

Resurrection

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We have an interesting custom among us of setting aside special days on which we think about special things. We set aside the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day, and on that day we let our minds reach up and try to understand the purposes for which this day was set apart. We set apart the third Sunday in June as Father's Day for the same reason.

Someone has said that the human mind has some of the qualities of the tendrils of a climbing vine. It tends to attach itself and draw itself upward by what it is put in contact with. We have some other wonderful days in which we put our minds in contact with other great ideas. We set apart the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving, and on this day we try to build gratitude and appreciation into our lives. And as we recount our blessings we increase them. On the fourth of July we commemorate the birthday of this great nation and we remember that God raised up wise men to write our constitution and establish this land upon righteous principles. Governments were instituted by God for the benefit of man, and he will hold us responsible for our acts in relationship thereto.

December 25 is the day set aside when we commemorate the birth of the Son of God, who came into this world to organize his church, to teach us those great lifesaving principles of the

gospel, to atone for our sins, and to administer to us all of the ordinances of exaltation. The Church is a divine institution, but so is the government.

We set aside another important day called Easter, when we commemorate the initiation upon this earth of the universal resurrection. The resurrection is commemorated in the spring of the year, when the earth itself seems to be coming back to life after the cold and snow of the long dead winter.

We have other, smaller commemorations of Easter. When someone dies we sometimes talk about the resurrection. But ordinarily we don't like to talk about the resurrection because it is so closely associated with death, which seems to us to be unpleasant; and because we don't like to talk about unpleasant things, we close our minds and turn away our faces. But death does not cease to exist just because it is ignored.

The ancient Egyptians had a much more logical way of handling this situation when on their great festive occasions they kept

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constantly on display before the revelers the skeleton of a dead man. They wanted everybody to continually remember that someday he was going to die. Now I don't want to frighten anyone unduly in this audience today; however, I would like to point out as gently and as kindly as I can that someday each one of you is going to die.

Someone has said that, judging from the past, very few of us are going to get out of this world alive. One man had an inscription prepared for his tombstone which said, "I knew it would happen." One of the ways to get the better resurrection pointed out by Paul is to think effectively about it in advance. It has been said that the most important event in life is death. Death is the gateway to immortality. We live to die and then we die to live.

The other night I reread the old Grecian tragedy about the fall of Athens. You may remember that a Roman general had captured an Athenian philosopher, and he told the Athenian that he meant to put him to death. But because the Athenian didn't seem very disturbed, the Roman thought that probably he didn't understand. So the Roman said to the Athenian that maybe he didn't know what it meant to die. But the Athenian thought that he understood it better than the Roman did, and then he said to the Roman: "Thou dost not know what it means to die, for thou dost not know what it means to live. To die is to begin to live. It is to end all stale and weary work, to begin a nobler and a better. It is to leave deceitful knaves for the society of gods and goodness." The purpose of our mortal lives is to teach us how to live eternally.

That is also the primary concern of God himself and the purpose of the resurrection. If the death of the body forever ended all there is of human life and personality, then the universe would be throwing away with utter heedlessness its most precious possession. A reasonable person does not build a violin with infinite care, gathering the materials and

shaping the body of it so that it can play the compositions of the masters and then by some capricious whim smash it to bits. Neither does God create this great masterpiece of human life and then, when it has just begun to live, throw it utterly away.

It would be very helpful to us if we clearly understood the central event in all human history which took place some 1,900 years ago in a garden tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem. I would also like to discuss with you some of those things that preceded this event and some of the things that followed after it.

Events Preceding the Savior's Crucifixion

During the last days of the ministry of Jesus, the antagonism of his enemies had become so great that he took his most intimate associates, upon whom the burden of carrying on his ministry would rest after his death, and sought retirement in the little town of Ephraim some twenty miles north of Jerusalem, where for a short period he could teach them in comparative peace and quiet. But as the feast of the Passover approached, he startled his followers by saying, "Let us go into Judaea again." They reminded him that the Jews had there recently sought his life, and they asked, "Goest thou hither again?" (John 11:7-8). But Jesus prevailed, and early Friday morning of the last week of his life he began that solemn march toward Jerusalem and the cross.

He arrived back in Bethany late Friday afternoon, just before the beginning of the Sabbath, and went to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, where he would lodge during these last few nights. Over the last Sabbath of the Lord's life, the gospel writers have drawn a reverent veil of silence. We know a few things that happened during this last Sabbath but not very many. Then early Sunday morning, the first day of the week, he went into Jerusalem to resume his teaching in the temple. He was joined along the way by Passover crowds going to Jerusalem, and they

formed a triumphal procession where the people threw flowers and palm branches in his path and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9).

Jesus wept over Jerusalem, knowing the calamities that would befall this sacred city because of its sins. All day long during this last Sunday, he taught in the temple, and then in the evening he walked some mile and a half back to Bethany to lodge. On Monday morning he came again to the temple. This is the day he overthrew the tables of the money changers and drove out those who used the temple to sell their goods, saying, "It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Luke 19:46).

Again that night he returned to Bethany to lodge. On the next day, which was Tuesday, the Lord came for the last time to the temple and taught all day long without substantial success, and as the day closed, he began his journey back to Bethany to be with this little family that he loved. He had foretold his own death, the destruction of Jerusalem, and many other important things. As he, crossed the Mount of Olives he stopped near the summit to rest, and his disciples came unto him and said, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3).

And then for a few moments he laid aside the cares of his own death and talked to them about our day. He told them of the wars and rumors of wars that should be among the signs of his second coming. He made a comparison rather uncomplimentary to us when he said, "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matthew 24:37). And then, in what must have been the one bright spot in a rather gloomy picture, he said, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14, 37).

Later, John the Revelator was to look forward to our time and announce the restoration of the gospel when he said,

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come.
[Revelation 14:6-7]

And then, before going on to Bethany, Jesus made his famous farewell speech to Jerusalem. It was near the close of the day, and we might imagine that as he sat there on the side of the hill the last rays of the declining sun had lighted the temple with their golden light. This was a spot that was endeared to every Jewish heart by the sacred memories that it contained. Upon this spot, now occupied by the temple, had once been the wheat field of Ornan, where an angel of God had commanded David to build an altar on which to offer sacrifices to Jehovah. Here the magnificent temple of Solomon had later been erected. And after its destruction it had been rebuilt by King Zerubbabel. And now, after its second destruction, it was in the process of being rebuilt by King Herod. It was here that Jesus had come and from this spot had operated for the period of his mortal ministry. It was here that he was now saying farewell. In that famous last speech he said,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.
[Matthew 23:37-38]

Only yesterday he had referred to it as his father's house. Now their chance had gone; he

was leaving those sacred precincts forever. Their time had run out, and he said, “Your house is left unto you desolate.” Then he went back to Bethany to lodge. Wednesday and Thursday he spent with the twelve. Thursday evening he invited them to the last supper. He gave them many teachings and instituted the sacrament. Then, after he gave the sop to Judas, Judas went out in his act of betrayal and brought the mob to take him in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he had gone after the supper.

His Crucifixion

All during that long night he was dragged from one political jurisdiction to another. During the mock trial he was sentenced to be crucified, and at nine o’clock the following morning he was nailed to the cross. He stayed upon the cross from nine until three. From twelve until three a darkness covered the land. It was against the law to leave anyone upon the cross during the Sabbath, and so, as the end of the day approached, the executioners went around among those on crosses and, if the victims were not already dead, hastened their death by the extra pain inflicted by breaking their legs. Jesus was already dead, but a Roman soldier thrust a sword into his side.

Joseph of Arimathea, an uncle of Jesus, had gone to Pilate to obtain permission to take down the body and lay it in his own sepulcher. A group of Jesus’ enemies had also gone to Pilate and said,

Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.

Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure unto the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.

Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. [Matthew 27:63–65]

He Is Not Here: For He Is Risen

So they placed the Roman seal upon the rock and set a guard of Roman soldiers around the tomb to make sure that nothing was disturbed. And thus the tomb remained during the balance of that Friday night, all day Saturday, and until Sunday morning. What happened on that first day of the week is partially recounted by Matthew:

In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.

And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:

And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.

And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.

He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.

And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word. [Matt. 28:1–8]

The scripture continues this important account of the inauguration of the resurrection by saying, “And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matthew 27:52–53).

These were real people, and the resurrected bodies were real bodies, just as our own resurrection will be a very real, tangible one. During the next forty days the resurrected Jesus

ministered among the people. He talked with them, ate with them, and manifested his person unto them. On one occasion he appeared to ten of the twelve in a room in Jerusalem. When he appeared in their midst they were terrified and affrighted, as they supposed that they had seen a spirit. But Jesus said unto them,

Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts?

Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. . . .

And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat?

And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb.

And he took it, and did eat before them. [Luke 24:38–39, 41–43]

On this occasion Thomas was absent, and when they told him that they had seen the Lord, that he was alive and had been resurrected, Thomas said that he would not believe unless he could see for himself. Eight days later, the Lord appeared to them again when Thomas was present and invited Thomas to come and make an intimate inspection of his person and feel the nail holes and put his hands in his side and be no more faithless but believing. And after a great exclamation of belief, the Lord said to Thomas, “Because thou has seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

After an eventful forty-day postmortal ministry, Jesus stood on the top of Mount Olivet with his most intimate followers and from their presence ascended up to heaven. The record says:

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. [Acts 1:9–11]

A Literal Bodily Resurrection

It is of the greatest importance to us personally that we understand this important event and that God has decreed that all men, good and bad, who have ever lived upon this earth shall be resurrected—some in the resurrection of the just and others in the resurrection of the unjust.

There are some people who claim that it is very difficult for them to believe in a literal bodily resurrection and the eternal existence of the human soul. It has never seemed to me that this should be very difficult for one who can believe in his own birth—that is, if you can believe in this, if you can believe that two microscopic bits of protoplasm can come together to create a life cell and then by a process of self-division create other cells completely unlike the original to make this great masterpiece of flesh and bones, mind and personality, vision and understanding that we call a human being—for if you can believe in that, it ought not to be difficult to believe that that creation, once it had been established, could live on throughout eternity.

Edwin Markham once put this idea down in verse under the title “The Unbelievable.” He said:

*Impossible, you say, that man survives
The grave—that there are other lives?
More strange, O friend, that we should ever rise
From out the dark to walk beneath the skies,
But having risen to life and light,
We need not wonder at our deathless flight.*

*Life is the unbelievable; but now
That this incredible has taught us how,
We can believe that all-imagining power
That breathed the cosmos forth as golden flower,
Had potence in his breath
And plans us new surprises beyond death—
New spaces and new goals
For the adventure of ascending souls.*

*Be brave, O heart, be brave:
It is not strange that man survives the grave:
'Twould be a stranger thing were he destroyed
Than that he ever vaulted from the void.*

Some important events are recorded very briefly in the Bible. On one page the Bible contains all that is written of the history of the entire world for 500 years. Even the life of Christ himself is very briefly told. We know about his birth, but there is very little told of what he himself did until age thirty. We have only two short glimpses of him in that earlier period. One is when he visited with the wise men in the temple at age twelve, and Luke makes the only other comment: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

He had an active ministry of some three and a half years. And John says that if all the things had been recorded which Jesus said and did, the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. But if you should put together all of the direct statements made by Jesus recorded in the Bible, they could be read in approximately thirty minutes. Likewise we wish we had more of the facts of some of his important teachings and more details about such momentous events as the resurrection.

Some time ago I read an interesting account of the resurrection of Jesus as it might have been told by the Roman officer who guarded the tomb of the crucified Christ. This story is based on scriptural fact and supplemented by the author's imagination. The officer's name is Maximus, and he later recounts to his

sweetheart what he saw during this official three-day assignment.

He says to her:

*My Sylvia, 'tis long since we have met, so kissed,
so held each other to heart!*

*I thought to greet thee as the conqueror comes,
bearing the trophies of his prowess home, but Jove
has willed it should be otherwise.*

*Jove say I? Nay, some mightier, stronger God,
who thus hath laid his heavy hand upon me; no vic-
tor, Sylvia, but a conquered man—who seeks to hide
his weakness in thy love.*

*How beautiful thou art! The years have brought
an added splendor to thy loveliness.*

*Come, girdle me about with thy true arms, and
pillow on thy breast this aching and bewildered
head of mine;*

*Here, where the fountain glitters in the sun
among the saffron lilies—and I will tell, if so that
words will answer my desire, the shameful fate that
has befallen me.*

*Down in Jerusalem they slew a man, or God—
it may be that he was a God—those mad, wild Jews;
whom Pontius rules; thou knowest Pilate, Sylvia, a
vain man, too weak to govern such a howling horde
as those same Jews.*

*This man they crucified. I knew naught of him,
never heard his name until the day they dragged
him to his death;*

*Then all tongues wagged about him and his
deeds; some said he claimed to be their king, some
that he had blasphemed their deity. 'Twas certain
that he was poor and meanly born.*

*No warrior he, nor hero; and he taught doctrines
that surely would upset the world; so they killed
him to be rid of him.*

*Wise, very wise, if he were only man, not quite
so wise, if he were half a God!*

*I know that strange things happened when he
died. There was a darkness, and an agony, and some
were vastly frightened—not so I.*

*What cared I if that mob of reeking Jews had
brought a nameless curse upon their heads! I had
no part in that blood guiltiness.*

At last, he died, and some few friends of his took him and laid him in a garden tomb. A watch was set about the sepulchre, lest these, his friends, should hide him and proclaim that he had risen as he had foretold.

Laugh not, my Sylvia, I laughed when I heard the prophecy; I would I had not laughed.

I, Maximus, was chosen for the guard with all my trusty fellows. Pilate knew I was a man who had no foolish heart of softness—all unworthy of a man.

I was a soldier who had slain my foes; my eyes had looked upon a tortured slave as on a beetle crushed beneath my tread;

I gloried in the splendid strife of war, lusting for conquest; I had won the praise of our stern general on the scarlet field; red in my veins the warrior passion ran—for I had sprung from heroes, Roman born!

That second night we watched before the tomb, my men were merry on the velvet turf, bestarred with early blossoms of the spring; they dined with jest and laughter.

All around, the moon light washed us like a silver lake, save where that silent sealed sepulchre was hung with shadow as a purple pall.

A faint wind stirred among the olive boughs; me thinks I hear the sighing of that wind in all sounds since; it was so dumbly sad; but as the night wore on it died away, and all was deadly stillness; Oh, Sylvia, that stillness was most awful, as if some great heart had broken and so ceased to beat.

I thought of many things, but found no joy in any thought, even the thought of thee. The moon waned in the west and sickly grew her light sucked from her in the breaking dawn.

Never was dawn so welcome as that pale, faint glimmering in the cloudless brooding sky.

My Sylvia, how may I tell thee what net came to pass? I have been mocked at, when I told the tale, for a crazed dreamer, punished by the gods, because he slept on guard; but mock not thou, Sylvia!

I could not bear it, if thy lips should mock the vision dread, of that Judean morn.

Suddenly the pallid east was all aflame with radiance, that burst upon our eyes as from the noon

day sun, and then we saw two shapes, that were as the immortal gods, standing before the tomb;

Around me fell my men as dead; but I, though through my veins ran a cold tremor never known before, withstood the shock, and saw one shining shape roll back the stone.

The whole world seemed ablaze, and through the garden came a rushing wind, thundering a paean, as of victory.

Then that dead man came forth! O Sylvia if thou could'st but the face of Him have seen.

Never was such a conqueror. Yet no pride was in it—naught but love and tenderness, such as we Romans scoff at, and his eyes bespake him royal. O my Sylvia, surely he was no Jew but very God!

Then he looked full upon me. I had borne much staunchly but that look I could not bear! For what man may front a God and live?

I fell prone as if stricken by a thunderbolt; and though I died not; somewhat of me died that made me man.

When my long stupor passed, I was no longer Maximus, I was a weakling with a piteous woman soul; all strength and pride, joy and ambition gone.

My Sylvia, dare I tell thee what foul curse is mine because I looked upon a God?

I care no more for glory, all desire for honor and for strife is gone from me, all eagerness for war. I only care to help and save bruised beings and to give some comfort to the weak and suffering.

I cannot even hate those Jews; my lips speak harshly of them, but within my heart, I feel only compassion; and I love all creatures, to the vilest of slaves, who seem to me as brothers.

Sylvia, scorn me not for this weakness; it will pass, surely 'twill pass in time and I shall be Maximus, strong and valiant once again, forgetting that slain God. And yet, and yet, He seemed like one who could not be forgot.

At Christmas when we commemorate the birth of Jesus, we retell the story of the wise men, the shepherds, the angels, and fact that there was not room for Christ to be born in the inn. We follow about the same procedure at

Easter when speaking about the resurrection. Jesus was resurrected and there we usually let the matter rest until the next Easter Sunday. But most events get their greatest importance from what comes after them.

The birth of Jesus is even more important to us because of his teachings, his atonement, and the other important things which came after his birth. This is also true of the resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is important to us for many reasons. One is that he broke the bonds of death for all mankind and initiated the universal resurrection upon this earth under the divine decree that “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Our resurrection will be important to us throughout eternity.

There are some religious leaders who teach that a mortal body is but an encumbrance given us during our mortality and that we will be well rid of it when we die. This is not true. Without this mortal body we could never receive a fullness of joy, nor achieve our greatest accomplishments. If a body were not necessary for this life, then it never would have been created in the first place. If it had not been necessary for eternity, then the resurrection never would have been instituted. If a body of flesh and bones were not necessary for God the Father, then why was God the Son resurrected? At the resurrection the spirit and the body are inseparably connected and only then is it possible for us to receive a fullness of joy. This is one of the very important events in the wonderful program of God which we refer to as eternal progression.

A number of years ago Brigham H. Roberts recorded some ideas about God’s great program for our eternal growth and happiness. He said:

Think for a moment what progress a man makes within the narrow limits of this life. Regard him as he lies in the lap of his mother—a new born babe! There are eyes that may see, but cannot distinguish

objects; ears that may hear, but cannot discern sound; hands as perfectly fashioned as yours and mine, but helpless; feet and limbs, but they are unable to bear the weight of his body much less walk. There lies a man in embryo, but helpless, and yet within the span of three score years and ten by the marvelous working of that wondrous power within, what a change may be wrought! From that helpless babe may arise one like unto Demosthenes, or Cicero, or Pitt, or Burke, or Fox, or Webster, who shall compel listening senates to hear him and by his master mind dominate their intelligence and their will and compel them to think in channels that he shall mark out for them. Or from such a babe may come a Nebuchadnezzar or an Alexander, or a Napoleon, who shall found empires or give direction to the course of history.

From such a beginning may come a Lycurgus, a Solon, a Moses, or a Justinian, who shall give constitutions and laws to kingdoms, empires, and republics, blessing happy millions unborn in their day, and direct the course of nations along the paths of orderly peace and virtuous liberty.

From this helpless babe may come a Michelangelo who from some crude mass of stone from the mountain side shall work out a heaven-born vision that shall hold the attention of men for generations, and make them wonder at the God-like powers of man that has created an all but living and breathing statue.

Or a Mozart, or Beethoven, or Handel may come from that babe and call forth from the silence those melodies and richer harmonies that lift the soul out of its present narrow prisonhouse and give it fellowship for a season with the gods.

Out of the babe may arise a master mind who shall seize the helm of the ship of state and give to a nation course and direction through troublesome times and anchor it at last in a haven of peace, prosperity and liberty, crown it with honor too, and give it a proud standing among the nations of the earth while he the Saviour of his country is followed by the benedictions of his countrymen.

All of this may be done by a man in this life! Nay, it has been done between the cradle and the

grave—within the span of one short life. Then what may not be done in eternity by one of these God men? Remove from his path the incident of death, or better yet, contemplate him as raised from the dead: and give to him in the full splendor of manhood's estate immortality, endless existence, what may we not hope that he will accomplish. What limits can you venture to fix as marking the boundary of his development or his progress? Are there any limits that can be conceived? Why should there be any limits thought of?

Grant immortality to man and God for his guide, what is there in the way of intellectual, moral or spiritual development that he may not aspire to?

If within the short space of mortal life, there are men who rise up out of infancy and become masters of the elements of fire and water, and earth and air,

so that they well-nigh rule them as gods, what may it not be possible for them to do in a few hundreds or thousands or millions of years? What may they not do in eternity? To what heights of power and glory may they not ascend?

The Savior of the world said that the purpose of his mission was that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The greatest creation in the world is life, and the greatest form of life is the kind that God himself has; birth, education, death, and the resurrection are all a part of that program of God for our eternal welfare and happiness.

May God bless us with life in the greatest possible abundance. For this I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.