

“I Saw the Risen Christ Today”

I don't think you are surprised when I tell you that most Protestant churches – mainline denominations like Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists – have been in steady decline in membership and attendance. All sorts of reasons are being given for this. One of the most interesting was given by the late Dr. Thomas Gillespie when he was President of Princeton Theological Seminary. He said mainline churches are in a state of disarray and decay because it's like the pastor stands in the pulpit on Easter Sunday and says, “Christ is risen.....right?...Are you okay with that?... Is there any objection to my going on from here?” He maintains that with this semi “excuse me” approach, is it any wonder that the world isn't convinced that the tomb of Jesus really is empty, that death itself has been destroyed, and that love has triumphed over evil!

Well, I'm sure that isn't all that can be said about why so many long-standing traditional churches are in a deep funk, but I think he has a point.

First century Christians were not at all guilty of this “excuse me” approach to the message of Christ and His resurrection! The first Christians blared out to their generation this message: *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!*

Now, to be honest, at first the followers of Jesus really didn't believe that He had come back to life as He said He would! Each of the four gospels relate how the Lord chewed them out for their unbelief! But once it sunk in – that Jesus really is alive again – that was the motto at the heart of the Christian movement: “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” In fact, that greeting became the central motto in the worship of the early church: A pastor (or leader) would say, “Christ is risen!” And the congregation would respond: “He is risen indeed!” *Maybe we can do that! Pastor: “Christ is risen!” People: “He is risen indeed!”*

Now we can only say what we just did with joy and certainty if we have experienced the risen Christ ourselves! (Otherwise it is just empty ritual). We can believe up here (*in our head*) that Jesus rose again, but it may not make any difference in our life. We can accept as a fact or a doctrine Jesus' resurrection, yet not know the *power* of the resurrected Christ in a life-changing way.

We read this morning from Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection. “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body” (Luke 24:1-3). Some women go to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus, but they are met by two supernatural beings (probably angels). They say, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (Luke 24:5b). Later that same day, the risen Lord appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Then afterwards, over a period of days, He appears to many others.

If only we could have that close encounter with Jesus like they did! But we can! Through faith and trust! We can't see and touch Jesus physically like they did, but when we believe in Him and surrender our life and will to Him, we begin to see the Risen Christ at work in us, and in the world! And certain things start to happen!

The first thing that happens is that a spiritual rebirth takes place. Jesus once told a very religious man, Nicodemus, that if anyone is to see the kingdom of God we first have to be born again – we need a spiritual rebirth. As we are, because our human nature is fallen and infected with evil, we are unfit to be in the presence of a holy God – unable to grasp spiritual truth. We need forgiveness. We need a cleansing, a spiritual rebirth – each of us! This spiritual rebirth happens the moment we turn from our sins and put our faith in Jesus to forgive and change us. When we are born again, it is like a “mini-resurrection”! Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, wrote about how this experience of a new birth is tied in with Jesus’ own resurrection. In a letter he wrote that is part of our New Testament Peter says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Unfortunately, a lot of people shy away from this whole truth of being “born again”. People imagine that one has to have some great emotional religious experience. A sudden and dramatic change. The truth is that the experience of new birth can be sudden or gradual, with great emotion or little emotion. What counts is that when we confess our sins and turn our life over to Christ He forgives and cleanses us...we get a new heart and a new spirit and a new outlook. Jesus comes and begins to live out His life in us through His Spirit in us!

It’s a beautiful thing when this happens – and we can look at a person where this spiritual renewal is happening and say, “I saw the risen Christ in that person today!”

But that’s only one way “mini-resurrections” take place. We live in a world marked with hate, ill will, pain, hopelessness, death. We all experience this to some degree because we live in a fallen world. ***But the risen Christ is active in this world. And there are times when He brings new life and hope to desperate situations and defeated people.*** Love and forgiveness overcome resentment and hate...hope seeps through despair...life emerges out of death. Let’s look at some places where we can say, “I saw the Risen Christ today”.

Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS), the flying department of Wycliffe Bible Translators--had flown thousands of hours over a 25 year span without one fatal accident before April 7, 1972. On that day, a Piper Aztec lost its right engine and crashed in Papua, New Guinea, killing all seven persons aboard.

The Aztec had just rolled out of the Wycliffe maintenance hangar the day before following a 100 hour inspection. The chief mechanic was stunned when he heard the news of the crash. Reviewing in his mind each step he had performed in inspecting that right engine, he suddenly recoiled in horror. He remembered that he had been interrupted while tightening a fuel line and had never returned to finish the job! That faulty connection had allowed raw fuel to spray out and catch fire while the Aztec was in flight.

The mechanic's guilt at being responsible for the deaths of his companions was unbearable. For days he didn’t know what to do. The other mechanics tried to help him, as did his own family. But when the family of Doug Hunt, the pilot who was killed in the accident, was preparing to

return to their home in New Zealand, the mechanic knew he had to see them, talk with them and beg their forgiveness. He could barely get out the words as he sobbed in their presence. "That hand there," he said, looking at his right hand, "took Doug's life." Glennis Hunt, Doug's widow, embraced him. "Glennis sat by me and held the hand that took her husband's life," he later wrote, "and another JAARS pilot sat on my other side with a demonstration of love, comfort, and forgiveness. That was the most significant first step in the healing process."

I saw the Risen Christ today in those acts of mercy and forgiveness

With his life in disarray, Steven Lavaggi sat on his bedroom's wooden floor, and began searching his Bible for answers. His wife had just left him to marry a writer for the Rolling Stone Magazine. Ten days later, Steven discovered his son was stricken with Juvenile Diabetes. Then he lost his graphic art business. Unemployed, abandoned, and worrying about his son, Lavaggi turned to God's Word. As Steven read, he skipped over the black letters, only wanting to read the words of Jesus. The Risen Christ emerged from the pages. Steven Lavaggi gave his life to Jesus.

As a new Christian, he clung to Psalm 91:11: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways." Out of his brokenness came a passion to create a message of hope. He discovered his passion was to minister through fine art. He moved to California, to influence the people who influence the world--Hollywood. And he's doing that.

The response to his work is overwhelming. Inspired by the Psalmist's words he painted an angel. When a friend encouraged him to make the image three dimensional, he collaborated with a sculptor, and together they cast the angel. While speaking to a crowd of 3500 natives in Soweto, South Africa, Lavaggi held a 20" sculpture of a black angel above his head. When he did, the crowd erupted with enthusiasm. A man on the stage told him that just a few days before, a preacher had declared that God would soon send an international artist who would express the love of God to their culture by doing something like "painting Angels in black!" When Lavaggi heard this, he grabbed a 20" white angel, held it above his head and said, "These angels were created to be like brothers and sisters, even as we are supposed to be." Sculptures became known as, "The Angels of Reconciliation."

Today, he is known as the artist of hope. It propelled him into creating an incredible series of spirit-inspired paintings, sculptures, figurines, and prints. Steven's message would not exist without his passion! Today, he is touching and changing the world for Christ.

I saw the Risen Christ today lifting a man from despair to a life of usefulness and service for the Lord!

There is a delightful story about a man who took his children to a restaurant. Let's let him tell it: "My six year old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads, he said, 'God is good. God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom got us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen.'" "Along with the laughter from the customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, 'That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why I never!'"

“Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, ‘Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?’
“As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job, and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, ‘I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.’ “‘Really?’ my son asked. ‘Cross my heart.’
Then, in a theatrical whisper, he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started the whole thing), ‘Too bad she never asked God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.’

“Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment and then did something I will remember the rest of my life. He picked up his sundae, and without a word, walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he told her, ‘Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.’”

Sometimes we see the risen Jesus in a child.

In the midst of the sorrow and pain and brokenness of our life here on earth there is a Risen Christ present...bringing new life, hope, joy, love! When we put our faith in Christ and allow Him to work in us, “little resurrections” can happen!

Big resurrections, too! For He has even conquered our biggest enemy: death! I saw this cartoon featuring two funny looking men dressed in Roman soldier outfits standing in front of an empty tomb. The caption for the cartoon has one of the men saying to the other, “Well, this leaves only taxes as being certain.” *That’s the good news of Easter!*

Philip Yancey, a noted Christian author, in one of his books says, “Not long ago, three of my friends died in quick succession...the last was my friend Bob, who died scuba diving at the bottom of Lake Michigan. I spoke at all three funerals, and each time, as I struggled with what to say, the old, ugly word ‘irreversible’ came flooding back, with greater force than I had ever known. Nothing I could say, nothing I could do would accomplish what I wanted above all else: to get my friends back.”

He goes on to tell how at the very time Bob was making that fateful last dive, he himself was sitting in a café at the University of Chicago, reading a book by the famous psychiatrist Dr. Rollo May. Dr. May told of being part of a Greek Orthodox celebration, where the priest gave everyone three brightly decorated Easter eggs marked, “Christ is risen!” And then, as was custom, the priest said, “Christ is Risen!” and the people responded, “He is risen indeed!” Rollo May went on to say, “I was seized then by a moment of spiritual reality: What would it mean for our world if he had truly risen?”

When Philip Yancey read that, he said Dr. May’s question kept floating around in his mind – especially after he heard the terrible news about his friend. What did it mean for our world that Christ had risen? Yancey tells how in that cloud of grief hanging over Bob’s death, he began to see the meaning of Easter in a new light That Easter actually held out the awesome promise of *reversibility. Nothing, not even death, was final. Even that could be reversed.*

When he spoke at Bob's funeral, he asked, "What would it mean for us if Bob rose again? How would it be to walk outside to the parking lot and there, to our utter astonishment, find Bob. Bob! Alive again! He says, "That image gave me a hint of what Jesus' disciples felt on the first Easter."

I want to tell you, Jesus is alive! And through the eyes of faith, we can see that risen Christ at work – and we can experience Him ourselves – wherever people give their lives over to Christ and are reborn spiritually...and where people forgive and are reconciled to one another...and where hope shines through despair...and where six year old boys or girls give grumpy old ladies their ice cream!

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