" (2:24). The suffering among us are not some kind of embarrassing mistake. They're Christ's invitation to each of us to really live, to really believe – to be with Him, by serving them.

Our commitment to be with Christ among those who suffer reminds us of one other important thing. Justice needs to be at the heart of all our relationships and all of our evangelization efforts.

Chief Dan George once said that, “When the white man came, we had the land and they had the Bibles. Now they have the land, and we have the Bibles.” We can’t have a living relationship with Jesus Christ without rooting our lives in justice. The Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ’s presence — not only in our hearts, but also in our daily lives and especially in our treatment of others.

Our job is to bring Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ. But how can a few simple people like us convert the world? Mary and the Apostles asked the same question. They changed the world by letting Jesus Christ live and work through them. We don’t need to be afraid. We need to be confident in the promise made by Christ Himself: “I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Don’t be afraid of the world. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley once sneered that “I could believe in Christ if He did not drag along behind Him that leprous bride of His, the Church.” But Shelley’s long gone, isn’t he . . . and the Church is still here, still bringing life to the world.

Don’t be afraid of the world. Charles Spurgeon once said, “The way you defend the Bible is the same way you defend a lion. You just let it loose.” So much of the world is already dead without knowing it — and that’s exactly why people respond to the truth when they hear it. Robert Farrar Capon wrote that, “Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the Gospel is to be dead. You don’t have to be smart. You don’t have to be good. You don’t have to be wise. You don’t have to be wonderful. You just have to be dead. That’s it.”

Understand the purpose of your life. When you leave here today, you’re going out into a struggle for the soul of the world....That’s your vocation. Nothing is more important than that work. C.S. Lewis once said that “Christianity, if false, is of no importance; and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

....[Just as Jesus] strengthened and encouraged the first Apostles, so too He will strengthen and encourage each of us — if we let Him. The age of miracles — the age of faith — is not over. It’s just beginning. It begins today in each of you.

We become who we really are — we experience reality most vividly — when we allow Christ to mingle His flesh and blood with ours; when we allow the bread of life to transform us, and to work through us to renew the face of the earth. Each of us is called to share in God’s creative and procreative power to give life....

Relationships have consequences. Jesus loved us enough to die for us. Surely we can love Him enough to live for Him — and be His witnesses to others.

Tim Keller describes the role of the church as God’s new/alternative city in the world: “As Augustine wrote, every human city is a political community united by a common passion—‘to make a name for ourselves’ (Gen 11:4). People come to the city needing to prove themselves and get an identity based on accruing and collecting achievement, beauty, status, wealth, and power. But within every human city is the ‘City of God,’ an alternate political community based on love and sacrificial service to others whose visible behavior shines out to show the world the beauty of God’s grace (Matthew 5:14-17).” That’s our “new creation ethic”: We are to live as lights shining into the darkness.

I know that in mentioning talking animals in the sermon, I edged towards “the deep weird.” I won’t develop the point, though I do think we should learn to think of all animals as God’s pets. Animals were made for many reasons — creatures for man to eat, creatures for man to eat, etc. — but most especially animals were made for their Maker. The Bible is clear — he cares even for the sparrow. That care must include bringing animals into the new creation.

There are a lot of questions that come up when you affirm animals will be present in the resurrection world. Will extinct animals like dinosaurs be there? Will we eat animals? And, yes, will these glorified animals talk? The talking animal question is interesting because the Bible starts with a talking animal in the garden; we also have the example of Balaam’s donkey. Perhaps C. S. Lewis’ Narnia series gives us some insight, and there will be both talking and mute

animals in the new creation. Lewis' also address some interesting questions about animal afterlife in *The Problem of Pain*:

The error we must avoid is that of considering them in themselves. Man is to be understood only in his relation to God. The beasts are to be understood only in their relation to man and, through man, to God. Let us here guard against one of those untransmuted lumps of atheistical thought which often survive in the minds of modern believers. Atheists naturally regard the co-existence of man and the other animals as a mere contingent result of interacting biological facts; and the taming of an animal by a man as a purely arbitrary interference of one species with another. The "real" or "natural" animal to them is the wild one, and the tame animal is an artificial or unnatural thing.

But a Christian must not think so. Man was appointed by God to have dominion over the beasts, and everything a man does to an animal is either a lawful exercise, or a sacrilegious abuse, of an authority by divine right.

The tame animal is therefore, in the deepest sense, the only "natural" animal - the only one we see occupying the place it was made to occupy, and it is on the tame animal that we must base all our doctrine of beasts.

Now it will be seen that, in so far as the tame animal has a real self or personality, it owes this almost entirely to its master. If a good sheepdog seems "almost human" that is because a good shepherd has made it so.

I have already noted the mysterious force of the word "in." I do not take all the senses of it in the New Testament to be identical, so that man is in Christ and Christ in God and the Holy Spirit in the Church and also in the individual believer in exactly the same sense. They may be senses that rhyme or correspond rather than a single sense.

I am now going to suggest - though with great readiness to be set right by real theologians - that there may be a sense, corresponding, though not identical, with these, in which those beasts that attain a real self are in their masters. That is to say, you must not think of a beast by itself, and call that a personality and then inquire whether God will raise and bless that. You must take the whole context in which the beast acquires its

selfhood - namely "The-goodman-and-the-goodwife-ruling-their-children-and-their-beasts-in-the-good-homestead."

That whole context may be regarded as a "body" in the Pauline (or a closely sub-Pauline) sense; and how much of that "body" may be raised along with the goodman and the goodwife, who can predict? So much, presumably, as is necessary not only for the glory of God and the beatitude of the human pair, but for that particular glory and that particular beatitude which is eternally coloured by that particular terrestrial experience.

And in this way it seems to me possible that certain animals may have an immortality, not in themselves, but in the immortality of their masters. And the difficulty about personal identity in a creature barely personal disappears when the creature is thus kept in its proper context. If you ask, concerning an animal thus raised as a member of the whole Body of the household, where its personal identity resides, I answer "Where its identity always did reside even in the earthly life - in its relation to the Body and, specially, to the master who is the head of that Body." In other words, the man will know his dog; the dog will know its master and, in knowing him, will be itself....

But if any do, and if it is agreeable to the goodness of God that they should live again, their immortality would also be related to man -- not, this time, to individual masters, but to humanity. That is to say, if in any instance the quasi-spiritual and emotional value which human tradition attributes to a beast (such as the "innocence" of the lamb or the heraldic royalty of the lion) has a real ground in the beast's nature, and is not merely arbitrary or accidental, then it is in *that* capacity, or principally in that, that the beast may be expected to attend on risen man and make part of his "train." Or if the traditional character is quite erroneous, then the beast's heavenly life [Lewis, in a footnote adds "its participation in the heavenly life of men *in Christ to God*"] would be in virtue of the real, but unknown, effect it has actually had on man during his whole history: for if Christian cosmology is in *any* sense ... true, then all that exists on our planet is related to man...

I think the lion, when he has ceased to be dangerous, will still be awful: indeed, that we shall then first see that of which the present fangs and claws are a clumsy, and satanically perverted, imitation. There will still be

something like the shaking of a golden mane: and often the good Duke will say, "Let him roar again."

Anyway, these questions about animals in the resurrection world provide interesting fodder for conversation....someday we'll have the answers!