

“The Point of the Spear”

Acts 2:22-24; 4:1-2, 32-33

April 8, 2012

Easter Morning

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I want to direct your attention to some verses from the early chapters of the Book of Acts. Acts comes right after the four gospels, each of which tells the story of the Lord’s birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. Acts carries that story forward. We are reading just a few verses in chapter 2, then a few more in chapter 4. The first two come from the middle of a sermon that the Apostle Peter preached in Jerusalem on a great feast day when there were thousands of people from all over the world in the city for the celebration of the Feast of Pentecost.

Read Text

We have read a few verses from the early chapters of the Book of Acts, a book that relates the history of those first days, weeks, and years that followed the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t give us the whole history, to be sure; it would have to have been a very large book to have done that. But it relates the key events and introduces us to the principal figures by whom the message about Jesus Christ was spread to the rest of the world. In a remarkably short time the news about Jesus was spreading everywhere. Within a few years there were thousands of Christians in virtually every city of the Greco-Roman world and the news continued to spread as Christians proclaimed the good news about Jesus in the city streets, in private conversations, and as merchants and missionaries carried it to faraway lands. Christians had news to tell and they told it to everyone who would listen!

What the few verses we have read indicate is that first and foremost that news concerned the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It was not so only at the very beginning. As we read onward in Acts we learn that the resurrection continued to be the centerpiece of the message. When the Apostle Paul, for example, made his famous address to the philosophers in Athens **in Acts 17**, the one thing we know that he told them about Jesus was that he had risen from the dead.

“Every sermon preached by every Christian in the New Testament centers on the resurrection. The *gospel* or ‘good news’ means essentially the news of Christ’s resurrection. The message that flashed across the ancient world, set hearts on fire, changed lives and turned the world upside down was not ‘love your neighbor.’ Every morally sane person already knew that; it was not news. The news was that a man who claimed to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world had risen from the dead.” [P. Kreeft and R.K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 176]

Why was that? Why was it the resurrection that the first Christians were always talking about? After all, there were many other important things to say about Jesus. They could have talked about his miraculous birth, or his great miracles, or his wonderful teaching that was unlike anything anyone had heard before, or about his death on the cross for our sins. All of that was extraordinarily important and, of course, all of that eventually was told. But the resurrection was first and foremost. Why the resurrection?

Well, no doubt one very important reason was that the resurrection was the event that had created the good news in their own experience. Jesus had been executed in the most horrible and humiliating way, crucified among other criminals as if he had been one himself. His disciples had been utterly devastated by this sudden and catastrophic defeat. They had been riding the crest of the wave just a few days before, certain that Jesus was about to claim his rightful place as the king of Israel, and now he was dead. Their high hopes lay in ruins. And then suddenly, a few days later, reports reached them that Jesus was alive again and then they saw him themselves, spoke to him, walked and talked with him. Stunning news! And exhilarating! Thrilling! They had never been so low those few days before and now they had never been so happy. No wonder they talked about it to everyone who would listen. It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to any of them. And when marvelous things happen to you, you can't help talking about them.

And, I suspect, when they talked to others about Jesus, they majored on the resurrection as well because it was their strong suit. The good news had enemies in those days as it does today. There were many people who did not want it to be true, who were heavily invested in believing that Jesus was a false teacher, a charlatan, and a dangerous man. They were the ones who had arranged to put him to death. They were hardly friends of the announcement that Jesus has risen from the dead. They had wanted him dead. And now they were helpless before the onslaught of all this eyewitness testimony. Scores of people had seen him alive again. Excited as they understandably were, they were telling everyone what they had seen, what Jesus looked like, what he had said to them, what he had done. One report, or two, or three might be discredited, but the news was coming from all sides. And the religious leadership could do nothing to contradict it. They couldn't produce the body, they couldn't explain what had happened or why Jesus' followers, so dispirited upon their leader's death, were now shouting the news of his resurrection from the housetops.

The accounts that we have read from the Book of Acts, like the rest of the New Testament, were written at a time when many of the eyewitnesses were still alive. Plenty of people would have known if what was being said were not true. The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem just a few weeks after the Lord's crucifixion – and the rapid spread of the Christian faith through the world in the first century – according to Roman historians Christianity was already a significant movement just a few decades later – is virtual proof that Jesus had in fact risen, because they could never have got away with that story had it not been true. They would have been laughed at and that would have been that! No Jews in those days had the expectation that the Messiah would die and rise again. That was not part of their understanding of the Messiah and his work and life. His own disciples hadn't expected this and yet here were the Christians proclaiming that Jesus had died and risen from the dead. Many thoughtful people have examined the biblical record and have concluded that the idea that this was somehow concocted is psychologically and historically impossible. There is but one explanation for the history that you read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the rest of the NT and that is that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified on Friday was alive again on Sunday morning.

Some to be sure have argued that it *was* all made up, a conspiracy, a plot to foist a new religion upon the world. But even many unbelievers have admitted that such a theory is absurd. Those

men hadn't the means to deceive Jerusalem. People would have seen through the outrageous claims they were making: a dead man rising from the dead. Preposterous. Where is the proof? Charles Colson, one of the Watergate conspirators, has compared his own experience as somebody actually involved in a conspiracy to what would have to have been true of those early Christians trying to convince people of something that wasn't true, trying to persuade people that something had happened that in fact had not happened. He recounts the desperate efforts made by himself and President Nixon's inner circle to try to cover-up the Watergate break-in.

“With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hand-picked loyalists, no more than ten of us, could not hold a conspiracy together for more than two weeks. ... After just a few weeks the natural human instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators one by one, deserted their leader.” [*Loving God*, 67]

And all those men had to prove to the world was that the President hadn't known anything about the break-in beforehand and hadn't done anything to cover it up. The disciples had to prove that a man had come back from the dead! Fat chance, unless, in fact, a man had come back from the dead! Colson goes on:

“Take it from one who was inside the Watergate web looking out, who saw firsthand how vulnerable a cover-up is: Nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and Lord.” [69]

You will sometimes hear people say that folk in those days were more credulous, more easily duped. They were unscientific; not like us today who have horoscopes in our newspapers. C.S. Lewis once described that viewpoint as chronological snobbery. The fact is people knew then as they know now that people do not return from the dead. It is precisely because they knew that that it took them by such surprise and became something they had to tell others. People do not come back from the dead, but Jesus did!

Imagine if that had happened to you, and you had been an eyewitness of such a thing. You couldn't have kept it to yourself either. Happiness is not complete until it is shared. And something so amazing simply must be talked about. Everyone gossips. Why? Because when you know something others don't you find it very difficult not to talk about it.

People began to believe the message they were hearing in large numbers. They had a message that people couldn't help but believe. People who had days before joined in calling for Jesus' death were now believing that he had risen from the dead; even more startling people among the religious leadership had also believed their report of the Lord's resurrection. The good news was a tidal wave sweeping through Jerusalem. No group was less likely to receive with acceptance the news of Christ's resurrection than the priests. They had felt the Lord's lash more than once as he condemned them for their false teaching and their false living. They resented his criticism as we ordinarily resent criticism of ourselves. What is more they were jealous of the Lord's popularity. Human nature being what it is, they were not about to become followers of Jesus, but we read in Acts 6:7 that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” They couldn't help it. It had happened. Astonishing!

I can influence you in some ways. Others can as well. I can tell a funny joke and make you laugh. Or I can tell an emotionally wrenching story and make you cry. I've been married to my wife long enough that, if the movie is sad enough or if in the story happiness has come after great sadness, I can tell when to turn to look and find tears on her cheeks. I suspect we can all be moved in such ways.

But to change your whole life, to make you change your mind about fundamental things – what you think about yourself, about your life – to make you love and hate a completely different set of things, to make you care about different things than you cared about before, to make you committed to living in a different way; I say to do that takes much more; it takes an earthquake. *And that is precisely what the resurrection was, an earthquake that shook men and women by the thousands, by the millions to the core.* It was an event that changed their world. Of course the Christians were going to keep talking about the resurrection!

But I think there was another reason why the resurrection figured so largely in the proclamation of the *gospel* or the good news in those early days and years when the Christian faith was spreading outward from Jerusalem all over the known world.

The existential consequences, that is, the consequences of the resurrection for *you*, for *your* life, and for the meaning of your life were immense and undeniable. The resurrection was in itself the message. It was the truth that sets men free!

Think about this with me. What does your life mean? As you sit here this morning, who and what *are* you? Well the answer to that question depends entirely on what your life *is*. Are you a cosmic orphan, as our modern secular philosophies of life maintain. Are you nothing but a highly organized piece of matter, a chemical/biological accident, with no connections before or after; here today, gone tomorrow? Are you just a *thing*; a carbon-based life-form? Is that all you are? Or have you been made in the image of the eternal God who has stamped his nature on you? Is your life, your existence something that continues after you die? It makes all the difference in the world if the answer to that question is “yes”.

We are creatures of a day, a few years, and then we die. And what then? Is there life beyond the grave? This is the great question of human existence because the answer we give to it changes everything. If the answer is “no,” the Bible itself candidly admits that the only thing that makes any sense is to eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. Make the most of this short and little existence that somehow or another you find yourself to have because that's all there is. But if the answer is “yes” it changes everything. We are here for a reason; our lives are just getting started in this world. Life here is preparation for life in the next world. We are here for a reason. Our life finds its meaning and purpose in the life that will continue after we have died.

Our lives here are short, passing as an arrow flashing through the air. But if life continues then we need to know one thing and one thing only: the way to heaven; how to land safely on that happy shore. And that there is a heaven, that there is such a happy shore, and that men and women can land there when their days on earth are done as they so soon will be: all of that is what the resurrection of Jesus Christ means and must mean.

For it is perfectly obvious that Jesus didn't rise from the dead as a stunt. He didn't come out of the tomb Easter Sunday morning long ago for his own sake. Nor, once having risen, did he die again. He rose to *eternal* life. He did all of that for us. As he died for our sins so he rose again for our eternal life. The resurrection happened in his life *so that it could happen in ours!* There is nothing like this anywhere else in the world's religions or philosophies of life. Only here do we find an event in history that defines the meaning of our history.

Jesus didn't come back as a ghost. That is what his disciples thought in the terrified moments when he first appeared to them. But they soon realized that he was not a ghost. All the witnesses who saw him alive again in the forty days after his resurrection bore testimony that they saw him as a true, living human being. His body still bore the marks of the nails that were driven through his hands and feet when he was crucified. He ate food in their presence; he walked and talked with them. He was a living man!

Nor was this resurrection some form of resuscitation like someone nowadays who has what we call a "near-death experience." Jesus came back with the same body he had before but his body was in a different condition, fit for everlasting life. Nor was this resurrection reincarnation. He was not a different creature after his resurrection than before. He was the same person, his was the same body, but now fit for immortality.

And all through the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament we are told that what happened to Jesus will happen as well to all who trust in him. He did it for us. He rose from the dead so that we might rise from the dead. He conquered death on our behalf.

I suspect many of you have had an experience – something like what Katrina just described to us – and experience like *this*. You have felt for a moment or for a time that some intense reality is on the point of breaking through the surface of things and revealing itself to you. There is something more to life, something or someone out there you should know. You have felt a shiver, or have caught on the edge of a thought something that makes you think you are not alone, we are not alone. That there is something very great about your life. You need to know what it is.

Well, the resurrection is the proof of that greater reality. You are living in this world. You will die, not so many years from now. But your life will not be over. What is clear from these reports of the resurrection of Jesus and from the many explanations of it we are given in the Bible is that the resurrection opens to our view the life of heaven, the life of eternity. But that life, the resurrection of Jesus also proves *is not for everyone*, but is for those who are the followers of the Jesus Christ, those who trust in him, those who understand that their lives must be bound up with his. No one else rose from the dead; no one else made this promise of everlasting life – body and soul together – except he; only Jesus. He's the one who has the power to give eternal life to our mortal bodies.

What did the resurrection do for the Lords' followers? Read the Book of Acts and you will find out that though they lived on for years afterward, their lives were utterly different. Simple fisherman now traveled the world telling others about Jesus. Their lives had become bound up

with Jesus. As the risen Lord he was with them and they knew that he was with them. They did all manner of exploits in the confidence of his blessing, his help and his power. They lived for him because of all that he had done for them. He was alive for them to love, to worship, and to serve. He was alive to trust in times of need, he was alive to hear their prayers, he was alive to provide for them in time of need. And so he did and so they lived their lives loving him and trusting him and serving him. Christ always makes people better, their lives more important to others.

And that is what Christians do still today. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead and opened the way to eternal life for those who trust in him, *then I want to be among those who trust in him, and I want to serve him with my life, If he went to the cross for my sins and rose from the dead for my everlasting life, I want to love him and thank him with my life. You don't follow Jesus to eternal life without realizing that something extraordinarily great has been done for you. The Apostle Paul said about his coming to faith in Jesus Christ and the life that he lived after, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." In some ways, serving Christ proved a hard life for them, but no matter; because, as Jesus himself once said, what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul? How do you lose your soul? You don't follow Jesus through death to eternal life; that's how you lose your soul!*

Let's be practical here; let's get real, as they say. Why am I a Christian? I am a Christian because I am convinced – absolutely convinced, as sure as that I am standing here before you today – that Jesus came out of that tomb on that long ago Sunday, alive and brimming with eternal life. I am a Christian because I know that because *he* rose from the dead, *I will rise from dead*. I know that I am going to die. I can't deny that. My father has died; my sister has died; my brother-in-law has died. I'm going to die. I can do nothing to prevent that.

I'm a minister and so I am in cemeteries a lot. I've been in every cemetery in the City of Tacoma and most of the cemeteries round about. One of the things I always say to the group gathered around the casket at the grave before the burial – I think it helps them to cope with their loss – I say that one of the most important things for all of you to realize while you stand here, before you go home and return to your ordinary affairs, is that you are going to be here yourselves before too much longer. You're going to be lying in a box like this. Your friends and loved ones are going to be in a circle gathered around this hole in the ground to give their last respects to you. And what then?

But I know that I will live after I die. No one else, no other religion, no other philosophy of life can give me that confidence. No one else has ever done it except Jesus of Nazareth. No one else actually died and then came back in immortal, human life except him. *That's* why we follow Jesus Christ. No one else ever did it: live a human life before others after having died. No one ever actually conquered death but Jesus and he said that he did that for me and for all those who will trust and love and follow him.

I am a Christian because I want to live. Not for just a few years in this world. I don't want simply to exist; I want to *live!* I want to live in happiness and wholeness of life; I want to live in love; I want to live in that way I think every human beings knows full well we are supposed to live. I want to live forever. In fact, everything about my life bears witness to the fact that I was made to

live forever. We were not made to exist for a few years and then decompose into nothing. Our entire being cries out, *protests* against such an idea. *Our lives mean something* – we know that they do – and that can only be because they are not confined to a few years of this earthly existence, and then nothing more. I want to *live* and you do too. I'm sure of it. That is why I am a Christian. Jesus Christ and he alone has conquered death and opened the way to eternal life; he alone went before us into death and came out alive, fully and wonderfully alive, on the other side. I'm going to follow him. Who else would I follow knowing that I must die?

But there is more. I am a Christian because I want to *live now!* I don't want simply to exist in this world, pass through the ordinary round of days and nights, do the things that all human beings do and then kick the bucket. I want to live. I want to live like the Lord's disciples lived after he rose from the dead. What lives they lived! What lions they became! They had purpose; they had power; they had love. They lived for others and others loved them for it. They found fellowship with others, the kind of friendship and love that is so rare among human beings was commonplace among the Christians. They shared this high purpose of living for Jesus and of loving him by loving others.

Their lives were not the ordinary round of life lived by so many people today. They were lives full of hope, of goodness, of usefulness to others, of love, of high drama as they served the Lord Jesus in the Devil's world. I want my life to matter. When it is over I want to know that I lived my life to some important purpose. And all of that is made possible by the resurrection.

The resurrection teaches me that because my life is going somewhere surpassingly wonderful – because death will take me to Jesus and to heaven and to perfect humanity – my life matters *now*. There is someone and something for me to live for now. These men didn't see Jesus alive again and heave a sigh of relief and slide back into their former lives, doing nothing more than what they had done before. The resurrection for them was a summons to live for Jesus' sake and to make him and his salvation known to others. If my life is going to last forever, I want to start living it now the way it ought to be lived. If my life is going to last forever, then it is my calling to make it the best and most important life it can be. And Jesus is alive to help me make it so.

You don't want to waste your life. You want, I know you want, to live an important life, a valuable life. No one who knows that he or she is going to live forever can be content with the ordinary, uninteresting, and unimportant life that so many people live. Life is too precious for that! Jesus proved that by coming out of the tomb!

A wise man once wrote that "The church is like an arrow sent out into the world to point to the future." [J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 328] When was the last time anyone sat you down and talked to you about the future? The reason they don't is because they don't know what the future will be. But we Christians do. We don't know the details. I don't know what the stock market will do next week or if there will be a war this year in the Middle East or when we are going to die. But we know the main points. I'm going to die and then I'm going to rise, just as Jesus did, to new and everlasting life. And the future explains the present. My life must be the kind of life that fits such a future as I have stretching before me. I need have no fear of death. And because the reason I am going to live forever is that Jesus Christ loved me, died on the cross for my sins, and rose again from the dead, I want to live my life right now *for him*. As the Apostle Paul once

put it, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” He made my death an entrance into life and so I want my life to be lived for him,

That is the way Christians think and the way they live and it is all because Jesus rose from the dead. Only a risen Christ is worth living *for*. Only the conqueror of death is worth your complete confidence and trust. And only the one who lived, died, and rose again *for you* is worth your truest love. Give it to him. Give your life to him, your confidence, your assurance, your trust, your love and then watch him give your life back to you so much better than you had it before. If Jesus rose from the dead for you and me – and he did! – then he is worth all that we can give him and much more. Give him your life now and then, in due time, watch him take you through the grave to heaven. What a great day *that* will be! Since Jesus rose from the dead, I want to follow him!