

What Difference Does Easter Make?

² The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined. (Isa. 9:2)

Very early, before daybreak on April 5, 33 A.D., or Nisan 16th on the Jewish calendar, at least four devout Jewish women met. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome (Jesus' aunt), and Joanna gathered together, having collected a mix of spices, oils and aromatic gums used to embalm bodies being buried. In love and remembrance, they wanted to honour their Teacher, Jesus, by finishing embalming His body. Sunday was a normal working day, so they wanted to get there early, before the day began, and also as soon as they could after Sabbath had ended, and there was some daylight.

The previous Friday, just before Sabbath began, Jesus died and was verified dead by a Roman spear through his ribs just after 3pm. The bodies were usually left on the cross to be eaten by birds or insects, unless a family member specifically requested the body. A former secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea had to go to Pilate to get special permission to have the body of a crucified criminal, and that would have taken at least another hour or two. It's probably 6 pm by the time he gets the body of Jesus into the tomb, with the women observing. In April, the sun goes down in Jerusalem at 7pm, so he and Nicodemus only had an hour before Sabbath begins, by which time they must have finished with His body and be back in their homes. There was only so much they could do in an hour. Joseph and Nicodemus had managed to wrap Jesus in a linen cloth, with some spices of aloes and myrrh. But the job had not been completed, and so the women were ready that morning to go and complete the embalming process.

On the way, they were unsure exactly how they would get access to the tomb. The stone in front of the tomb, which was either a disk stone, or a kind of cork-shaped stone, could weigh between 1-2 tons, and would need two to three men to roll. But they decided to make their way there, and solve the problem when they got there, rather than give up because of obstacles.

But now imagine with me for a few moments an alternative set of events, opposite to what is found in Scripture. The women arrive at the tomb, and there find, to their surprise, a Roman guard, which had been posted on the Saturday, by Pilate's permission. Wrapped across the massive stone is a rope with a wax seal, carrying the authority of Rome, and forbidding anyone to enter. As they arrive, the guards gruffly ask them what they want. They tell them that they have come to finish embalming the body of Jesus which was not completed. The guards don't know anything about this, and say the women need to go back into the city and get permission from Pilate for the seal to be opened. One of the younger women goes to Pilate's palace, and after a long wait of several hours, and a rude interview, she gets a slip of parchment with his seal saying they can finish embalming the body under the supervision of the soldiers.

It's already the middle of the morning when she returns, and hands the parchment to the guard. The guard carefully unties the rope, and three men push the stone open. The women timidly enter. The fragrance of the aloes and myrrh partially dulls the smell, but not enough, and the women must cover their noses with their veils. They quickly begin working, tears mingling with hard swallowing at the gruesomeness of a crucified man's now swollen and putrefying body. The bored Roman soldiers take turns standing in the tomb, watching to make sure no funny business goes on. After two hours, the body is completely wrapped, sealed with resins and gums and fragrancd with perfumes. The women say their last goodbyes through tears, while the soldiers confirm the body is there.

As the women are hustled out, they find some of the Sanhedrin, who have arrived, having heard that some of Yeshua's followers went to the tomb. They are there to make sure no stories of the body going missing take place. One of them asks to be able to look inside, and calling a second for two witnesses, they stand just outside the tomb so as to remain ceremonially clean and verify the body is still there. The Romans roll the stone back, the cord is restored and the Roman seal put back. The guard will remain there for the next two months, preventing any stories about a risen messiah.

In those next two months, the grief-stricken eleven disciples slowly return to their former lives. They had lost all their courage the night Jesus was arrested, and all their hopes for a kingdom came crashing down. Slowly they return to where they came from, mostly in Galilee, and go back to fishing, Matthew can't return to tax collecting, but finds other work. All of the many other disciples of Jesus also return to their lives, confused and perplexed at another failed messianic movement in Judaism. The last best hope of Israel is gone, and with him, the light that Judaism was to the rest of the world.

Judaism returns to normal, the synagogue and the Temple functioning as it did, with the Pharisees and Sadducees in control. Thirty years later, war breaks out with Rome in the year 66 and the Temple is destroyed, and another 60 years later, another revolt results in the Jewish people being scattered. Judaism shrinks to a minor oddity in the empire, a negligible religion in a pantheon of paganism.

And so Rome never experiences the true Messianic faith of Israel. Instead, Rome's pagan immorality only grows, its decadence and evil becoming more and more corrupting. There is no challenge to its paganism, to its immorality, to its abuse of humans, to its denigration of women, to its murder of children, to its bondage to demons.

There will be no churches changing Rome's makeup from the inside out, permeating every level of society. No persecution, no martyrs, and no viral spread of this religion across the empire.

No Christian apologists and philosophers challenging the absurdity of paganism. There will be no Constantine, and no spread of of this religion. In fact, there will be no Islam, because Mohammed essentially rejected the Nestorian Christianity which came his way, and so not even the later civilisation of Islam will come to the Middle East and the Arabs. They too, will remain pagan.

Rome will finally collapse under the weight of its debauchery, slavery, corruption and greed. But when it collapses, there will be no churches or monasteries with learned scribes and monks, and so, no one to preserve and purify the classical learning of the Greeks and Romans, it will all be lost and forgotten.

The illiterate barbarians who plunder Rome never hear any gospel, and remain as barbaric as before. The barbarian kings that rule Europe will be pagan. There will be no Alfred the Great, and no Charlemagne. And when the vicious Vikings come south, it will be pagan against pagan, tribal destruction upon tribal destruction.

And now we are too far into an imaginary timeline to even keep it coherent. No Magna Carta, no Renaissance, no art, architecture, literature, poetry, music, law, economics, statecraft, jurisprudence as we know it. No scientific or industrial revolutions, no great emancipations of whole population groups, no end of slavery, no spreading of wealth and innovation and sanitation. No light dawning on any other people group stuck within the horrific cycles of tribal superstition and animism.

What about war? Didn't religion bring war? Yes, but in this timeline, there'll be a lot more of it. The whole world immersed in illiterate, superstitious, tribal subsistence living, cycles of destruction and development, living in bondage to ignorant fears about nature, captive to primitive medicine and nutrition. A harsh, brutal, nasty world, where life is cheap and short, and there is no purpose and no sign of it ever changing.

It goes without saying, that is not the world you live in. Why not? Why are we here right now, in a church building? Why are you literate and able to read? Why is there a Bible in your hands? Why did you arrive here in a technological invention called a car, having enjoyed meals all week cooked with electricity, your body kept healthy by all sorts of medicines, while you worked and lived in a relatively stable society where you weren't fending off wolves and savages with sticks and bows and arrows every night?

The answer is because those women found something very different that morning.

I. Easter Changed the World From A Pagan Prison to a Humane Home

Matthew 28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as the first *day* of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. ³ His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴ And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead *men*. ⁵ But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. ⁷ "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." ⁸ So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. ⁹ And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go *and* tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." (Matt. 28:1-10)

They found instead what looked like there had been an explosion in the tomb: the stone was away from the tomb, the seal had been burst, and there were no guards, except maybe what they had dropped and left behind when they fled.

Instead they found two men, whose appearance indicated they were God's heavenly messengers, who told them Jesus was risen. And in the next few hours, the following people, in this order, saw Jesus: Mary Magdalene, then the other women, then two disciples on the road to Emmaus, then Simon Peter, then the ten disciples with Thomas absent. By the way, in the ancient world, if you wanted to invent a story about resurrection, and give it credibility, you would have made the first eyewitnesses men, not women. The fact that the very first eyewitnesses were women, in a society that devalued their opinion is a smoking gun that these events were exactly what happened.

Try to picture it. Not a vision of Jesus, not a hallucination of Jesus. Jesus. Physically. Picture your reaction if someone you had lost in the last year were to walk into the room now and sit next to you.

And in the next 40 days Jesus appears to the disciples with Thomas present; He appears to them when back in Galilee on the lake; He appears to them again, on a mountain in Galilee with 500 others, to his half brother James, and to the disciples before His ascension.

The result is that those formerly cowardly disciples do not return to their old lives. They are radically changed forever. They have no interest in fame, or money. They are not seeking self-advancement by beginning a new religion. Far from it: they know this is going to cause them to lose

everything, including their lives, but they are willing to die for what they have witnessed.

Instead, 50 days after the Resurrection, a group of 120 of these Mashiachim – Messiah-followers, gathers in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Shavuot or Pentecost and display inexplicable signs: for a few minutes, they can speak the languages of Jews living in other countries, who are present for the feast. Thousands gather to hear what these will say. After Peter's sermon, the group grows from 120 to 3000, and in the next months and years it soon it becomes 5000.

Within a few years it spreads to Samaria, and then it does the totally unexpected: it begins including non-Jews in the assembly without their becoming Jews. They are grafted into the commonwealth of Israel, become part of the Abrahamic covenant, without conversion to Judaism, simply by faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. So the movement spreads through the Roman empire, small assemblies beginning in town after town, city after city. In Greek, the word for Messiah is Christos, so the name for Mashiachim or Messianics in Greek is Christianos – Christians.

It soon becomes a target for Roman persecution, but that only makes it grow more and more, spreading through more and more of Roman society. The persecution is like pouring gasoline on the fire. Soon, its not just slaves becoming Christians, but noblemen, patricians, soldiers. By the 300s, it is found everywhere, and finally Rome not only permits Christianity in 313, but adopts it in 380.

Christians now permeate the empire, and theologians and philosophers and pastors and monks write about the faith. There is corruption, yes, as you would expect, and heresy, but by the time the Roman empire falls in 475, Christianity is preserving learning and education in its monasteries and monks. It is Christians who send teachers all over Europe, and pagan tribes adopt it, and become literate.

For the next 1000 years, the teachings of Israel, Old and New Testament seep into the thinking of people across Europe. It changes the way they think about law and ethics and morality. It seeps into the thinking of vicious and pagan Vikings who delighted in being bloodthirsty and wicked. It changes attitudes towards the weak, the orphans, women. It changes the ideas of impartial law, about the rights of an individual, about fair trials, about punishments fitting the crime.

Monogamy in families, chivalry toward women, laws against infanticide, hospitals for the sick, orphanages for children began.

It changes marriage and family, and soon it changes government, from absolute chiefs to kings with limited power to democracies and republics.

It changes the way way people think about nature and creation and it sparks what we call science and invention. Industrial and scientific and medical revolutions begin and continue to this day.

It creates the most beautiful architecture, painting, music, literature, and poetry the world has ever seen. It even creates the freedom to criticise itself and question itself.

In short, Easter changed the world. It changed it from what was a pagan prison, where people were in bondage to superstitious nature religions, and in bondage to their mortality and what they called fate, and the gods, to a humane home. Acts 17 describes the pagans saying that the Christians turned the world upside down.

It turned the Gentiles from darkness to light. ² The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined. (Isa. 9:2)

Indeed, it turned them from what they thought were gods but were actually demons. ²⁰ Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, (1 Cor. 10:20)

In fact, I'm convinced the world was a pagan prison because those very demons had more control before the Resurrection. But Paul tells us that after the atonement, Jesus

¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (Col. 2:15)

That is, I believe before the resurrection, fallen angels and demonic beings had more free reign in the world, more power to manifest and control. The reason why the writings of ancients are so filled with supernatural manifestations is not because those people were delusional, and wanted their descendants to think of them as naïve and primitive, but because they actually did live in a different kind of world, where there was more of that. And indeed, go to places where the gospel is still mostly shut out and you will still find it.

But when the resurrection took place, the energy and life of Israel's true faith spread through the world and turned darkness into light.

It literally changed the world. Today, you sleep under a blanket that Easter provided. The freedoms, stabilities, wealth, order, technologies, knowledge, laws came from Israel's God, Israel's Messiah that spread through the nations over 2000 years. Millions, more like billions of people, live in the freedom and benefits of what Resurrection Sunday brought to the world. They live in a changed world, and they think it is due to the impersonal god of "progress", due to some kind of natural evolution and advancement. But anyone who know history knows that before 33 AD, it wasn't steady progress; it was merely cycles of pagan empires rising and falling while the tribes of mankind lived in superstitious darkness.

Whether or not you've acknowledged it, whether or not you've given thanks for it, whether or not you've believed it, Easter Sunday changed the world from a pagan prison to a humane home. Have you thanked God for Resurrection Sunday? Have you believed and thanked Him that you do not live in a pagan prison, under bondage to demons masquerading as gods or ancestors or nature spirits?

But it is not just an idea that changes the world, at least not just an idea in the abstract. Plenty of other religions had resurrection stories, too. In paganism you Osiris and Tammuz. Greek mythology had Asclepius and Achilles who were resurrected. Hinduism had Indra resurrecting all the valiant monkeys who died in a battle against evil.

Ideas are fleshed out in people. And it is only if the resurrection of Jesus had a genuine power that continues in His people, from generation to generation, that you can explain how what began in Jerusalem conquered the world.

II. Easter Changed People From Fearful Slaves to Fearless Sons

¹⁴ Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Heb. 2:14-15)

The text tells us that Jesus took flesh so as to die for our sins, but then rise again, and through that death destroy the greatest weapon and instrument of fear that Satan had: the fear of death. Jesus broke the back of all false religion that used the fear of death to keep people enslaved.

How? The power of the resurrection. The power of the resurrection is freedom from the bondage to

the fear of death. What made Peter and John such bold witnesses before the Sanhedrin? The power of the resurrection. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33)

What gave Paul such boldness to face opposition at every turn?

¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, (Phil. 3:10)

These fearful slaves became fearless sons.

It means every generation, the same power that made those timid fishermen become unstoppable witnesses, is present. It has been present, and the growing years between the date of Christ's resurrection have not made that power fade into a memory. It is renewed and present in every generation.

The truth of resurrection means that everyone who embraces Jesus as Saviour and King is delivered from the fear of death in two ways. First, if you know that your sins are forgiven by the risen Jesus, you have living proof that you are forgiven and your physical death will not be the end of you. As Paul says in Philippians ²¹ For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain. (Phil. 1:21)

Any people group who are not afraid of death become nearly unstoppable. We know that in people who have embraced wrong causes, but didn't fear death: Viking berserkers, Japanese kamikazes, Islamic suicide bombers. But Christians are those who have not typically sought out conquest, but have sought to carry the same message of love, even if it cost them their lives. And when losing your life is no longer the greatest fear, then you are an awesome weapon in the hand of God. Revelation 12 in fact describes the defeat of Satan by believers, and it says how ¹¹ "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. (Rev. 12:11)

But there is a second way that the power of resurrection works. Christians who embrace Christ are not only not afraid of our physical death, but they are not afraid of personal death to a worldly life.

See, when you are a slave to this life, then all that matters is that you gather up the experiences of this world as quickly as you can, as much as you can. You must get what this world has: riches, children, marriage, fame, achievement, promotion, success, status, possessions, love, sex, power. And you must get it. And you must get the money to get it. And you must get it while you still have time, and still have youth, and still have years. And its slavery.

But Paul says when you become a Christian, God crucifies the old life in you, and puts into the resurrection, eternal life of His Son by His Spirit into you. That new life is not an earthworm scavenging this dying world for crumbs.

Col 3:1 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Rom 6:4-11 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

¹⁵ and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Cor. 5:15)

²⁰ "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

In fact, it's everywhere in Scripture. Believers are those who have new life: God's life. And so

believers are able to experience a continual death to the world, to a worldly life, to a selfish life, to a life lived only for this life. Why can they do that? Because of the power of the resurrection that says: die to that life, and you will really live. Try to have the old life and you will experience a living death. That's why the most repeated words of Jesus in Scripture are these:

²⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (Matt. 16:25)

If I am not only unafraid of physical death, but I'm unafraid of dying to what the world tells me this life is really about, then nothing can stop me from sharing this message of life and light and love to the world. I am the freest soul on earth. Free from fear of death, free from the fear of missing out, free from my own being chained to my own appetites and low, earthly desires.

Now unleash an army of these people in every generation, and the power of the resurrection changes society, because these people are living embodiments of the power of the resurrection. ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Cor. 4:10)

Easter changed the world. And Easter changes slaves into sons. But how has Easter changed you? You don't live in a pagan prison, but perhaps you've never noticed, and you take it for granted. Today you should consider deeply what broke the cycles of bondage, and why Easter is not just a nice Christian holiday, it is quite simply, the most important day in human history.

But then it has to go even deeper than that. Have you been delivered from the fear of death? I don't mean are you blasé about death, none of us is; we aren't seeking death. But is death still an unthinkable thing to you, a deep unknown contemplated only with horror? Then you need to come to Him who went there and came back.

Have you been delivered from the fear of losing life? The fear that life will slip away and slip through your fingers if you give it to Christ, that you won't know who you are, and you won't be the person you want to be? Then I tell you, you have not yet experienced the power of the resurrection. When Christ is yours, and you are His, you know the paradox from the inside out, you know that when you die to yourself, you really live, and when His life takes your place, it's a death you want and resurrection you must have. You're giving up what you cannot keep, to gain what you cannot lose.

If you don't know what I'm talking about, then you must still come and accept the Risen Jesus as your King, as the end of your old life, and the beginning of a new life. Be free from the fear of death, let the power of the resurrection transform you, as it has this world.