

Resurrection

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

We shall study 1 Corinthians. 15:14-20. "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses for God, for we have testified of God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

For Paul, the Resurrection is the central event along with the crucifixion. The Resurrection is the ultimate confirmation of what happened on the Cross. For modern man it may be difficult to grasp why the Resurrection had such radical meaning for Paul - but this was not the case for the Jews of the time. They believed that it became clear only at the end of a person's life whether God approved of him and confirmed his calling - whether the things he had said and done were really from God.

In Psalm 22:8 the psalmist prophesied the people's opinion of the suffering servant of God, the Messiah, "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." Here we see that the people did not expect God to allow his servant and Messiah to perish. If God was pleased with him, if God really stood by him when he acted in God's name, then God should intervene and save him. In Psalm 37:18 we read, "The days of the blameless are known to the Lord, and their inheritance will endure forever."

If God was not going to intervene, that proves that the message was meaningless. Remember the advice the Jewish scholar Rabbi Gamaliel gave the Jewish court which was appraising the apostles in Acts 5:38-40, "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

The meaning of the Cross

The Resurrection is absolutely central in relation to what happened on the Cross because it put God's signature on Jesus' message; but not only on his message, also on the person of Jesus. In John 11:25-26 Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

When Jesus links the resurrection, the victory over death and the hope of eternal life to his own person, this is ultimately a matter of his personal consummation. This is no longer simply a matter of his teaching. It concerns him as a person. This makes the Jews' fear understandable. It is not only that the disciples could steal the corpse. The Jews deeply feared that God could actually put his signature on the life of this enigmatic person. If God wakened Jesus from the dead, something of unforeseeable consequence would be set in motion.

This fear is expressed in Matthew. 27:64, "So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception would be worse than the first."

After the Resurrection the leading Jews could think of no way to help themselves except to bribe the sentries, as we read in Matthew. 28:12-13, "When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them,

'You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep. ""

The miracle of the Resurrection is not just something God does with Jesus. His Resurrection is not the same as when other people are raised from the dead, as still happens among his disciples. Jesus' Resurrection sets God's signature on the prophecy in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed... though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand...by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities."

Jesus refers to this prophecy when he says of himself, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28) and "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:18-19).

The cross was not only a gruesome Roman method of execution; to the Jews it was also a place without God, a cursed place, as we read in Deuteronomy. 21:23, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." According to Jewish thought it was not only unreasonable, but also heresy that the Messiah himself, the expected saviour of Israel, the second David, should end on the cross as a sign of sin's curse and God's absence.

Not one is righteous

This is unthinkable not only for Jews. The Cross is the central challenge for the human spirit, an insult to so-called common sense. The cross is an unbearable offence for everyone who believes that by means of his intellect and good will man can ultimately overcome evil and create good. It is a thunderous testimony to the fact that man cannot bear what is really good, pure and true in his midst. He destroys it and thus confirms God's word about mankind in Romans. 3:10-12, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

Because God knows man's situation, he sent the One who himself knew nothing of the sin of pride, egoism, falsehood and arrogance. He called this One to take the death-bringing reality of man's sin on himself; to bear this reality away from the relationship between God and man and take it to the cursed tree. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jews and non-Jews alike are incurably guilty before God. There is no one who is righteous, not even one! So we can understand why Jesus said, "I did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners." There are no righteous! There are only those who admit that they are deathly ill in soul and spirit and need help, or those who refuse to accept their condition and ultimately perish in their pride. Without the lamb of God the angel of judgment, the death angel, will not pass over any of us! The prophet Isaiah said, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6).

From now on the decision in relation to salvation and damnation, life and death depends solely on the One on whom God laid the guilt of all. Since the event on the cursed tree, no one can get around this One, neither Jew nor non-Jew, even though this message is an unbelievable stumbling block for Jews and great foolishness to non-Jews, according to Paul (1 Corinthians. 1:22-23).

Forgiveness of guilt and salvation from death and destruction come only through the blood of God's Passover lamb, not through man's good deeds or religious efforts.

At the Cross the idea of a good and reasonable mankind is exposed as a lie. Man's pride is shaken to the core. God's lamb on the cursed tree, bearing my guilt and yours, perishing miserably because of it, becomes the sole, narrow and low gate which can lead us to life and freedom. One can pass through this gate only by stooping down. None can pass through without his pride being broken.

But whoever refuses to stoop down and place his pride under the judgment which for his sake was carried out on Jesus will find himself rebelling when confronted with God's judgment on his life. Rejection, mockery, contempt and hatred - forerunners of darkness, death and damnation - reach for his heart and bring him deeper and deeper into enmity with the God of the Bible.

Judgment and love

The Resurrection is absolute only in relationship to the Cross. Without the Resurrection as God's signature on Jesus' life and message, it would have been nothing more than a philosophy - a mystic's life view which would no more have changed people's hearts than any other philosophy or religion. Nothing in creation would have altered.

The Resurrection is God's clear message that there is no other access to him than through his Son's sacrifice. It confirms Jesus' statement in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Or in John 3:17-18, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn this world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

There is no other route except the confession, "Lord, I can do nothing. Be merciful to me, a poor sinner, because I really deserve death." The Cross is the place where God calls each one of us to experience grace, salvation and help in judgment. There is no detour, no short-cut. No one can come directly to the God of love. Access to the God of love is only through the truth at the Cross. God is love! His love became visible when his heart let his Son go through the agony of judgment and death for you and me. There was no other way to destroy pride and arrogance and to save us from eternal darkness and separation from God. No one loves us more! No one can understand why God did this for us. Love cannot be understood. It can only be experienced by loving in return.

God's nature has another aspect which is difficult for us to grasp. Unless we accept Jesus's sacrifice, there is only merciless judgment. In Hebrews 10:31 we read, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." God is love, but this love must pass through the Cross. If we do not grasp that judgment is an absolute reality over this world and our life, we will never understand the meaning of the Resurrection. God calls the world and each one of us to the Cross. God can spare no one the disgrace of the Cross; each one of us will have to experience it. It is the door to life and to grace.

When we go out to the Cross the world will see us. People will watch and react. We ourselves will experience the offence which the Cross means for the world. The indignation of those who believe in man, whether they are religious, secular or atheistic, whether materialistic or social, whatever their background, will be forcefully encountered by the person who stands under the Cross and identifies himself with it.

Resurrection is a new creation

But when we really come to the Cross we will realize that resurrection is not only where God's kingdom breaks into this world and our life. Resurrection is a new creation! Jesus' Resurrection means nothing less than the fact that from now on there is a new heaven and a new earth! Resurrection means that mankind now has a new family tree which was founded by the Son! Man becomes a member of God's family! A new family of God began in and with Jesus.

In the Resurrection God went much further than in the first creation. In the first creation God created the world and man, then gave him this world to live in, and entered into a relationship with him. But God was not yet in his essence part of man's existence. Only in Jesus has he become part of us. Therefore, whoever identifies himself with Jesus and his death on the Cross also participates in Jesus' Resurrection. He is thus born into God's kingdom.

For our small heart - and even more for our intellect - it is far from easy to understand or believe this amazing message. Through Jesus' Resurrection we are no longer merely creatures within this creation, but a new creation! "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). The Holy Spirit has given us birth as sons and daughters of God. In Romans 8:16-17 we read, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."

But resurrection also means that judgment is abolished once and for all. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans. 8:1). Jesus' Resurrection confirms that his substitutionary death on the Cross once and for all overcame the powers of darkness and death which separated man from God and thus from life; it confirms that everyone who belongs to him is no longer at the mercy of darkness and death. Those who belong to him have no more reason to fear because fear means we do not know God; it means we are at the mercy of the powers which destroy life. This is more than just a matter of my body - these are powers which can destroy me in all eternity.

No more fear

Jesus calls to us, "In this world you will have trouble (some German translations say "fear"). But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Whoever surrenders to God's love, through Jesus, and holds fast to this love, will know that "there is no fear in love" (1 John 4:18). From now on we have a father who loves us with the same love he has for his only Son Jesus! This father calls to us, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Resurrection means that my hope is a living hope because it is established in the living God. My future can be destroyed neither by economic catastrophes nor atomic bombs. My future cannot be destroyed by anything because God guarantees it and says to me, through Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phillipians 4:4-7). See also 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

Through Jesus' Resurrection we were not only born into God's kingdom. His kingdom was also born in our heart like a mustard seed. It grows and penetrates our life with his kingdom character which is peace, joy, freedom from worry, confidence, calmness, trust, forgiveness, goodness, love... In Jesus we are called to life, to joy and to peace! The only

thing still exposed to this world, to which death still has access is my body. But even that is in God's hands. My body belongs to a dying and transient world. Therefore Jesus says, "Do not fear the one who can destroy the body, for he can do no more than that."

A new reality

Through the Resurrection my life has entered a new reality which is independent of my external circumstances. Because my life is in the hands of my heavenly father, nothing can now destroy my hope and my peace, not even bereavement, illness, unemployment or accident. God promises that everything I encounter must serve to my best.

Only on the basis of the Resurrection can we understand that although we are still part of this world, our whole being belongs to another kingdom. Jesus did not remove us from this world because through us he wants to demonstrate the reality of his Resurrection in this world. As God's children we live in the reality of the Resurrection. It is not that some day we will enter God's kingdom. We belong to it already. Jesus, who is the light living in us, called us to be a light in the darkness of this world. He says to us, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14)!

The people around us - whom God loves so much that he gave his heart to save them - should, in the midst of their need, hopelessness, bitterness, loneliness and fear, see our eyes lit up with God's face. They should encounter in us peace, joy, hope, forgiveness, goodness and care. Then they will find the path to the Cross, the path to the father's heart, the way back home. We have every reason to testify to this peace and this hope, for we have been liberated to a life which has an inconceivable future. This is a future which surpasses every concept of happiness, joy and beauty. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians. 2:9, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." And in Romans 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Our goal is perfection, joy, and peace; a new heaven and a new earth which will be immersed in light, peace, joy and beauty! This is not just an illusion or cheap comfort, but reality - as real as the reality that God is the creator of heaven and earth, the reality that he raised Jesus from the dead! May God increasingly permeate those of us who belong to Jesus with an awareness of the Resurrection; with an awareness that we have an indestructible future because Jesus lives in us.

Until we reach perfection - when God calls us home to himself or Jesus returns - our lives remain a daily struggle against everything which distracts us from our father and his growing and coming kingdom in us. There will never be a lack of troubles and problems as we follow Jesus on the path home, for the gate is small and the road is narrow which lead to life.

Sometimes we suffer from ourselves, from our inability to love, trust, or accept truth; this suffering decreases according to the extent that we allow God's kingdom to spread in our hearts. But there is also suffering for the sake of God's kingdom, because darkness persecutes light with all the means at its disposal. Paul wrote of this in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10, "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings and imprisonments... through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything!" In everything we are more than conquerors through him who loved us: Jesus, the Risen One!

We do not think about the Resurrection only during the Easter season. No, for us it is absolutely necessary that we consider Jesus's Resurrection daily because the reality of the Resurrection is the mightiest force in all of creation. It is the only thing which can change my

life and preserve it every day until the day of his return. In the Resurrection eternity has broken into our hearts. Our future is clarified and certain. In spite of all the pressures and tensions which may accompany us, we do not have to cheat our way through life with some sort of sedative. People sedate themselves when they have no hope and no future, when they do not know why they have been saved and thus cannot face the end, which brings confrontation with the result of sin. For "the wages of sin is death". But when we have grasped the power of the Resurrection and have begun to live in it, we need fear neither death nor the devil!

The feast of laughter

We want to be witnesses to the incomparably joyful message that death and the devil have been conquered and darkness can be overcome in the life of every person who comes to Jesus! We want to witness to the Resurrection with our whole life and with a joyful heart. We have every reason to do so! Let us join in God's laughter. In the old church, Easter was also known as the feast of laughter, referring to Psalm 2:4, "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them." What does he scoff at? All the powers who say they will destroy God's creation, those who thought they had thwarted God's plans when his Messiah perished miserably on the cross. The powers of evil knew God only as holy and just, merciless in regard to sin. They therefore thought that the Messiah was destroyed once and for all and thus failed beneath the burden of sin. They did not know God as love and did not know that love can take unimaginable routes.

I can envisage that the inhabitants of heaven were also shocked by the darkness of the Cross, but then broke out in hearty laughter with God when Jesus rose from the grave on the third day. Only then did both angels and demons alike realize that God's judgment is not the end, but the beginning. Through death and judgment God's love created a door to life, to the father's house. In the deepest darkness the brightest light shone. Once and for all it became clear to every power that God's hand in his Messiah Jesus reached down into the deepest depths of darkness and sin and death; he did this to save every one who will ever call on the name of the Lord. Where the devil thought he had won, he had suffered this crushing defeat. The final defeat of evil filled heaven with laughter! That is why the Resurrection is a daily feast of laughter for us!

The devil wants to convince us that God cannot reach his goal with us because we are such failures - people like us with such a ruined past, unstable character, impossible circumstances haven't a chance. When the devil besets us with hopelessness and resignation we can just stand back and, looking at the Resurrected One, laugh and say: You don't know God's heart! If you knew who God is and what he has done and is still doing for me, you would slink off! I fear neither you nor the reality of my own life, for there is nothing in this creation which cannot be changed and overcome through Jesus' Resurrection power! How could God - after doing unimaginable things for me - now desert me? Don't you know that he has given me everything in order for life to thrive?

"What, then, shall we say in response to this (when we are tempted)? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans. 8:31-21).

This is cause for joy! As long as I cling to Jesus I can erase hopelessness, resignation, fear and loneliness from my vocabulary without being merely utopian! Every day his forgiveness, his hope, his goodness and his power are freshly available to charge my life with peace and joy. Through the Messiah Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah calls to me, "His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations. 3:22-23).

Every morning when we awake and place ourselves under the rule of Jesus, the Son of God, we can joyfully remind ourselves: God's thoughts for us today are thoughts of peace, salvation, joy. He has given us a glorious, indestructible future! Let us proclaim this joyful message to all people, for that is the desire of God's heart.

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