

LAUNCHING THE NEW CREATION

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-4

You may have heard about or seen a recent television documentary claiming to have found the tomb of Jesus. In a cave in Jerusalem was found a series of burial boxes called ossuaries, one of which was labeled *Yeshua bar Yosef*, which would be translated Jesus (or Joshua) son of Joseph. The filmmakers claimed that this box contained the bones of Jesus. Of course, there is little evidence for this. The names Jesus, Joshua, and Joseph were very common in ancient Israel. Thousands of people in ancient Israel could have been named Jeshua, son of Joseph. This week, out of curiosity, I googled grave markers for anyone named Kenneth, son of Clyde. I found that I was buried in Michigan.

But I am not here to discuss names on burial plots. What I found interesting about this whole discussion was the number of people who said it did not matter. They said that finding traces of Jesus' bones in an ancient burial box would not change for them the meaning of Easter. They said that Jesus lives on in our hearts, even if his body rotted somewhere in a grave.

That was the opinion of one of our more recent American theologians: Richard Nixon. In a book written shortly before he died, Richard Nixon said,

Orthodox teachers have always insisted that the physical resurrection of Jesus is the most important cornerstone in the Christian religion. I believe that the modern world will find a real resurrection in the life and teaching of Jesus (*In the Arena*, p. 89).

Is that true? Is Easter simply a dramatic way of saying that Jesus' teaching and Jesus' example lives on in our hearts?

Not according to the Bible. All four gospels in the New Testament insist that Jesus' tomb was empty. According to the Bible, Easter is not the story of Jesus living on in our hearts. It is not the story of people remembering Jesus' teaching after he was gone. It is the story of Jesus changing physical earthly life. It is the story of Jesus defeating injustice, conquering suffering, and triumphing over physical death. It is the story of Jesus launching the new creation.

To show what this means, turn to the back of the bulletin where I have placed side by side verses from two important chapters of the Bible: Genesis 3 and Isaiah 65. Genesis 3 is the story of the first sin and its consequences. Adam and Eve were living in the garden of Eden. They had all the food they needed, right there for the picking. They got along with each other. Apparently they even liked each other, which is not bad for a married couple. They also got along with the animals. Nature was in harmony. They had everything they needed for happy, prosperous, fulfilling lives. The only restriction was against eating the fruit of one forbidden tree. This tree, called the knowledge of good and evil, was symbolic of trying to play God—of putting ourselves in the position to decide what is good and evil or right and wrong.

That desire to be God, to be in control, to rule everyone lives, messed things up, not only for Adam and Eve but for the whole world.

On the back of the bulletin you see the consequences—the curse—that fell on creation because of sin. First, it messed up the relationship between people and animals, between people and nature. “The Lord said to the serpent, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel’” (Genesis 3:15). Later in the Bible the serpent is identified with Satan, and the battle between the woman and the serpent becomes a spiritual battle. But at this point in the story the serpent is identified only as one of God’s creatures—one of the animals with whom humans are now in deadly conflict. Because of sin the harmony between people and nature has been broken.

So has the harmony of people with each other. Look at Genesis 3:16: “To the woman the Lord said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.’” Suddenly having children becomes a painful experience, which, by the way, does not end at childbirth. There is a broken relationship between parents and children as well as between husbands and wives, who blame each other for what has gone wrong.

Next, our work becomes cursed; our desire to be productive contributing human beings is foiled. Verses 17-18: “And to the man the Lord said, ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.’” Work was not supposed to be a pain. It was not supposed to be a form of frustration, exploitation, or humiliation. It was supposed to be productive and fulfilling. But it was messed up by sin. Think about it. Isn’t the pain and frustration that you experience at work usually caused by people? Our work lives are messed up by human sin.

And finally, sin results in death. Verse 19: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We are told that in the garden of Eden was a tree of life. It was not the forbidden tree. The humans could have eaten of the tree of life and lived forever. But they lost that privilege when they tried to be gods, when they insisted on having things their own way.

Now look at the second column from Isaiah 65. Isaiah 65 looks forward to a new creation. In verse 17 the Lord says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” In other words, God is going to reverse the damage that has been done to the creation by human sin. Notice how everything described in the second column reverses the damage described in the first column. Isaiah 65:25 says, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” That is a reversal of Genesis 3:15. Humans and animals will no longer kill each other, and the serpent is no longer able to mess things up.

The next verse in the second column talks about families—Isaiah 65:23: “They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.” That reverses the curse describe in Genesis 3:16. The pain in bearing and raising children will be replaced by blessing.

The next section talks about work—Isaiah 65, verses 21 and 23: “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ... They shall not labor in vain.” The curse of futile, frustrating work has been replaced by blessing.

Finally, the anguish of injustice, suffering, and death will be conquered—Isaiah 65:19: “I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress.” Isaiah talks about the end of premature death: “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” But our second scripture lesson from Revelation 21 takes this even further. Like Isaiah it talks about a new heaven and a new earth, but then it says, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” In the new creation the curse of death will be reversed.

Now, let’s go back to Jesus’ resurrection. Why does it matter that Jesus’ body was raised from the dead? Why isn’t it enough that Jesus lives on in our hearts or in our memory?

The answer comes from Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21. Jesus’ resurrection is the launching of the new creation! Easter is not the story of one person’s rise to immortality. It is not a case of Jesus’ teaching and values living on after he is gone. Easter is a transformation of the physical world. God raised Jesus from the dead, body and all, because God is determined through Jesus to bring new life into human bodily creation. In the new creation there will be no more cancer or car bombs. In the new creation there will be no more hunger or homelessness. In the new creation there will be no more AIDS or abuse, no more genocide or global warming, no more tyrannical bosses or troubled teens, no more broken bodies or broken relationships. And Easter is the sign that the new creation has begun in Jesus.

Now admittedly, the new creation is not yet finished. Easter is the launching of the new creation, not its completion. We still live in a world where bodies are ravaged by injuries and disease. But every time we work to heal human bodies, every time we care for them and do things to make them whole again, we strike a blow for the new creation in the name of Jesus. We declare that death will not have the final word in our lives; Jesus will.

Likewise, every time we build or repair a home for the homeless, every time we serve a needy person at the food bank, every time we intervene to stop the abuse of a child or an elderly parent, every time we work for peace and justice in this world, we strike a blow for the new creation in the name of Jesus. We declare that injustice, cruelty, and suffering shall not rule this world; Jesus will.

Every time we approach our jobs with integrity and compassion instead of greed and conquest, every time we approach our families with love and respect instead of retaliation and control, every time we approach the world of nature as stewards instead of exploiters, we strike a blow for the new creation. We declare that bodily life in this world is important to God, and that God is determined to save it.

In his book *Miracles* C. S. Lewis says that miracles write for us in small letters what God will one day write in large letters across the whole canvas of Nature (p. 219). Easter writes for us in small letters what God will one day write in large letters across the whole creation, and through Jesus you are invited to be part of it.

- Ken Onstot
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