

Living Third Day Lives

Romans 14: 8-9; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-15

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So we're down to the heart of the matter. This is the episode in the Jesus-story on which everything depends. "The third day he rose again from the dead." We rise or fall on the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Either he got up or he didn't. Either we have the greatest hope the world has known or we have a bunch of sentimental clap-trap that's not fit for a Hallmark card. The earliest Christian message is one of resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under the authority of Pontius Pilate on a Friday. He was buried in Joseph's tomb and stayed dead all that next dark Saturday. But by Sunday morning he was up. He popped the stone off his tomb like a champagne cork. And came back to the land of the living.

This was as astounding then as now. People long ago didn't believe in the resurrection because they were pre-scientific simpletons. The rate of resurrection from the dead was the same in AD 33 as it is in AD 2019: zero. Stones didn't get rolled away from tombs. People wrapped in grave clothes didn't come out and eat broiled fish with their friends. It just didn't happen. It just couldn't happen. It sounds, literally, unbelievable. And indeed, you might not believe it. I can't make you believe it. I can't tell you a trick to make it sound more plausible. In our usual way of understanding the world, the resurrection of Jesus is an impossibility. I can tell you, however, that there is a mountain of evidence confirming that this impossibility is exactly what the first Christians believed. They went to their deaths declaring that they had seen the dead Jesus alive again. Now you and I don't have to believe resurrection happened, but we would have to ignore history to deny that Jesus' followers believed in resurrection. They did, and they have continued to believe, this *glorious impossible*¹ to this day.

Lesslie Newbigin was both a brilliant Biblical scholar and an effective missionary in India. His specialty was connecting the gospel of Christ across cultures. In his later years, he returned to England where he did his most difficult missionary work: making a bridge between the story of Jesus and our post-Christian culture. Newbigin knew that everything always hinges on the resurrection. He wrote,

The problem of making sense of the gospel is that it calls for a change of mind that is ...radical... Without that change of mind, the story is too implausible to be regarded as real history. Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point...I think the Church cannot evade the sharpness of this encounter.²

The glorious impossible of Jesus' rising challenges us to change our mind about what is possible. It challenges my belief that I'm the center of the universe. That I can make any choices I want to make without question. It challenges other views of reality, be they mythological or materialist. The resurrection declares, "The guy who got up is Lord. The guy who broke through death is the center and starting point of everything. Change your mind about whatever you thought life was about. It's actually about the guy who got up from the dead. Build everything around him."

The report from the followers of Jesus is that everything in their lives changed because of his resurrection. Jesus died and rose physically. Those who put their trust in him discovered that it was like they died and rose *spiritually*. They felt like their old life fell away. Guilt, despair, fear, futility, living for wrong things all came away like a skin being shed. Forgiveness, hope, confidence, and living for Christ and for his love filled them with energy. They knew that death would no longer be the end of them. They would be raised as Christ was raised. And so it changed life right now. They felt made new. Born again. Transformed.

Paul described the change this way:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Cor. 5: 14-5).

Jesus died and rose on behalf of us all. He lived in faithfulness to his Father and love for his people. He was rejected and put to death, but he turned that death into the way he atoned for all our sins. He rose from the dead and declared, "Because I live, you also will live." What Jesus did, where he went, became a journey we can get in on. He died as a man subject to weakness and death. The third day he rose as a man free from death and outfitted for everlasting life in his Father's presence. *We get united to him when we put our lives in his hands.* We get joined to him when we bow the knee and acknowledge him as Lord. He gives us his Spirit and we

experience this mysterious, glorious transfer from death to life. We get freed to no longer live for ourselves—that stale, boring, self-focused life of endlessly paddling around in our own bath water. We get freed to live for Christ, for life, for love, for his mission to regather the whole world to himself. We live in devotion to the one who gave himself for us.

This past week I asked a question in Bible studies with our elders, our staff, and a men’s group. I asked them to complete this sentence. “If the resurrection of Jesus is true, it means that I do not have to.....” How would you answer that? They said things like this. If Jesus rose, I don’t have to:

- Change people’s minds on Facebook.
- Worry so much. Or get even.
- Try to fix everything. Or worry about what others think all the time.
- Stay stuck in myself.
- Stay stuck in shame. Stay chained up.
- Wallow in disappointment with others.
- Wonder if suffering is meaningless.
- Fear death. Anticipate nothing but the void.
- Fear the world. Try to control the world. Or look at the world and feel only despair and defeat.

That’s some significant freedom! If the glorious impossible occurred and the dead Jesus rose in victory, truly everything changes. My chains fall off. My fears evaporate. My worries are taken up into hope.

So then I asked a follow up question. We discussed how believers in Jesus’ resurrection are Third Day Christians. We know that Jesus is more than a great teacher of timeless truths. He’s more than a misunderstood Messiah who got himself killed. He’s the Lord of the living and the dead. The Third Day has transformed the cosmos. So I asked, “What would the lives of Third Day Christians look like? Describe lives filled with faith in Jesus’ rising.” They answered:

- We’d be full of *hope*. Even in the worst situations, we’d know that Jesus overcame the powers of death, sin and evil and the redeemer of the world will bring everything to rights by the end. As Peter said, we have been born again, out of futility, into a life of hope, precisely because of the resurrection
- We’d be people of deep, calm *peace* even in the midst of chaos, for we’d know what the final outcome of the world will be.

- We'd be *free* people, unafraid of what man can do to me, knowing that the worst someone can do is to take our earthly lives, but they cannot touch our eternal lives.
- We'd be *giving* people, no longer scrabbling and scrambling in a fight for survival of the fittest. Knowing the eternal life we have in Jesus, Third Day people are free to give their lives away to others.
- We'd be *real* people. There would be no need to live in the delusions of our culture. We can face down the reality of aging, mortality, failures, breakings and rendings because we have been joined to the one who took our sadness and sin as his own, and took it down to the depths of hell only to return in new life. He took our betrayal that led to his broken body and outpoured blood and made it the sign of the life he gives to us every time we take communion.
- Above all, Third Day lives overflow with *joy*. This is no shallow chipperness. This is a joy that accounts for the sorrow in the deep wells of the earth. We see that God is turning our scars into beauty marks. He took his thorns and wore them as a crown. He still turns ashes into beauty. He still turns deep darkness into morning.

Hope, peace, freedom, giving, reality, joy—that's the kind of energized, resilient, positive life I'd like to have. That's a life that would be compelling to others, that would spread the gospel across the world.

Those descriptions poured forth easily from people. We know what it means to live in the truth of Jesus' resurrection. That led to the third question. A deflating one. *So what the heck happened?* We believe Jesus rose. What keeps us from looking more like Third Day Christians?

The answers were just what you already know. We take matters into our own hands. We go back to old ways of coping. We go back to old patterns of seeking life in dead things. We take the short cuts to quick pleasures, like delicious gossip, or enticing lusts, or a quick high, or an easy undercutting of another, a convenient lie, or an impulsive purchase. They never work beyond the moment. But we are easily deceived. We get cut off from our joy.

We get distracted by our busyness. One day away from the Lord doesn't seem to matter. But one day turns to a week which turns to months. And then we find we hate the thought of getting into God's Word. We start to despise the idea of happy Christians gathered together. We think it's futile even to try. We're just not meant for this spiritual life.

We get so mad about everything. People sucking the life out of simple pleasures. Always correcting us. Always outraged. Shocked. Offended. Tearing down every hero. Always cynical. Our anger in a polarized nation is always smoldering and it drowns out the hope we know runs deeper.

It's true we are easily thrown off our confidence and deflected from our faith. So we're here. To hear the story again. To find a way back to the joy of the truth we know in our bones. To sink a line down into our deepest heart. To drink from the well whose waters alone satisfy. To remember again who rules the world and what his future promises. To recall our mission and we prepare to go out once more. To worship and renew our spirits.

So let's close out by returning to the resurrection passages we read:

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live unto the Lord. If we die, we die unto the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

We are the Lord's. This is an identity statement. I am not my own. I am the Lord's. I am not alone. I'm part of a "we," part of a people. We are the Lord's. He wants us. He claims us. He is our life now and our future to come. So Paul adds,

Christ died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

There is the whole Third Day Christian life put into one sentence. *That we might no longer live for ourselves but for him who for our sake died and was raised.* There was something that happened in the world. The world of history. The world of place and time. Jesus lived. Jesus died and was buried. Jesus got up. He was raised on the third day. The glorious impossible happened. It only makes sense if it becomes the starting place of all our thinking. The resurrection is the very heart of God made known to us. It's the center of reality from which everything flows. I can't make you believe it. But I can tell you truly that people have been telling this news for more 2000 years. Jesus is risen. And for 2000 years those who accept this news as the starting point of life find that everything changes. They die to the bitterness, the bondage and the despair. They rise to hope and forgiveness and love.

Third Day Christians learn the freeing news that life is so much better when it's not about us. My little story is caught up in a much greater story. And that big

story of God's reclaiming, regathering work gives significance in every moment and every action. My little life partakes of God's great redeeming mission.

So in a moment we will step up to the table. We will proclaim the great mystery of the faith said at this table for centuries in many languages and cultures. The essence of the news. The glorious impossible that actually happened: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Dear ones, Jesus is risen. And he offers you nothing less than himself. Eat him. Drink him. Do you want to live vibrantly as Third Day Christians? Do you want your life to be lit up with the assurance and hope, the giving and love of Christ? It starts here. Let go your cherished sins. Let go any bitterness or unforgiveness. Drop the dead things you play with. Leave off being the lord of your life. Come to Christ. Receive the one who for your sake died and was raised. Eat and drink from the table of grace!

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *The Glorious Impossible* (NY: Simon and Shuster, 1990).

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) pp. 10,11,61.