

Isaiah 26:12–13, 18b–19 (NIV2011)

¹²LORD, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

¹³LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but your name alone do we honor.

We have not brought salvation to the earth,
and the people of the world have not come to life.

¹⁹But your dead will live, LORD;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—
your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.

John 20:1–10 (NIV2011)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ²So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

*Alleluia! Christ is risen!
This is the day to see and to believe.*

Seeing Easter from a distant past

Writing and prophesying more than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah saw doom falling on the northern kingdom of the Israelites, Israel. Soon, the full weight of the Assyrian empire would fall on Samaria and Galilee. But Isaiah also looked far ahead and caught a glimpse of restoration, renewal, and resurrection: “Your dead will live, LORD, their bodies will rise. Let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy.”

Yes, it is only a hint at God’s endgame but what a thrill it is to glimpse into God’s promise of new creation and new life. This passage, and others like it, gave rise to the widespread Jewish belief in Jesus’ day that when God’s big day came, he would resurrect all of the dead to newly embodied life. Families would be restored and knit back together. God’s people would be a vibrant full-of-life community that loved God and loved one another every day and in every way. Swords would be beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

Thus, as we saw a few weeks ago in the story of Lazarus, Martha knows that she will see her now-dead brother again and tells Jesus so (John 11:24). Lazarus and his sisters will

be reunited in the resurrection of the last day. All of the dead would be raised. All. No Jews expected that one person would be resurrected long ahead of the rest. But seeing is believing.

Believing exactly what?

Jesus was crucified and died on the Friday afternoon of Passover week. After his death was confirmed by the Roman soldiers, who were undoubtedly quite competent at execution, Jesus' body was claimed by a prominent member of the Jewish Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus' body was taken to Joseph's family tomb where it would have been wrapped, scented and laid on a slab. The women would have prepared Jesus' body as best they could before sundown on Friday, the commencement of the Jewish Sabbath. No one, not even women, could touch a dead body on the Sabbath without necessitating a week's worth of purification ritual.

God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. Abandoned by all but a few, Jesus had cried out to God just before his death, "Why have you forsaken me?" To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world "held him of no account" (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to vindicate someone is "free of blame, criticism, or doubt." Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was actually the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court, he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

Because they had been rushed, the women returned to the tomb very early on Sunday, after the Sabbath was over, to finish their work.

As John tells us in his account, Mary, a woman from Magdala (hence, she was known as Mary Magdalene), arrived and found that the tomb had been opened. She evidently believed, and naturally so, that someone had opened the tomb and made off with Jesus' body.

This is exactly the reaction one would expect. It is important to remember that no one, absolutely no one, would have expected a resurrected Messiah, for no Jew expected a crucified Messiah. Indeed, the fact that Jesus had been crucified could only mean that the disciples had been quite wrong and now had good reason to fear for themselves.

After running to get help, Mary sat outside the empty tomb and wept. Why? Because she believed that someone had stolen the body of her beloved Jesus.

Resurrected Messiah?

Often, Christians wonder why Mary and the other disciples didn't "get it." Didn't they know that Jesus must rise from the dead? Hadn't he told them as much? In v.8 of his account, John reminds us that they

did not yet understand. Frankly, it would have been odd if they had. Jesus and all his disciples were devout Jews. For any first-century Jew, the Messiah was God's returning king who would usher in God's kingdom, doing so in power and might and wonder and glory, for all the world to see. Thus, even though Peter had confessed to Jesus that, yes, he was the Messiah (Matt 16:16), Peter was completely bewildered and terrified when Jesus was arrested and tried. Peter, and everyone else in Jerusalem, knew what the Romans did to would-be messiahs. The Romans crucified them in a most public

demonstration of the fate that awaited anyone who challenged the authority of Rome. Here is the part that is most hard for us to comprehend 2,000 years later – to any first-century Jew, the fact that Jesus ended up dead on a Roman cross meant that he was surely not the Messiah! “Resurrected Messiah” simply wasn’t in the Jewish vocabulary. Little wonder then that Mary mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener (v. 15).

Only after Jesus appeared to the disciples and more than 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) and only after the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on Pentecost did they comprehend what had happened. Only then did they grasp that the Messiah’s suffering and resurrection was fully in accordance with the Jewish scriptures. It was Jesus’ resurrection that led them to proclaim: yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God’s kingdom had come; not fully, but it had come. Yes, the resurrection had begun, though oddly so.¹

So . . . with all this, isn’t it fascinating that John tells us when he (assuming, as I do, that John is the “beloved disciple”) looked inside the tomb, he saw and believed. Somehow, against all odds, he intuited that Jesus, though crucified, had walked out of that tomb and he had trusted Jesus even in this. I think that God opened John to the truth in that moment, enabling him to understand, at least in some sense, what his own eyes were telling him. And nothing would ever be the same.

Easter Changes Everything

Let’s be clear about this. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of Jesus’ resurrection. Christians are resurrection people. Indeed, only the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ explains the existence of Christians at all. No one has put this more plainly than the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19-20).

Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Easter is the first great answer to that prayer. Our celebration of Easter reminds us that we and this world are God’s creations and that our future is grounded in this world. Easter is good news for us and the world precisely because it is about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our hope lies not in some spiritual escape into heaven, but the restoration and renewal of God’s world, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17; Rev 21:1). If we speak only of a “spiritual” resurrection, with Jesus’ body left in the tomb or stolen away, Christianity becomes about nothing more than some private, other-worldly salvation. Instead, borrowing N.T. Wright’s² phrase, resurrection makes us a “kingdom on earth as it is in heaven” people.

Bishop Wright puts it this way. “Let’s make no bones about it: if Easter isn’t good news then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.” Alleluia! Alleluia!

¹ First-century Jews expected that upon the arrival of the Messiah and God’s kingdom, all God’s people would be bodily resurrected – all of them, at one time. But Jesus’ resurrection, accompanied by no others, meant that the resurrection had begun but was not completed. Hence, Paul describes Jesus as the “first fruits of those who have died” and promises that “all will be made alive in Christ . . . raised imperishable . . . in the twinkling of an eye.”

² N.T. Wright is a noted New Testament historian and formerly the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. This is from an article, “Why Easter Matters,” in his book, *For All God’s Worth*, Eerdmann’s, 1997.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Because the Christian claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected is so astounding and so counter to our own life experiences, many people are tempted to find a way around it. They want to build a Christian faith on a foundation of Jesus’ “spiritual” resurrection and the disciples’ “experiences” (i.e., only visions) of a risen Christ.
 - a. Discuss why Jesus’ bodily resurrection is so fundamental to our faith. Do you believe in Jesus’ bodily resurrection? If so, why? What do we lose if we try to construct a Christianity without Jesus’ bodily resurrection?
 - b. Are we expected to accept the claims of Jesus’ bodily resurrection in blind faith? The disciple “whom Jesus loved” looked in at the empty tomb and believed (v. 8). What brought you to belief in Jesus?

2. The accompanying resurrection text for today is Isaiah 26:12-19. Written more than 700 years before Jesus, the whole of Isaiah 24-27 looks ahead to resurrection and restoration in response to the darkness of exile.
 - a. How would you summarize the message of hope in this passage?

3. Easter is our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. It is the most significant day of the year. What does Easter, Jesus’ bodily resurrection, really mean to you now? God created a physical world and pronounced it good. God created us in God’s image. The resurrection life that God promises each of us is a gloriously transformed, but still physical, life. How might this change our view of the present world? Of our own bodies? Of our responsibilities in this world? There are many people who want to convince us that what really matters in life is the spiritual not the physical. What does our Easter proclamation say to them?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, John 17 Jesus prays to be glorified, for his disciples, and for all believers.	Tuesday, John 18 Jesus is arrested and tried before Pilate.
Wednesday, John 19 Jesus is sentenced, crucified, dies, and is placed in a tomb.	Thursday, Mark 16 Mark’s account of the empty tomb.
Friday, Luke 24 Luke’s account of the resurrection.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands in its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

We meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Paul and the Galatians

We meet from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages. The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Beginning April 15

What the Bible Really Says About the End Times