

“Easter—What Did God Want to Tell Us?”

I want to get at the “So what?” question by asking another question. Why? I’m a why guy. I want to know why—about everything. And when it comes to Easter I want to know why was Jesus resurrected? Because it seems like Jesus’ life could still have had a happy ending without the resurrection. What if instead of Jesus’ resurrection, the story ended with him being crucified, saying, “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing.” Then he said, “It’s finished,” and his spirit went to heaven where he went to sit at God’s right hand and his body was simply buried.

The story of Jesus would be more believable without his resurrection. Jesus’ teachings would still be intact without the resurrection. The commands he gave would still be there. The miracles still in place. The Gospels could have ended without a resurrection, but they didn’t. It would have been more believable to a lot of people if the story ended that way. But it didn’t.

And I want to know why? Was it for Jesus’ sake? I don’t think so. I can’t see him wanting to come back into a body that had been tortured, and beaten, and bruised. And I can’t see him wanting to go back into the city full of people who killed him. He wouldn’t have done that just for himself. So then why? The answer has to be that Jesus was raised from the dead, not for him, but for us—for our benefit, not his.

Consider this, that the whole reason that Jesus walked the earth was for God to tell humanity something. Jesus was the word of God. God communicating with people. John put it this way, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1, 14, NIV)**. Jesus was God communicating himself to us. God chose to embody his word, his will for humanity.

So when you think of it that way, Jesus’ whole life was God communicating himself to us—what Jesus did, what he said, how he treated people, how he confronted evil and injustice—all that was God communicating something to us. So if that’s the case, then what was God trying to communicate to us through Jesus’ resurrection? I’m thinking that it must have been something very important! Important enough for Jesus to postpone going to heaven so that we got it. Something so important that the Gospel writers put the resurrection in there knowing that people then, just like people now, would find it hard to believe.

What did God want us to know and hear in Easter? Well, hundreds of books have been written about that, and depending on where you are in life, you’re going to find different answers to that. But the Gospel of John gives us some really good stuff to chew on. Some things that point us to the real meaning of Easter in 2010.

One of those things is that Mary Magdalene weeps at Jesus tomb. She was one of the disciples of Jesus. We talk about the men disciples but there were women too. They traveled with him from town to town and had gone with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem before his death. These women were with him throughout his ministry; Luke tells us that they supported him financially. We’re know some of their names from the Gospels. There’s Joanna, Susanna, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene had wrestled with her own personal demons in her life and when she encountered Jesus, he set her free. She found real freedom, real joy in Jesus. She was whole. In Jesus she experienced unconditional love. He radically altered her life and she had to have had a deep appreciation and a deep love for him. John’s Gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died on Friday. He hung there for six hours and Mary the mother of Jesus, the apostle John and several others were there too. The rest of the disciples had hidden behind locked doors but these women had courageously stayed by his side so that Jesus doesn’t have to suffer and die alone. Mary Magdalene was there with Nicodemus when Jesus’ body is taken down from the cross and when his body is placed in the tomb. She was there that first day, that Friday. It was terrible day.

And Saturday was a terrible day. On Saturday, the Sabbath when no work could be done, all the disciples, including the women, stayed where they were, they waited, they grieved. That Saturday, that second day, had to have been gut-wrenching, dark, devastating.

Sunday started the same way--dark, filled with grief. Before dawn, the third day, Mary Magdalene was there at the garden tomb. She was there because it was the closest she could get Jesus, her friend. It was the least she could do for Jesus to finish preparing his body for burial. She was there because her heart was filled with such pain, and sorrow. And while she stood there she wept.

There are times when weeping is the only appropriate response to things in our lives. Sometimes words cannot express the feelings, just tears. All the disciples were feeling that their hopes and dreams were dashed, destroyed. They were traumatized by watching the death of Jesus, the man they loved. They couldn't see how they could go on. Evil seemed to have had the final word. Death seemed to have had the final word. The world just seemed so broken, so cruel, so violent. That's what Mary had to have been feeling as she wept.

I've sat with men and women whose spouses have walked out on them. Sometimes all you can do is weep. I've been with people that have lost jobs. And you weep. I've sat with a young wife and mother whose husband took his own life. And you weep. I've held a baby girl in my arms that died just hours after being born—her name was Sarah. Her parents were filled with joy one minute and the deepest grief the next. And you weep. Three weeks ago I did the funeral of a truly wonderful woman who died too young—Sonja Davidson. I was with her husband through her death and through his tears. Sometimes you have to weep.

This is a part of the human condition. Part of the human condition that God was addressing powerfully and dramatically in Easter. This is not a Christian doctrine by the way, it's just life. Doesn't matter what religion you are, or if you're an atheist. It doesn't matter—life is punctuated with times of pain, and suffering and sorrow. We don't live in those times all the time, but there are moments when life is hard and all we can do is weep—just like Mary Magdalene.

And in those moments God speaks dramatically, powerfully through the resurrection. As Mary weeps there in the garden Jesus speaks. He calls her name. The event that we're celebrating today is God's word to us in the face of life's circumstances. God's word is that evil will never have the final word. That the day of death and despair and sorrow and suffering will never be the final day. And the worst things are never the last things. That's the message of Easter!

The Apostle Paul put it like this: **“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day...Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 4:16, 5:1, NIV).**

That's what I told the family of Sonja Davidson at her death. Death does not get the final word.

Listen carefully. Easter doesn't change our circumstances. The resurrection of Jesus isn't a promise that you will never go through hard times. The resurrection doesn't mean life is going to turn out perfect for you. Remember Jesus suffered through torture and hung on a cross for six hours and died a painful death. It's not the story of a pain free life.

Easter doesn't change our circumstances it changes our perspective on our circumstances. We see things very differently. Mary Magdalene would never live life the same after she saw Jesus raised from the dead. From that time forward, no matter how terrible things might get in her life, she knew that it was always going to be OK. She knew that the day of death was never the last day. She knew that the worst things were never the last things.

The disciples, after Jesus' resurrection, they lived boldly and courageously. They faced death over and over again. 10 of the 11 remaining disciples (after Judas took his own life) ended up being put to death for their faith. And they faced death without fear because Jesus was raised from the dead. That changed how they looked at life, why they lived and how they faced tragedy, difficulty and adversity.

If you let it, the resurrection changes everything. How you face your own death. How you face the death of people you love. How you face betrayal. How you face hardship. How you face a job loss.

That's a huge part of Easter. Jesus rose from the dead, this strange and almost unbelievable event, in order for God to say to you, "There is always hope. Death doesn't get the last word. Evil doesn't get the last word. The day of death and suffering is not the last day. The worst things are never the last things." So we hold on tight, we trust, we have hope.

There's one other thing I want to point out from John's Gospel about the resurrection. When you read John's Gospel you read it at different levels. There's the basic, obvious level, but he's always pointing us deeper. He includes little details that he's hoping we pick up on and look at very closely. In the details John wants to show us a deeper meaning in Jesus' life. But you've got to work for it a little bit. John writes this detail: **"In the place where Jesus had been nailed to a cross, there was a garden with a tomb that had never been used" (John 19:41)**. Only John gives us this detail about the crucifixion, and burial of Jesus happening in a place where there was a garden. Only John thought it was important to mention this. Why does it matter to John that Jesus died, was buried and rose from the dead in a garden?

To answer that we have to look at the very beginning of John's Gospel. He starts his gospel by writing, **"In the beginning..." (John 1:1)** There's one other book in the whole Bible that starts that way. The first book—the book of Genesis. It starts with, **"In the beginning..." (Genesis 1:1)**.

John's gospel ends in a garden where Jesus is crucified, buried and rises from the dead. The first part of Genesis starts in a garden. A place of beauty, of purity, of life. It's a place where there is no war, no violence, no hate, no sin, no shame. It's paradise this garden. And it's also where the first sin took place. Adam and Eve ate from the one tree they weren't supposed to. They go against what God asked of them and chose their own path. Whether you believe that literally or figuratively it still points to the fact that we have this human condition where we are broken, and sinful, and rebellious. We know God's way, but we listen to temptation and we give in and walk our own path and pay the price for that. Which is why there are wars going on right now, and why 40,000 children die of starvation and related diseases every day. We see greed, and hatred, and unrestrained materialism. There's something fundamentally broken in us. We look around and know that this ain't paradise.

So when John tells us that Jesus was crucified in a garden, that he died there, that he was resurrected there. He's saying that the sin that infected all humanity from the first garden, what went wrong then, was made right in this last garden. John's connecting the garden in Genesis with the garden of the crucifixion. John's trying to tell us that Jesus came to fix what is broken—that was Jesus' mission, that was God's desire. The first tree in the garden was a source of sin, the cross in the garden was the tree that fixed the problem.

Picture it. Gathered around the cross are the most religious people in the world, religious leaders waiting for the Messiah, but they don't recognize that Jesus is the One. They insist on Jesus' crucifixion. The Romans, who say they're champions of justice, are there taking a man they know is innocent and torturing him to death. Right there in the garden we see just what people are capable of. We see the curse of what human beings can do. And we see Jesus taking that curse on himself. He suffers for our infidelity to God. He suffers and he takes the punish on himself that we deserve.

And he's doing all this, in the garden, to draw us back to God. He's showing us just how much God loves us. He's trying to get through our hard hearts so we can hear him say, "Follow me, I'll lead you to the life that really is life." And on the cross he's showing us how to live—that sacrificial love is the only answer so we can help heal the brokenness of this world. Then he dies.

Jesus' resurrection is his way of saying, "I have overcome evil, I am stronger than evil, stronger than death itself. There is hope for you and the work has just begun in restoring Eden, paradise."

When Mary Magdalene finds Jesus raised from the dead in the garden, what did he look like? All the paintings show him in his white flowing gown and his blue Miss America sash. He's clean and perfect. But when Mary first encounters Jesus after his resurrection, she doesn't recognize him. Because he looks like a gardener. He showed up looking like a gardener! Coveralls and a plaid shirt, a bandana, dirt under his nails. And do you know what he's saying? Catch this imagery. God is the one who plants the garden of Eden and Jesus is the gardener in this garden. He's saying, "It's time to get to work."

John's telling us that our job, if we choose to follow this Jesus, is to restore paradise. That's our mission, that's our purpose, that's why all this important. We all want to have a mission and a purpose. John's

telling us, it's about restoring paradise. Our purpose is to work together with God, with one another in doing justice, loving kindness, showing mercy, loving our neighbors and our enemies, forgiving those who've sinned against us, working so that the world might look more like the kingdom of God. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." Our task is to do it. To be at work in this.

Hear this clearly. It's not enough to come to church on Easter and say, "This is awesome! Give me all the hope. I need that hope. Hope is great!" Because the hope comes with responsibility. You take the hope of the One who promises that the worst thing is never the last thing and you've got to take the responsibility that that One places on you to take on that life purpose that's bigger than you—working with that One to restore the world.

So why did Jesus rise from the dead instead of going straight to heaven? Because God had something really important to say to us. Jesus was God's living way to communicate with us. And God's message was not finished until he told us, "There is always hope. And there's work for us to do. Evil doesn't get the last word. Death doesn't get the last word. The worst things are never the last things."

Every once in a while somebody will ask me, "Aaron, do you really believe this stuff? Do you really believe in the resurrection? It just seems hard to believe." It is hard to believe, isn't it? Or is it?

I love science and scientific discovery. It tells us that in an instant, a split second, the entire universe came into existence from something the size of the head of a pin. That's kind of hard to believe. That things can travel at the speed of light and what can happen to them when they do. I don't fully understand that. That DNA, the most complicated code in the universe, would form out of that primordial soup and life would emerge on this planet. Seems a little farfetched to me. But that the God who created the entire universe could reanimate the atoms that formed the cells in the body of Jesus so that he could walk out of a tomb so he could speak the word to me. That just doesn't seem that unbelievable.

I not only believe this, I'm counting on it, and you can too. And for today that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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