

RISING UP

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Global culture today is glutted with symbols, icons, avatars, and virtual reality. Each of these is a verbal or visual representation of something else. It's enough to make one ask, "Is anything *real* anymore?"

In the religious realm, we have long had icons and images to remind us of biblical, spiritual, or mythical truths. In addition, today's New Age theology divorces spiritual terms from their original context or expression to create a host of quasi-spiritual abstractions. This practice leaves us with talk of "divine love," yet no loving God; "eternal peace," yet no Prince of Peace; "ecstatic joy," yet no joy of the Lord; "harmony" and "balance," without salvation.

Today, throughout the Christendom, we remember and celebrate—not the Easter Bunny, but—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Easter Bunny is a harmless sort of fellow, surrounded by symbols of fresh life and new beginnings. But the first Easter knew none of those, except a new dawn. Earlier this morning, we read the story from Matthew's account. Hear it again, from The Message version of Mark's book:

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, "Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?"

Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

He said, "Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He's been raised up; he's here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You'll see him there, exactly as he said."

They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

Their heads were swimming and their minds were stunned, but they were not dreaming. Have you ever encountered something real, but unexpected, that made your head swim?

Martha and I were once invited to a dinner party by our daughter at the San Francisco home of one of her friends. We parked a couple of blocks away and walked to the house, enjoying the unusual warmth of the summer evening. It was an area near where I had spent my teenage years, so it felt pleasantly familiar. We rang the doorbell and were welcomed inside. Suddenly, the air rang with a shout, "Surprise!" Our daughter had cooked up a surprise party for our 25th wedding anniversary. For the next ten minutes we were warmly greeted by people from this church, people from our former church, people from Martha's work, a fellow police chaplain, and family members from near and far. We were stunned! Not only were we caught off guard by the event, but also by the diversity of the people—each had played meaningful parts in our lives, yet many had never been in the same room at the same time before. We were spinning! Literally, it took about an hour before I began to feel normal again.

Luke 24:13-33

¹³ That same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. ¹⁶ But God kept them from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. ¹⁸ Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days."

¹⁹ "What things?" Jesus asked.

"The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth," they said. "He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. ²⁰ But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. ²¹ We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel. This all happened three days ago.

²² "Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report. ²³ They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive! ²⁴ Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said."

²⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. ²⁶ Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?" ²⁷ Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

²⁸ By this time they were nearing Emmaus and the end of their journey. Jesus acted as if he were going on, ²⁹ but they begged him, "Stay the night with us, since it is getting late." So he went home with them. ³⁰ As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

³² They said to each other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" ³³ And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a mind-boggling event! And it is much more than a figure of speech, or analogy! Researchers have found it to be the most well-attested fact of ancient history. Modern jurists have announced that its evidence and testimony permit only one conclusion: Jesus of Nazareth, who died a brutal death by crucifixion and was buried, did in fact, in spite of the miraculous nature of the event, arise from the dead!

Does this make a difference? Does this matter to us, two thousand years later? Apostle Paul advised us to think long and hard about it.

Colossians 3:1-4

¹ Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. ² Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. ³ For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

Here are four theological verities related to the resurrection of Jesus, four "realities of heaven":

- Demonstrates God's supernatural power
Many self-styled prophets, swamis, and gurus have predicted their return from the grave, but none have pulled it off.

Luke 18:31-33

³¹ Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus said, "Listen, we're going up to Jerusalem, where all the predictions of the prophets concerning the Son of Man will come true. ³² He will be handed over to the Romans, and he will be mocked, treated shamefully, and spit upon. ³³ They will flog him with a whip and kill him, but on the third day he will rise again."

- Authenticates God's acceptance of Jesus' sacrificial ransom

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

⁵ For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. ⁶ He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone.

A ransom must be accepted to be effective.

- Initiates everlasting life for humanity as the "firstborn of all creation"

Romans 8:29

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

- Validates Christ's power over death, hell, and the grave (and, by extension, demons and sickness)

Apostle John had been exiled to an island prison for preaching about Jesus. It was there, that the Risen Lord appeared again to him to give him a new commission. John recalls, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave." (Revelation 1:17-18)

These four spiritual realities give me assurance in seven dimensions of my life. As a result, Jesus' resurrection:

- Assures me that my sins have been forgiven (1 John 2:12)
- Assures me that He "lives forever to pray for me" (Hebrew 7:25)
- Assures me of the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39)
- Assures me that He will "never leave me, never abandon me" (Hebrews 13:5)
- Assures me that I "can do all things (that He requires) through the strength Christ provides (Philippians 4:13)

- Assures me that He will come again
(Revelation 22)
- Assures me that we will live again
(John 11:25)

These assurances are very personal to me, but they are not exclusively mine; God offers the same assurance to all who put their trust in Jesus.

Therefore, the rising up of Jesus is a universal invitation to know God, our Creator, personally.

And to rise to a new lifestyle that is fruitful—pleasing to God and satisfying to you.