

"The Impossible"
1 Corinthians 15
April 20, 2003
Dr. Jerry Nelson
www.soundliving.org

The resurrection of Jesus is the most significant event in human history.

But that significance is largely lost even on this day that is supposed to commemorate it.

Today is called Easter. But what does it signify?
Spring? Bunnies and daffodils?

Has it gone the way of Memorial Day and Labor Day where few can remember why those are holidays?

How much longer before the significance of the 4th of July is totally buried in picnics, store specials and fireworks?

We are all quite aware of the SARS epidemic that has raised concerns world-wide.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome is killing people.

A couple of days ago I heard on the radio that a large church in Canada has said, in spite of the SARS threat, it will continue to allow people, one after another, to kiss the same religious object in worship.

They said God has blessed that religious object and no germs could be communicated.

I do not believe there is any scriptural warrant for such superstition.
And I'm certain that most who heard the story rolled their eyes at such thinking.

But as I thought of the likely public response to such a story I couldn't help but think that such is the likely public response to the idea of resurrection.

It is largely perceived as ignorant, religious superstition.

No wonder that the origin of the day gets buried in lilies, storewide sales, and Hallmark "happy spring" cards.

Resurrection is either true or it's an embarrassment that needs hiding.

If resurrection is a naïve superstition then your presence here this morning ought to be an embarrassment to you.

If someone saw you walk in here this morning they might think you actually believe.

But if resurrection is a reality then the implications for our lives are staggering.

What is one objective, universal, historically repeated, incontrovertible fact of human experience?

Everyone dies.

On this point, secularist and saint agree.

The mortality rate of the human race is 100%.

The Bible says, "In Adam, all die."

Have you ever seen a dead body? I have many times
I've told before of the man of our church who died and whose mother, brother and sister came to the hospital convinced he was not dead.

They prayed, they read Bible verses, they yelled, they demanded that their son and brother awake.

But he did not.

Death is death.

The body decays, the relationship fades, because dead means dead!

Malcolm Muggeridge, the celebrated English journalist, who died in 1990, wrote,

“In **earthly** terms, death is the only certainty. All my mortal mind can know for sure is that this hand, writing these words, will falter and become inert, and the intelligence choosing and arranging them become inoperative. Flesh and intelligence equally doomed (soon) to extinction after so brief and fleeting an existence – no more than a dragonfly’s, with its bright wings and exquisitely precise movements darting about in the sun. As the psalmist says, ‘We spend our years as a tale that is told...and are soon cut off, and we fly away.’ This strange inescapable fate is common to every living creature, from a (bacteria) to Michelangelo; the tale varies but the outcome is the same.” (Malcolm Muggeridge in Jesus the Man Who Lives p 191)

And I believe it is true that every philosophy of life and every religion known to humanity are attempts at dealing with that reality of death.

Hedonism is the idea that pleasure is the only good in life.

It is the fatalism of “carpe diem” (seize the day) – suck everything out of life that you can because you only go around once.

Eat, drink and be merry, tomorrow we die.

We may not call ourselves “hedonists” but it is very tempting to live that way.

Unsure of life after death, we can easily fall into thinking that if this is all there is, I’d better get all I can get.

Hedonism doesn’t know what to do with death so it simply tries to live as much as it can before death.

But death wins.

Nihilism is the idea that life/existence is senseless and useless.

It is the despair of our age that says suicide is as “logical” as life, maybe more so – “whatever”!

When I get overwhelmed by the suffering in this world and the almost odd juxtaposition of virtue in this world, it is tempting to say life makes no sense.

And then add to that the realization that everything dies. Being the most logical of the philosophies, nihilism admits that life is pointless because of death.

And in the end, death wins.

Stoicism is the idea that we should be unmoved by joy or grief and simply submit to what is.

It is the manly attitude that doesn't expect anything from life and takes it as it comes.

Life is hard and then you die.

Stoicism doesn't know what to do with death so it simply puts it chin up and faces it.

But in spite of the bravado, death wins.

Or consider **Hinduism**, which has been popularized in our culture.

We are mindlessly entertained by the "The Lion King" and the like with its New Age - Old Hinduism mentality of the "cycle of life".

It declares that death is simply a part of life and our existence continues on in eternal reincarnation.

Or consider **Buddhism's** Nirvana where the answer is found in the extinction of individual consciousness.

We are eventually subsumed into a great cosmic consciousness.

We simply hang on until we get happily lost in the cosmos.

But life to me is not cosmic consciousness but actual awareness of those I love, real life.

Reincarnation and Nirvana aren't life.

So death wins.

I think the martyred German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, captured the failure of these philosophies and religions when he writes:

"Where death is last (where death is the end), there fear joins with defiance. Where death is last, there earthly life is all or nothing. (This results in) a foolish playing at life, (or) a frantic

affirmation of life, (or) an indifferent contempt for life. (Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p11))

The Bible says all such philosophies lead to one end:

Proverbs 16:25 "There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.

There is a difference between dying and death.

Since Elizabeth Kubler-Ross made it popular in the 70s and 80s – we have attempted to manage our emotions in the dying process and manage our grief in the death of a loved one.

We have tried to deal with dying but we have done nothing about death.

Again I quote from Muggeridge:

"Confronted with (death), we may rage, despair, induce forgetfulness, solace ourselves with fantasies that science will in due course discover how we... may project our existence, individually or collectively, into some Brave New World spanning the universe in which Man reigns supreme.

(BUT) God's alternative proposition is the Resurrection – a man dying who rises from the dead." (Malcolm Muggeridge in Jesus the Man Who Lives p 191)

With that in mind, listen to the witness of those who were there that first Easter:

Matthew 28 and Luke 24 "The angel said to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter said in Acts 2:32 "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact."

And in Acts 4:33 “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus

Acts 17:18 “Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”

He later declared in Romans 1:3,4 Jesus was “God’s Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Easter doesn’t speak of spring or the cycle of life or even of spring-like immortality; **it declares resurrection** – resurrection of the physical body – Christ’s body and our bodies.

The Apostle Paul understood it when he said in 1 Corinthians 15:14,20 “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead...”

Not reincarnated, not melded into the cosmos, but he was raised from the dead – alive again.

The same person was alive again.

Death did not win; death was not the end.

And the modern popular variations of the old philosophies and religions of hedonism, nihilism, stoicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism all fail.

And they fail on precisely the most important issue – what to do with the reality of death.

But in Jesus, in the Resurrection, we have life, real life, physical life, even after death.

1 Peter 1:3 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”

Romans 8:11 “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 through his Spirit, who lives in you.”

Easter/Resurrection is meaningless if there is no death.
And life is meaningless if there is no Easter/Resurrection.

Again from Bonhoeffer:

The resurrection we celebrate today is a “resurrection from a death that really is death with all its terrors and monstrosities, a death of the body and the soul, of the whole human being... That is the Easter message. Not of divine seeds within the human being, who like nature repeatedly celebrates resurrection, but (the message) of the sin of the human being and of death, but also of God’s love and of the death of death...” (Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p26)

Is that what you believe – resurrected life, Jesus and yours?

The real and physical resurrection of Jesus changes everything!
That's why I celebrate Easter.

John 5:24,25 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming...when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

And the Bible declares in John 1:12 “To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God...”

Earlier in this service, Chuck Porter, testified to the transforming power of the resurrected Jesus in his own life.

The forgiveness, peace and future, which Chuck spoke of, can be yours as well by confessing your need for the resurrected Jesus.

People are available in our prayer chapel this morning for you.

You can cross over from death to life today.

Prayer.

“Easter? Our vision falls more onto the dying than onto the death. How we cope with dying is more important to us than how we conquer death. To cope with dying does not yet mean to cope with death. The surmounting of dying is within the reach of human possibilities, the surmounting of death means resurrection.” (Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p11)

“The mystery of the resurrection of Christ lifts the idolization of death, present among us, off its hinges. Where death is last, there fear joins with defiance. Where death is last, there earthly life is all or nothing. The vying for earthly eternities then belongs with a foolish playing at life, a frantic affirmation of life, (or) an indifferent contempt for life.

(Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p11)

“Nothing reveals the idolization of life more clearly than when an era claims to be building for eternity and yet life itself has no value, than when great words are spoken about a new humankind, a new world, a new society that should come to be, and yet this newness consists only in the extinction of existing life.

The radicality of Yes and No to earthly life reveals that only death counts. Grabbing all or throwing all away, that is the attitude of the one believing fanatically in death.

But where it is recognized that the power of death is broken, where the mystery of the resurrection and of the new life shines into the midst of the world of death, there one does not ask eternities from life, there one takes from life what life can offer – not everything or nothing, but good and evil, important and unimportant, joy and pain; there one does not frantically hold on to life, nor does one throw it foolishly away; there one is content with measured time and does not attribute eternity to earthly things; there one leaves to death the limited right it still has. The new human being and the new world one then expects only from beyond death, from the power that surmounted death.” (Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p19)

Civilizations for millennia have equated death with winter and resurrection with spring. Or light and dark have been metaphors for life and death. And so year after year the light and life of spring becomes victorious over the dark and death of winter.

But from it many have postulated that death is not really death but simply a part of life. But Christianity says very different things:

“Not about a battle of dark and light that finally brings victory to life because the dark is really nothing, because death is already life; not about a fight between winter and spring, between ice and sun – Easter is about the struggle of guilty humanity against divine love – better: of divine love against guilty humanity, a fight in which God seems to be defeated on Good Friday and in which he indeed by being defeated triumphs – on Easter.” (Bonhoeffer in The Mystery of Easter Crossroad Pub 1997, p23)

“In earthly terms, death is the only certainty. All my mortal mind can know for sure is that this hand, writing these words, will falter and become inert, and the intelligence choosing and arranging them become inoperative. Flesh and intelligence equally doomed (soon) to extinction after so brief and fleeting an existence – no more than a dragonfly’s, with its bright wings and exquisitely precise movements darting about in the sun. As the psalmist says, ‘We spend our years as a tale that is told...and are soon cut off, and we fly away.’ This strange inescapable fate is common to every living creature, from a (bacteria) to Michelangelo; the tale varies but the outcome is the same. Confronted with it, we may rage, despair, induce forgetfulness, solace ourselves with fantasies that science will in due course discover how we came to be here and to what end, and how we may project our existence, individually or collectively, into some Brave New World spanning the universe in which Man reigns supreme. God’s alternative proposition is the Resurrection – a man dying who rises from the dead.” (Malcolm Muggeridge in Jesus the Man Who Lives p 191)