

**Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Resurrection Versus Religion**  
**John 20, Colossians 1:15-20**

### **1. We face contrasts and choices**

The church says, "Christ is risen; He is risen indeed." But atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell said, "I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. The slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark."

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, will live, even though he dies and whoever... believes in me will never die."

Anthony Flew was an atheist who then became a Deist. He decided a great force, "god," shoved this world into existence. But he insisted he is no Christian. He said, "I want to be dead when I'm dead. I don't want an unending life."

By contrast, as Jesus prepared to leave this world, he promised his disciples, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

What about you? What do you believe? What is your hope? If you do hope for life, is it a grounded conviction or a mere wish? If you're inclined toward despair, how will you live? Some atheists (Hemingway, Camus) think suicide is an option. Escape the misery. Go out on your own terms.

Others believe in the power of distraction. When the darkness of this is closing in, watch a comedy, take a walk in the park, go shopping, fly to the Caribbean. We can find happiness, even though it is fleeting. When death approaches, bear yourself bravely on the scaffold.

Jesus teaches us to hope and to prepare for life after death. But his followers have choices, too. Some despair of this world. They withdraw and wait for eternal life. But Jesus wants us to affirm this life and see it as significant in its own right.

### **2. We affirm life - the whole Bible affirms life**

Everyone must account for both the grandeur and the misery of this world. Biblical faith says it is grand because "God created the heavens and the earth" and filled it with light and life. Many secular people agree that there is a creator who powered up the universe. They admit that some "god" may exist, but they think this god is impersonal, uninterested in human affairs. It's how they explain the grandeur and the misery of this world.

The Bible explains our grandeur and misery differently. The world is grand because a great, wise, personal God created it. We are hungry for love, community and connection because God made us in His image. He seeks relationships, and we are like Him. This world is grand because God created humans for joy in this world. But there is misery because humans chose to rebel against God. We fell and this world fell into futility and death with us. The story could end in despair and death, but God chose to engage the human race and seek reconciliation with us.

God's decision to create this universe is his chief life-affirming act. When He created the world, He placed Adam and Eve in a perfect garden with a tree of life near the center. Even after mankind fell and tasted decay and death, God kept hope for eternal life in our hearts (Ecc. 7).

Before he died, Joseph made his sons swear an oath, "You must carry my bones up from this place" and take them to the promised land. Joseph believed God would re-knit bones with tendon, sinew, muscle and skin. As an act of faith, he wanted his bones to await that day, resting in the promised land.

When Job was so miserable and thought he would soon perish, he said, "After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes, I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (19:26-27).

David had the same hope: "Because [the Lord] is at my right hand... my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave. You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psa. 16:8).

### **Jesus' incarnation and resurrection affirm life (Col 1:15-20)**

This reaches its first peak in the incarnation of Jesus. After three years of intense activity, Jesus died, in the prime of life, slain by the unjust accusations of religious hypocrites and careless Romans. Then on the first day of the week, he rose again, in the flesh – real flesh, walking, eating, solid to the touch, bearing the marks of his wounds.

Colossians 1 says that God is invisible, but Jesus, the Son of God, is the exact visible representation of God's essence. If you want to know what God is like, read the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

It says Jesus is the "firstborn over all creation." Not that he came into existence. The next sentence says, "All things were created by him and for him." So he is above and before creation (1:16). Instead, "first born" means someone has supreme rank and priority, whether literally the eldest child or not. (David was youngest son in his family, but he's called "first born" because he was king). Jesus is first born because he has supremacy (Ps. 89:27).<sup>1</sup>

Colossians 1:16-17 says, "He is before all things and in him all things hold together." Jesus has supremacy because the power that produced and sustains all creation resides in him. He has no rival (1:18). He is the head of the church and first born from among the dead. "First born from among the dead" might sound like the title to a scary movie. In fact, it means that Jesus is the first to die and rise and never die again. As the first born of the dead, Jesus is the leader, pioneer. He blazes a trail, from death to life that many will follow into eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, pp 41-53

Eternal life is no dreamy angelic state. It's not life in the minds of those who remember and hold that memory dear. It's real physical life. John Updike's poem:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body;  
 if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit,  
 the amino acids rekindle, the Church will fall.  
 It was not as the flowers, each soft Spring recurrent;  
 it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;  
 it was as His flesh: ours. The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
 the same valved heart that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then  
 regathered out of enduring Might new strength to enclose.

Jesus' resurrection means this world is good. He cares for this world. Do you believe that? It can be hard because something is wrong with this world and we ask, "Where is God in all this trouble?" Answer: He sent Jesus to begin to set things right by his life, death and resurrection. And when he left us, he left something behind – the church. He is still head of the church (1:18).

Gulp. Please don't think of the church as the flawed organization, the visible buildings, or its flawed, even hypocritical leaders. *The church* means the people God has called to himself, starting hospitals, schools, and works of mercy.

Not the church as cloister. The church as the people who leave the world and meet God so we can return to the world, in the thick of trouble, scattered but strong, ready to endure, shining like stars in a dark age.

### **Jesus reconciles all things to himself**

Our passage says two more things. First, the fullness of God dwells in Jesus from his birth, through his life, death and resurrection (1:19). Second, God was pleased, "to reconcile all things to himself... making peace through his blood shed on the cross" (1:20). Let's focus on reconciliation. Jesus made peace – between God and humanity thru his blood, through the cross, reconciling us to God.

The words "peace" and "reconciliation" mean there is a problem between God and man and that Jesus solved it. God created humanity and we rebelled. So we no longer know Him, thank Him or follow Him. No, we ignore, avoid, or defame Him.

Jesus describes our "relationship status" with God as alienation. When we sin, we generally avoid God. Some seek him, but most rarely think about God. If we do, it's in idle, speculative ways. We debate religious topics, but don't search for the Almighty and Holy God or talk to him in prayer. When thoughts about God or eternity enter the mind, most are like the philosopher who believes in distraction. We distract ourselves because deep down, we want to avoid God. But Jesus came to restore that relationship. That's reconciliation.

Suppose that the pastor leading the liturgy today falls asleep in that chair. Everyone can see it. I'm embarrassed at first, but then I get angry about it. I'm stressed and anxious and I take this as an affront. I say, "Wake up." Tap on the head – hard. "Everyone can tell you're sleeping. You look like a fool and you're making me look like a fool too. *Can't even stay awake.*" At lunch, I suddenly think, "What have I done? I hit a pastor, *in church, in front of all these people.* I humiliated him. Maybe he was sick. I didn't even ask. I feel ashamed, humiliated.

Now what? I can apologize to him and to the whole church. Or I can say, "I'm humiliated. I'm going to resign and move away. As time goes by, I will create an alternate version of events and convince myself, "That's what really happened." That's what we do: We convince ourselves that what happened *didn't really happen* so we can feel better about ourselves, although it probably doesn't work.

We don't want to confront God or the truth. But He knows what happened. He shatters our avoidance scheme, by sending Jesus to confront us with the truth.

Back to my story: So I wronged my fellow pastor and ran away. I should have gone to him and apologized, but I ran. Now my fellow pastor could say, "He wronged me and ran. Forget him." But no, he loves me, so he tracks me for months. At last he finds me. He says, "You wronged me, but I forgive you. I want us to be friends again, to laugh together, work together again. Come back."

When his love overwhelms me and I return, that's reconciliation. What about you? Most people run from God and construct their alternative, face-saving account of "what really happened." We try to forget what we did. So: Are you running from God?" We run in different ways:

- Never be quiet. Stay *busy* so you have no time to consider life and death in a serious way. If you get a serious thought, push it from the mind. Go to the mall.
- Stick with the atheists and doubters. Never read the Bible or read a book that makes the case for God. Avoid serious conversation with friends who follow Jesus.

Jesus seeks us as my pastor-friend sought me in the story, but there is a difference: The pastor seeks me with words, but Jesus seeks us with words and deeds. Jesus took flesh, suffered, died, and arose [1:20 says] "to reconcile to himself all things, making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

When the Bible says Jesus made peace through his blood, it means that when He came for us, he also paid a debt we owed. He bore the penalty we deserve for our rebellion against God – death. Let me say this two ways:

When we rebelled against God, asked Him to leave us alone, we ask the author of life to leave us and so we lost life. We became liable to death.

Let me say it as a question: Do you think you are so good, that you deserve to live forever? The world needs you, so you have to live.

Jesus says no one earns life; we're liable to death and deserve it. But on the cross, Jesus bore the death we deserve. We can reverse Adam's decision. Sin creates distance, alienation, even hostility with God. But Jesus died our death and when we trust him, we have peace with God, the source of life.

In my story, the *wronged party* seeks reconciliation, while the sinning party runs. So it is with Jesus. We offended Him, but he initiated healing. But the sinner has to respond. What about you? Are you open to God or running?

If you do seek God, keep your eyes open for signs of His presence. Be willing to be quiet and pray. Read Jesus' story in the gospels. Talk to believers whom you respect. Jesus said, "Seek and you will find." Consider what it does and doesn't mean to follow Jesus. First, following Jesus does not mean embracing "religion."

### 3. Jesus battles false religion so we can embrace living faith

"Religion" proposes something like this: Be good, submit to the system and the law, and you will get a reward when you die. Religion offers a transaction: Be good, get rewards. And a system: we priests will tell you how to be good enough. Christianity promises eternal life, but it is not a religion because it doesn't offer a transaction: Do this now, get that later.

Jesus doesn't offer a deal with moral guidance. He tells us and tells religious leaders that we'll never be good enough. No deals are possible; we have nothing to offer. That's why the religious leaders hated Jesus and killed him. Jesus spoke his harshest warnings for religious leader. He called them snakes, vipers, hypocrites. "Everything they do is done for men to see" (23:5, 33). They love titles. They claim to help people, but no, "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They "shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces." They are "sons of hell" because they promote religion and lead people away from Jesus (23:9-14).

A Bible passage presents this metaphor. Two prophets speak for a season, then they are attacked and killed and "their bodies lie in the street of the great city called Sodom and Egypt, where the Lord was crucified." That's symbolic language, but hear the point. There is a deep solidarity among evil powers. They are equally dangerous. All oppose and kill Jesus.

- Sodom represents wickedness, sensuality.
- Egypt represents the brute power that oppresses and enslaves.
- Jerusalem, where the Lord was crucified represents "religion" as hypocrisy.

The goal of Religion is to be moral and respectable. Religion says that God is like us. Stronger, wiser, but not radically different. This god fulfills our desires, especially if we're good and do a few things for him.

#### **Every aspect of this life counts** (Matthew 25)

Again: Jesus is the firstborn of the dead "to reconcile to himself all things, things on earth and in heaven." If Jesus promises to reconcile "all things" he does not promise eternal life as disembodied angels floating in the ionosphere – does that sound more like hell than heaven?

No, Jesus' physical resurrection means men and women will live in a restored creation, where heaven and a new earth meet (Isa. 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). We will share in Jesus' perfect physical and spiritual life on a healed earth. The Father "who raised Christ from the dead will also give life" to our bodies. "We shall be like [Jesus], for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Meaning what? Our present bodies fail us and refuse to follow orders, but our new bodies will be incorruptible and perfectly suited to a new life. Like Jesus, we will walk, touch, and eat. Hugh of St. Victor (1150) said the resurrection body "will be immune from death and sorrow; it will be at the height of its powers, free from disease and deformity, around thirty years old," surpassing all we can imagine.

But we try to imagine. A student once asked me if there will be volleyball in heaven. He played in college; more than that, he loved the game. The answer: if you want volleyball, there will be volleyball – because all our desires will be good. But our bodies will be good too, so a point could go like this: Smash serve, dig, set, thunder spike. Block, set, spike. Diving save. After 344 years, good point!

### **Every aspect of this life counts (Practice!) Col 1.20**

If God gave Jesus a resurrection body and promises us one, then this life counts. Someone said that even if skeptical, secular friends can't quite believe in the resurrection, they should at least want it to be true. Many secular people "care deeply about justice for the poor, about alleviating hunger and disease." They care for the environment, yet they also believe that this world – mountains, oceans, life itself – is the product of chance, an accident of nature. And it will perish, in nuclear war, environmental disaster or the death of our sun.

The skeptics are discouraged that so few people want to make the world a better place. But they fail to see that their own convictions undermine their cause. Why sacrifice if all is chance and nothing matters in the end? Why not distract yourself with a comedy and a walk in the park?

Voltaire wrote the novel Candide to mock the idea that the world is well-governed. The hero, Candide, tours the world and sees endless suffering, greed, poverty, death. There is no god, no order, little goodness. Voltaire was a Deist: God created everything but took the last train out of town, then pulled up the tracks. His advice? Tend your garden. Avoid trouble, enjoy what you can, while you can. If there is no god, retire from public life (Juvenal). You'll sleep better.

Jesus said, no, this world counts. He described the day when he returns to this world and meets all flesh. He will tell his people, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in... Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?'"

Jesus will reply, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Jesus see every good thing and it all counts to us, to him and forever. The life counts in its own right and it counts because it's heading for eternal life. We could call it practice, the kind of practice that really counts.

Allen Iverson famously mocked practice: "Practice? We're not talking about the *game*, man, we're talking about *practice*, not the actual game, when it matters, we're talking about practice." Sorry, Allen, but practice and the game are connected. Good practice and good games go together. It all counts. The resurrection says Jesus will reconcile all things to himself, so everything counts.

The resurrection declares that healing and justice will defeat pain and injustice. The resurrection brings healing for the world and it warms our hearts, Tom Wright said, "because it isn't just about warming hearts." God will not tolerate injustice and exploitation. The resurrection means Jesus has won victory over them all, so we can and should fight pain and injustice with him.

But Reconciliation comes first. Before we can fight with Jesus, we have to stop fighting against him, be reconciled to him. We wronged him, but he pursues us. Are you running? Or have you accepted his offer of peace by repenting and believing? If not, are you open to it? Will you listen to him, perhaps even pray to him, and talk it all over with a friend?

If you are reconciled to him, it changes everything. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not yet thirty when Hitler became Germany's fuehrer, leader in 1933. Because of family connections to the military, because of his insight, he decided to fight Hitler in word and deed for the rest of his life, though he knew it could lead to prison and death. And the SS did imprison him in 1943 and kill him in 1945.

His last worship was the week after Easter, at the request of a band political prisoners – Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and atheists. His text: "By his stripes we are healed." And he spoke on the resurrection. As the service ended, two SS agents appeared. "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." He started to go and then paused for one more word, "This is the end, but for me the beginning of life."

Do you know this too? The resurrection of Christ is the new beginning for human life. For all his people. I hope that you are, that you shall be, one of them. Not by religion, but by faith finding reconciliation with Jesus. He came for us once and He will come again to renew us, and all things.