

First, a wedding.

Whenever we move through the story of Christ's resurrection, the question that we all should pose is: "is this true?" From what we have just read, this was first asked by the women at the tomb, then by Jesus' male disciples, then down through the centuries since that morning. This has been asked by every person who hears that Jesus rose from the dead. *Can this be true?*

The basis of the Christian faith is the belief that something unusual happened on that Sunday morning. Jesus, the one who died by torture, is seen alive. Not just alive like you and I, but alive in a way that we don't quite understand. One moment he's with the women on the way back from the empty tomb, the next he displays a wanton disregard for locked doors when he appears in the midst of his disciples who were hiding out together in fear. And every time he shows up and reveals himself to the people who knew him, loved him, and called him "Lord" and "Master", the same question gets asked: can this be true?

This is a question that you and I need to ask from time to time because it helps us establish that our faith isn't just a shot in the dark, but a renewed life based on the bedrock of Jesus' actual resurrection. If this story isn't true, we might as well be gathered together to worship unicorns or pixies. But if this story *is* real, then the fundamental framework of all reality changes. What Jesus said about himself and his Kingdom are proven *true*. And in an even more astounding turn of events, you and I get to be a part of this new Kingdom taking root in the hearts of those who believe that Christ is risen. We are no longer an unclaimed people bound to wander and die. We are a redeemed people, a people in Exodus and Exile, but a people who together are called the Body and Bride of Christ.

Today, we are gathered as the visible Body of Christ to remember a time when the body of Christ was missing. Most people don't understand what's gone on when Jesus' body is nowhere to be found. They assume, as you or I would, that the corpse was moved or that someone stole it. But when stories of a fully alive Jesus start making their rounds, confusion turns into disbelief. Thomas

famously refuses to believe until he's stuck his fingers into the holes in Jesus' hands and can feel the place where the centurion's spear pierced Jesus' side. But once Thomas meets the risen Jesus and has his doubts swept away, he reacts the same way as all Jesus' friends do: their disbelief turns into rejoicing. Not coincidentally, rejoicing is what we're called on to do at a wedding.

In order to explain, we need to go way back. Once upon a time, we were represented by Adam and Eve in the Garden, and it was good. We had everything we needed—food, shelter, meaningful work—but most of all, we were in perfect relationship with God. However, we proudly chose to live our own way—and when we chose to do that, we shattered our bond with God. We pulled the curtain down around us and hid in shame from the God who loves us.

Thanks be to God that the story does not end there.

When Jesus cried out his last and the curtain in the Temple was torn, the veil between God and humanity was also torn away. A relationship that once was broken is now renewed. Because of Jesus, the way to the Father is wide open, and the Father gathers us as his new family. Because of Jesus, we who were scattered are now a *people* in his name.

Some of you may say “*who cares? What does it matter that Jesus is the way to the Father's heart?*” These, too, are good questions that we need to ask. And the answer is simple: because it is only when we are with the Father that we will be satisfied.

Every time you get something new and are excited about it for a week before losing interest, you rub against the reality that stuff you buy won't satisfy you, and the only thing that satisfies is the Giver himself, not His gifts.

Every time you get the job or promotion or profit margin or recognition you've been praying for and yet still feel unfulfilled and insignificant, you realize that only the affirmation of the Father is enough for you.

Every time you listen to the news and can only shake your head when you hear reports of war, famine, genocide, bombings, tribal clashes, missing children, abused women and men, random

violence, property crime, rising rates of cancer, rising floodwaters on the river, and the rising cost of everything else, you are longing for the Father's peaceable Kingdom.

And every time you cry because your family and friends have failed to love you as well as you deserve, you are crying out for the perfect love of the Father who loves you *as you are*.

The way to the Father was closed, but now, because of Jesus, it is open. When Jesus opens the way to the Father, we are now invited to the very source of our yearning, to the fountain of all delight. But we aren't just invited to grovel and bang our foreheads at the feet of God. No, we are invited to the great dance that has been going on all this time; the dance between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who now holds out his hands and invites us to trust him to lead. Through Jesus, we are welcomed into a relationship with the God of Milk and Honey and to be a part of his People of Dessert.

We now are the Bride of Christ, the one he gave himself up for. Because the way to the Father is now open, we are free to take small, trusting steps into the heart of God like a baby learning to walk. And along the way, we learn to experience the joy of an intimacy with God that we otherwise would not have. On Easter, we celebrate the wedding of humanity to a God who sacrifices himself for his beloved Bride. And this isn't all: the restoration of God's relationship with all us also makes us free to learn how to *love* each other. This is where our citizenship in the Kingdom that is both now and not yet shines through: because of Jesus, we know what love is and how much that love costs.

I think there's a reason why Jesus said some significant things about weddings. He knew that weddings were occasions where we start paying attention to the idea that one man will marry one woman for the rest of their lives. We feel the weight of that commitment born out of deep love. We see the awkward boy and the shy girl standing together at the altar and we automatically know that something extraordinary is happening: a promise is being given and a covenant is being made. In Jesus, God takes our hand and puts his ring on our finger as if to say "You are mine. I will love you, and you alone."

(Now, when we commune together with God as the gathered Bride, we become *community*. And we celebrate this communion of God with His brand-new people by *taking* communion as His brand-new people.)

\*\*\*\*\*

The other time you may find me wearing a suit is when I am attending a funeral. Today, we not only celebrate the re-wedding of the Bride of Christ with Jesus himself, but we also celebrate a funeral.

Celebrate a funeral? Should we celebrate a funeral? For those of us who have had loved ones pass, it seems a mockery of our grief when we put the two words “celebrate” and “funeral” together.

But what if the funeral we hold is for death? What if today we celebrate the death of death itself?

In Mark’s account of the empty tomb, the risen Jesus doesn’t even appear. And, after being told that Jesus was going ahead of them into Galilee, the women simply run away in confusion and fear. We look back on their reaction and think it rather amusing, but imagine for a moment that your best friend was killed by a drunk driver. How would you feel? You’d miss him, that’s for sure. You’d wonder if the last words you said to him were words that were good ones; whether they were words of love or anger or fear. You’d spend the early days remembering everything you could about him: the way he walked, the sound of his voice, the light in his eyes. And you’d wish more than anything else that you could talk to him again. Even if you had nothing to say, you’d just want to sit around and be with him because he meant *that* much to you.

That’s what the women were feeling up until the moment they bumped into the strange young man at the tomb. And when the finality of death was suddenly turned on its head to become the

possibility that Jesus was risen indeed, the heaviness of the grief on their hearts was flipped upside down. When the crushing burden of their sadness tumbled from their shoulders, the women were unbalanced, so they fled. When your paradigms of such seemingly universal and final things as death are turned upside down, running away is the most sensible thing to do.

This is what happens when the people who were mourning Jesus the most witnessed their risen Master and Friend. The unexpected news of Jesus breaking the bonds of death turns their deepest sorrow into the greatest joy. The risen Jesus means that death—and sin, and evil, and pain, and crying—no longer have the final word. Jesus was the first one to break the grip of death. And now, after that Sunday morning two thousand years ago when the women found the empty tomb, everyone who entrusts their whole lives to Jesus and is found in him when they die, will not die forever, but be raised with him on the last day.<sup>1</sup>

This is why today we *celebrate* a funeral. Before Jesus, the one inevitable fact of life for everyone and everything is that life eventually ends. We will say goodbye to our moms and dads, goodbye to our brothers and sisters, goodbye to our children, goodbye to our friends. But after Jesus, our goodbyes become *au revoirs*—“until we meet again.”

A few years ago, I traveled to Rome and there had the way I think about death changed forever. It was in the catacombs of St. Callixtus—the ancient tunnels running under the cemetery of old Rome—that I saw the places where the first Christians often had the same little meal that we have just had. To the Romans, the cemetery was a cursed place to be avoided at all costs. But to the Christians, the dark, damp tunnels lined with the skeletons and bone boxes of their family were places of hope that nothing of this world could ever snatch away. These men and women decorated the tunnels with simple pictures to remind them of this hope—smudged paintings of the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders or fish that symbolized their belief in Jesus as Son of God

---

<sup>1</sup> John 6:39-40, 44, 54

and Saviour. But the most remarkable picture I saw that afternoon was one that we never talk about in our modern church gatherings: a phoenix.

The legend of the phoenix, if you don't know, is of a mythical bird that would make its nest in a heap of ashes before dying and turning to ashes itself. Then, after a while, the phoenix would burst forth from the ashes in an explosion of flame, remade and reborn. Every time those first followers of Jesus painted a phoenix on the walls of those tunnels, they were reminding themselves that death could no longer hold them. They would die, yes—but one day, just like the phoenix, they would be remade and reborn! Not as birds who occasionally give feathers for Harry Potter's wand, but as men and women who are somehow more themselves because they have been fearfully and wonderfully re-made into what God had always intended them to be. Wouldn't that be great? To finally be what we are intended to be and to be completely at ease with who we are? This is the everlasting shalom of Yahweh, the wholeness and peace that you and I crave. The first Christians saw death as something to be welcomed because it brought them one step closer to truly being home.

This is the hope that you and I carry with us to this day: death will not hold us down, and one day, we will awake all-new in the fulfilled Kingdom. And in this Kingdom, there is no more fear, no more crying, no more pain, no more sickness, no more depression, no more schizophrenia, no more addiction, no more poverty, no more heartache, no more loneliness, no more goodbyes. Today, we celebrate the fact that evil does *not* have the final word. Hallelujah! Death is dead.