

April 24, 2011  
EASTER

Revelation 21:1-10  
Matthew 28:16-20  
II Corinthians 5:14-20  
Galatians 5:13-16  
Jeremiah 31:31-37

## ALL THINGS NEW

Some of you may wish to accuse me of pulling out too many “big guns” in this selection of Scripture passages. I hope you are wide awake enough on this Easter morning to accuse me of that. It certainly is true, and there is more here to deal with than I can possibly hint at in one service. On the other hand, that is appropriate to Easter. Can we catch a glimpse of the vast sweep of things beyond an empty tomb, or even a full-blown Easter?

*“Behold, I am making all things new.”* That is a wonderful assertion, promise, claim with which to close out the Biblical writings. It is a wonderful way to close the Bible. Only, it does not read: “I have made all things new,” or “I will make all things new.” It reads: “I am making all things new.” That is, this is not a nice claim to tag-on to the end of the Bible – to wrap it up, or to close it out. This is not a conclusion to apply to any specific period of time, although that is the way vast numbers of Christians have tried to hear it. This is not how God ends the Book or closes the age. This is who God always is – what God is always like – and this is what God is always doing. In other words, this statement is just as true in Genesis One as it is in Revelation Twenty-One. *“Behold, I am making all things new.”* Creation! That is what God is doing. That is what God is always doing. That is what God is like, and what God is about.

We frequently try to take Easter out of context. Whoever heard of raising somebody from the dead? Such things simply do not happen in our world. This is a monstrous miracle. It does not fit into any of our expectations or understandings of what life is like here on earth. Therefore if we decide to take it seriously at all, which most people do not, then at least we conclude that it is an exception that breaks all the rules. It comes out of nowhere, and it goes back into nowhere. We do not expect any repeat performances, even though that is what the New Testament writers keep insisting is exactly what will happen and what it is all about: we also will die with Christ and be raised to new Life. But that is consigned to euphemism and metaphor and, if it’s true at all, will be true

in another realm, not this one – another realm, one having little to do with this one.

But you see, if we think or talk like that, we have already sided with the enemies of Easter. That is, it is much easier to doubt Easter if we can see it coming out of nowhere and going back into nowhere. That way Easter has nothing to do with real life in the here and now. It's just a great claim and a consolation for some later, unrelated reality. We think that perhaps it would be nice if, after we died here – after we were finished with this earthly realm – a new and greater reality awaited us. But for too many, Easter is not really meaningful or relevant to our present reality. So the question is: Why would God send Jesus to the here and now – to live and die and be raised again – if it has no meaning or relevance to the here and now? If Easter is for later, why doesn't God wait until later to reveal it? God just likes to confuse us? God just likes to take up our time and energy on useless theories that have no present significance? Do we imagine that God is only saying, "Oh, I just wanted you to know that more is coming." Yes, well thank you very much, but no matter how true that may be – and philosophically, I can probably accept that there must be much beyond our limited awareness, and even beyond the limited realities of this time and space – I don't really need or appreciate being sidetracked from all the threats and challenges I am currently facing, just to be told that there are other realities coming in some distant realm.

There is much going on here that is not clearly known to any of us, and which seems to be hardly noticed by the majority of those alive on our planet at any given time. But there are more marks of it, more evidence, than are usually known or acknowledged. There is a history, a continuity – threads and themes – not just of truths but of vast unfolding realities behind and within what most of us see and recognize as life on this planet. There is LIFE behind and within the life we know.

Religion is not merely religion. Religion is the search, and the records we have of the search, by those who have discovered some of these threads and themes. Only, they would have known and found nothing if the drama and destiny were not real – if the being we call "God" was not actually trying all the time to awaken us and lead us and deliver us ... and carry us HOME.

Unfortunately, religion is also marketable in our world. It is one of the sources of power, influence, money – even of fame and prestige.

So the trail is corrupted and confused by mixed motives and false motives, as is always and everywhere the case in our world. Many sincere seekers are led astray, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. Then new threads of evil and stories of trial and temptation are told to explain what has made it all so confusing, so difficult. And then, of course, some suggest that perhaps none of it is really true.

In any case, I am persuaded that most people in our culture and time see Easter as an interruption to everything that came before and to everything that will come after, at least for them personally, and in this life. The vast majority of our people have no other perspective to call on. They do not come to church often enough to see a larger perspective. And in most instances, the church wouldn't teach them a larger perspective if they did come.

The truth is, Easter makes a lot more sense when we realize that it is coming from the same God who has the same goals and purposes that God has always had. Jesus is not a "thirty-day wonder" who suddenly drops into the world and onto the human scene out of nowhere. Jesus is God's Messiah! It is the fullness of time. The Covenant purpose is the same as it has always been, even if the Covenant looks new because it is the fulfillment – the blossoming – of everything the Old Covenant was pointing to and working toward. Covenant has always been God's answer to Sin. (Sin is alienation, separation. Covenant is community – us coming back into harmony and Life under God.) Only, the Covenant has to expand and enlarge ... to take in all of God's children. The New Covenant isn't different, just clearer, and therefore bigger – more all-encompassing. Only, this kind of bigger *does* change everything.

*"Israel is my first-born son."* (Exodus 4:22) To Jesus at His baptism: *"You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight."* (Luke 3:22) Same God. Same claim. Only, Jesus is a step beyond the sons of Jacob (Israel). Jesus is the new humanity: the church. The church is the body of Christ, and so His baptism is also the inauguration of the day when God's Covenant will include and draw in everybody – *"making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name ..."* (Matthew 28:19) However, it is hard for us to hear this rightly because it has all been made small again. We have reduced it to a new version of "just the children of Israel" – that is, just us right-thinking, properly converted Americans. That's simply another version of "the chosen people," as if some are not chosen and never will be. And vast numbers of people say to themselves: "This is just another form of colonialism."

Oh yes, we are still here; same old world. And right in the midst of all our realities, we long to – want to, need to – bring in all the sons and daughters of God. But that really isn't new; it's the old being *made* new. And true, there are so many conditions, all necessary for allowing this to happen – for allowing the promises and purposes to come into reality. But loving God, loving each other – being committed and obedient enough for God to work his will and way with us and in us – oh, that is terribly new in reality. But it is also terribly reminiscent of what we have been hearing and seeing clear back to the days of Abraham.

Jesus is the culmination of a seeable two thousand years of Jewish history – Israel's history – the history of the Sons of Jacob. And if, as the story says, we come to this incredible showdown between our world and God's Messiah – with all that happened to Jesus in His assignment and confrontation here on earth – **and God had not raised Jesus from the dead, that would have been the unthinkable surprise!**

That would have been the wonder of all wonders. That would have been incredibly unlike our God. Once all the promises and covenant meanings had been so faithfully followed, revealed, and lived-out in real life, for God to stand idly by – not back his Son, not make clear his truth and the real purpose and meaning of Life – that would have been unimaginable, unthinkable, the end of all faithful and purposeful life as we know it.

What is the Resurrection really for? What is it really about? It is not the center of the story. Pentecost is more exciting and more to the point, at least from any human point of view, and for anyone who really wants to be a follower of Jesus. Resurrection is not just to keep Jesus on earth a little longer. Some humans might be excited about that, but none of the saints ever were. What is the point and purpose of the Resurrection? Resurrection is totally and completely about backing Jesus. It is God's way of saying, "Jesus is the One to believe in. Jesus is my true agent. Trust and follow Him." Resurrection has no other point or purpose. It is God's stamp of approval. A pretty big stamp, to be sure. Incredible and mind-boggling indeed. But it only has one purpose and function: To let us know that Jesus is the true and rightful King. Jesus has it right, reveals the truth, *is* the Truth.

God says to us in Easter:

“Finally you see what I have been talking about, working toward, calling you into all along. Finally my Son has made it all plain and clear before your eyes. A true relationship with ME is so strange and frightening and compelling that you would not be able to look at it without blinking, without looking away. It is so threatening, in fact, that you killed Him. What some of you do not know because you will not stick with it long enough to see clearly is this: I know and understand how hard it is for you. I know how impossible it must seem to you from where you are and from where you experience things. Therefore I have resurrected Him, restoring the Truth to something you can see and comprehend if you really want it badly enough. In this vast, muddled maze of life as you know it, I have set my seal on the leader, the teacher, the role model, the Savior you can trust. You have often prayed to me, ‘Show us the way.’ So now I have answered your prayers. Jesus is the WAY.

“Now you can no longer set Him or me aside so easily. Not ever again. The time is ripe. The conditions are finally fulfilled. You need to know – it is imperative that you know – that JESUS WAS AND IS TRUE. He is your only hope, and your only true leader. So *of course* I raised Him from the dead! Of course I backed up everything He did and said and was and is. The physical death you so fear here – and get hypnotized by so often – is miniscule in comparison to the power and reality of my Kingdom. Death could not hold Him! Of course not! And you still have no inkling of who I AM? Wake up! He was sent to you to reveal who I really am. And as the great hymn says: ‘His truth is marching on.’

“Behold, I am making all things new. I always have been. I always will be. I *am* the Creator – not just once and long ago. I am the Creator, and it is my will and purpose to make all things new. I build things. I built you with endless potential. The moment you stop transforming – stop coming to Life – you are apostate.”

“*All things new.*” Never mind theory, or things far away or in some distant future. Do you really think God is eager, willing, and able to make *you* new? If not, we might as well pack it all up and go back to sleep. If you cannot be made new, then I cannot be made new, and whatever it is we are talking about or hoping for doesn’t really matter. If God is not making us new, what hope is there for us? And if God *is* making all things new: What about a new marriage, or an old marriage that is being made new? What about a new job, or a new way to do an old job?

What about a new golf swing? What about a new attitude toward nearly everything we see or participate in all around us?

This incredible precept that sweeps from one end of Scripture to the other is indeed the most relevant thing in all the world. Our problem is in wanting to dilute it – please, before it blinds us with its brilliance. It starts to get obvious and difficult really fast, if we imagine applying it to our safe and frightened ways of living. *Of course* God raised Jesus from the dead. But won't God want to raise us from the dead too? Oh no! Can't we find a softer, easier way to get back into some other church? Lots of churches are content to keep it small and petty and pretty, and just unbelievable enough so that we don't have to expect any real or inconvenient changes. But that is not the true Message at all. "*Behold, I am making all things new.*" He is risen! (He is risen indeed!) And you are next.

What makes preaching both difficult and exciting today is that so many people are skeptical and contrary. I don't think they really mean to be, actually; it just wells up from within because of all the trauma we have seen, and we think we understand because of all the conditioning of the culture around us. Often I'm preaching along and all at once I realize that at least some of the people listening are challenging the assumptions and assertions on a very different level. But it's all going on inside them. In most cases, the facial expressions don't change, and I may never hear the honest doubts being raised in people's minds. The trouble is, if I don't make any comment about what they are really thinking, we are two ships passing in the night. They will go away assuming that their objections are sufficient reason to rule out what I'm saying, even though in reality their objections may be quite small or even elementary. But if I interrupt the sermon to make comments about all the possible skeptical responses going on behind the scenes, it will turn into endless footnotes and side comments, and the real message will get lost.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the more we challenge and test the Gospel, the more it can reveal to us its inner wonders. Even that is only true of honest skeptics and doubters. Some people ask questions with a jaundice or an inner anger that has no intention of considering the replies or contemplating the answers that their doubts raise. If we have no intention of learning or listening, then the possibility of learning or listening is remote indeed. But I do not consider this to be the attitude of our current clientele, so I will interrupt this sermon for just a moment.

I have been talking about how the Resurrection of Jesus fits into the plans and purposes of God from the beginning – that is, for as far back as humans have been aware of God’s presence in our world. It doesn’t start on Good Friday. It doesn’t even start with Mary and Joseph. It starts, in our feeble awareness of earth history, with Abraham. Doubtless if we knew more, we would see how it starts long before that. I consider it both exciting and essential for us to realize this, for apart from this awareness, we either trivialize the Resurrection or miss the entire scope and meaning of the Christian Message.

But while I am talking about that, some minds are at work behind the sermon, saying: “But if God loved Jesus, why didn’t God stop the cruelty and injustice before all the pain and anguish of the Crucifixion took place? Why raise Him up afterward, after the damage had already been done?”

Is that a serious question? Or is that just an “I want to have everything my own way” kind of question? Or maybe it is an “I don’t really like pain and challenge” kind of question. The logic and power of this question already start to melt away just by asking it out in the open. It is in the Crucifixion that we see the true depths of our anger and mistrust toward God. It is in the murder of God’s Son that we behold our true condition, and begin to realize what is really wrong here – wrong with our world, and wrong with us. We cannot fix anything here until that condition is fixed first. Unless the animosity (to use the mildest word I can think of) between us and God is healed first, all our efforts to improve life for ourselves or for others will inevitably spring back to the same old realities and principles from whence they came. If I try to love my neighbor without first dealing with the Crucifixion, I will only find some new way to abuse, use, or try to control my neighbor, no matter how many nice words I try to surround it with. God did not stop the Crucifixion because it was imperative for us to see our Sin – our alienation and separation from God. The Crucifixion was our only hope. The extreme faithfulness of Jesus took Him to that terrible place, and He would not flee or turn away because He knew it was essential for us to know how great the fear and anger of our own hearts was toward God. What had Jesus done to deserve such treatment, such anger from us? He was teaching and telling us the truth; healing the sick; forming true bonds of friendship; showing us glimpses of our true destiny; declaring His own identity without apology or equivocation. That got Him crucified among us. And it doesn’t take a lot of thought to realize that

unless our world changes somehow, it will always get Him crucified, and a lot of His best followers along with Him. If that doesn't break our hearts, nothing ever will.

Of course, it is true that the question raises other questions. This close to the core of life, that is hardly surprising. So we ask: "Does God ever stop pain, cruelty, or injustice just because God loves us?" We all know what we wish the answer would be. And we all know what the answer really is. Jesus experienced life here as we know it. But that is only half of the Incarnation. Once we know *Him*, we experience life also aware of all the principles He faced and lived with. Paul keeps trying to tell us that we die with Christ – and we get raised with Him too. We are the body of Christ. The drama isn't over. We all have our own little crucifixions once we see the big one. God does not protect us from them for the same reason God did not protect Jesus from His. Some people will awaken because of what we go through. Some people will see the connections between their own lives and His life. The heart only changes when it is broken. Some people will never repent, never turn toward a new Life, never know the possibility of love, redemption, forgiveness, or the new Life in Christ Jesus. In fact, none of us do until it breaks our hearts ... and we realize that it has already broken His. It is said that there is no limit to what God can do with a broken heart, if he has all the pieces. And we are the only ones who can give God all the pieces. It reminds us of the foundational principles of our WAY: Turning will and life over to Him. "*You must be born anew.*" By myself I am powerless. My life is yours, Lord; do with it as you will. "*Behold, I am making all things new.*"

That is how God does it. And that is why God keeps inviting us into the story, into this new kind of Life. And of course, once we have discovered it for ourselves, we are asked to help invite others into it also.

So let me ask you a couple of questions: What other religion do you know of has death and resurrection at the core of its truth? Not metaphorically or ethereally, but grounded in the very reality of our physical existence here, where real people really die? And what other religion knows, says, and proclaims that HE IS RISEN?

Truly, Death and Resurrection is a hard act to follow. But the deeper truth is that it is a hard act *not* to follow! We are the Followers. So we form The New Church that really wants to be about how God is making all things new.