

April Fools or Awesome Easter?

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[0 : 00] Now when I started to prepare for Easter a few weeks ago, I soon found out that this year, Easter was going to fall on April Fool's Day.

And so it got me thinking about whether or what connection, if any, these two events might have with each other. Now, you might want to know a bit of trivia that the last time this occurred was in 1956, which is why probably many of you do not remember it.

And it's not going to occur again until 2029, and then one more time in 2040 for the rest of the century. I didn't bother to find out the dates for the next century, so you can Google that if you want.

And it used to be that there was a tradition, as some of you might know, where the papers would include a piece of fake news on April Fool's Day. Something that would look plausible at first, and then revealed to be fake the next day.

Now, given all the fake news nowadays, I'm not sure whether there's still a need to keep that tradition going. But if they did, and maybe they did, and tomorrow we'll find out, I sort of wouldn't be surprised in this age of skepticism, if I woke up tomorrow and found some newspaper claiming that actually it's the whole Easter story that's the April Fool's Day joke.

[1 : 22] That actually Jesus never rose from the dead. Ha ha. Jesus to them would be akin to the Easter bunny or Santa Claus, something that maybe is harmless to celebrate because it brings comfort to people, but in fact never really happened.

And sad to say, there are actually churches nowadays that believe that. They believe that miracles are not possible, and in that case, Jesus' resurrection isn't either.

And yet they would continue to observe the ritual of Easter because it gives them comfort and solace. Well, judging by Paul's words in our passage tonight, I think he would have taken a very dim view of this.

Now, back in those days, the reasons were slightly different, but some in the Corinthian church had actually had a problem with the resurrection, not just of Jesus, but generally, that a bodily resurrection wasn't possible.

But Paul had a very strong response to that view. For him, the resurrection of Jesus had to be a historical event. Otherwise, the consequences for him and for all of us were actually far-reaching, as Devin had said today.

[2 : 38] For Paul, either Easter is real and therefore it's an awesome Easter, or it never happened, and those who believe are fools for doing so. So look with me in verse 1 where Paul begins, Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

And by this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. So notice how strongly Paul puts it.

Let me remind you of the gospel I preached, on which you have taken your stand. It's by this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to what I've preached.

Otherwise, you have believed in vain. This gospel, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus, this great news of his rising from the dead, is then summarized in verse 3 and onwards.

But before he summarizes it, he goes on to say that I'm passing on this to you, this which is of first importance. In other words, what we're celebrating this Good Friday and Easter is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

[3 : 54] Take that away, and you don't have the Christian faith. But here, Paul, in verses 3 and onwards, doesn't merely summarize the gospel. He also sets out that there is actually credible evidence for it.

So first, Paul mentions that both Jesus' death and resurrection happened according to scriptures. Christ died for our sins, he says, according to scriptures.

And then later on, he was raised on the third day according to scriptures. You see, these aren't things that were plucked out or dreamed or out of thin air.

Paul explains that they were promised long ago, written down for the Jewish people, for which they carefully studied and considered them. Now, of course, nobody knew at the time how this would all happen.

But, you know, it's just like when you are being shown the solution to a puzzle, isn't it? Once you see the solution, suddenly it all makes sense. And this is what happens with the resurrection of Jesus as well.

[4 : 57] Because once it happens, all the verses that promised that this would happen all made sense. And Paul, of all people, would know because he was an expert in the Old Testament.

Second, Paul includes in his summary evidence of these momentous events. And the evidence is that it was witnessed by many. So in relation to Christ's death, we read that he died and then he was buried.

The burying part is the evidence that he actually died. He didn't just faint or pass out. He wasn't just taken off the cross just before his death. No, he was buried by those who wanted him dead.

And his burial place was guarded by the Romans. And so Paul is saying if anyone needed proof of his death, they only need to ask his executioners. Now, of course, someone has to really die before they can really rise.

And so as for Jesus' resurrection, Paul's evidence for that is found in the fact that Jesus appeared to many. So it says there, first to Cephas or Peter, then the twelve, and then to more than five hundred.

[6 : 12] Many of whom are still alive, Paul says. And then to James, and then lastly to Paul himself. And so again, if you want evidence for the resurrection, Paul's saying, go talk to these people who are still alive.

They saw him. Sure, one person may lie to you, but five hundred? That's going to be unlikely. One person may have a hallucination of a risen Jesus, but five hundred together?

Highly unlikely. And then last of all, Paul says, Jesus appeared to me as well. And Paul was saying this because he was the last person you would pick to believe in Jesus.

He's the one who persecuted the church of God, he says. And precisely because they believe that the resurrection was real. But then Paul says, by God's grace, Jesus appeared to him.

Even as he was going around persecuting the people who believed that. And so if someone as unlikely as Paul could be turned around by Jesus' appearance, and by the message of the gospel, then surely it must be true.

[7 : 22] And so profoundly is Paul changed by this message, by Jesus, that he, together with all the other apostles, are tireless in preaching the gospel.

He wants to preach it so that others may believe and go on believing. For this is a truth that really changes life. It's not like, say, for example, believing whether black holes exist or not.

Like, if tomorrow I told you, do they exist, by the way? Yes? Okay. Well, see how much it impacts me? But if tomorrow we found out that black holes didn't exist, I mean, would it change a single thing about your life?

It would not, would it? But that is not the case with the resurrection. Paul says that whether Jesus rose from the dead or not, really matters to each one of us.

If it didn't happen, Paul says in verse 12 to 18, then there are far-reaching consequences. And conversely, if it did happen, and he goes on to say that in verse 20, other things, other far-reaching consequences happen as well.

[8 : 36] Now let's look at the first bit, verses 13 and onwards. Now as I said earlier, some in Corinth didn't believe that resurrections in general could happen. But Paul now shows them the result of thinking like that.

Because if that were true, then Jesus, being a human himself, can't have risen either. Verse 13, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ did not rise from the dead, then three far-reaching or life-changing consequences follow. First, verses 13 and 14, the preaching of the apostles is useless, and their faith in their preaching is also useless.

Second, verse 15 and 16, the apostles are then false witnesses for God. They are liars. And if they are liars, the credibility of their entire witness is destroyed, isn't it?

It's not just simply their testimony about Jesus' resurrection. Everything else that they've said in the Bible, in the New Testament, is not believable as well, isn't it?

[9 : 42] All the things in the gospel are suspect. All of Paul, Peter, and John's letters as well. In other words, we cannot trust anything in the New Testament.

Not simply the historical events, but even Jesus' promises and his teachings, you know, the teachings about God hearing our prayers, about the Holy Spirit empowering us to live life, about our sins being forgiven.

Everything unravels if there is no resurrection. If we cannot believe the credibility of the witness of the apostles, then we can't believe everything else they say.

And not least, we can't believe the bit about Jesus dying for our sins. Yes, it's not hard to believe that someone could die.

Everyone will die. But unless Jesus rose from the dead, that's the bit that people can't believe, then his death was useless. It didn't achieve anything.

[10 : 43] Which is why Paul says in verse 17, you are still in your sins. If Jesus did not die, your sins have not been forgiven. And there's no basis for hope at all.

Which means any comfort and solace that people get from the Christian faith, if they do not believe in the resurrection, if the resurrection is false, it's delusional for them to draw any such comfort and solace.

And Paul rightly says, we are to be pitted, or we are fools for believing. For we are living a lie if Jesus did not rise from the dead.

We're not just April fools, we're fools for life. And so brothers and sisters, let me urge you to keep remembering that the Christian faith is actually an all or nothing faith.

There's no point simply coming along and following the moral teachings of Christ. There's no point just coming to church just because Christians are nice people and you want to hang out with them.

[11 : 48] If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then you're hanging out with fools, delusional fools in a make-believe world. But we know that that's not true because if Jesus did rise from the dead, and he did, then not only is our faith not useless, not only is the Bible credible, but it actually changes our life in an earth-shattering way.

If Jesus did rise from the dead, then it should really turn our lives upside down. Wrong way around to right side up. And here, as we look at verse 20 onwards, Paul spells out two particular things.

First, he says in verses 20 to 23 that all who belong to Christ will also have the same hope of resurrection. If Christ has risen from the dead, then so can we, and so will we.

So verse 20, Since Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, he's the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. The phrase firstfruits here is used because Jesus is like the first crops of the harvest.

He's the sign that the remaining harvest will come. Jesus' resurrection guarantees that those who have fallen asleep will one day rise with him or like him, just as was promised.

[13 : 11] And we saw that in our Old Testament reading tonight. Let me just look to that again. Daniel chapter 12. This was the promise. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting contempt.

Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of heaven, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. Now that is such a great assurance, isn't it, for those of us who have lost loved ones in Christ.

Because if Jesus rose from the dead, then death for them is no longer the final word. Rather, they will rise again one day. They will shine like stars forever.

And this promise isn't simply for those who have already died, because in verse 23 we'll read that Paul promises that it will happen to all who belong to Christ. That is, all who believe in the gospel, even those who are alive at the time of Jesus' coming.

But first, Paul also reminds us in verse 21 and 22 why we're in this predicament in the first place. So verse 21, For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

[14 : 28] For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn, Christ, the firstfruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him.

Christ's resurrection is necessary because of what Adam did. Remember God's purpose for humanity in Genesis 1? Adam was meant to fill the earth and rule under God.

But he disobeyed, he rebelled, and instead he brought death into the world. And so instead of showing forth God's glory on earth, humans become symbols of rebellion against him.

And death is God's just response to that rebellion. But God also sent Jesus to achieve a grand reversal of humanity's faith.

For because we are in Adam, one man, and because of him all face the fate of Adam's death, so now those of us who are in Christ, again one man, then Christ's destiny is also our destiny.

[15 : 31] And we have the same hope of glory as Jesus does, that of a resurrected life. And so of all people, we as Christians are the ones who have no reason to fear death.

We don't need to cling to this earthly life as though that's all we have, because that's not true. Even if we suffer, even if we are counted fools for believing, there is a glorious future that awaits us beyond death.

Even with its pain and sorrow, death isn't the end that we should fear, but it's simply the doorway through which we will enter into glory, where we will finally shed our mortal bodies and take on the glory of an incorruptible one, a body just like Jesus, a body in keeping with actually the life, the new life that we already have in Christ.

And so that's why Paul says, stand firm in that belief, stand firm in the gospel, stand firm in the knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus, because if it happened for Jesus, and it did, it will happen for us too.

Now this is great comfort, isn't it? I find great comfort knowing that however life is right now, there is this great hope of a glorious future. But we can also sometimes be so caught up with this great comfort that we miss actually the second earth-changing consequence that Paul talks about here.

[17 : 11] And that's in verses 24 to 28. For here we see that Jesus rising from the dead secures not just a glorious future for us, but it also changes the way we live right now and what God is doing on this earth.

Jesus rising from the dead is part of God's great unfolding plan for this world. And it's a plan that actually he's called us to be part of.

So let me just read the verses first. Verse 24, Paul says, Then the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he has put everything under his feet. Now, when it says that everything has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself who put everything under Christ.

When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him so that God may be all in all. Brothers and sisters, if I can go back to Genesis 1 again, God's plan for creation has always been like this little picture that I've put up here.

[18 : 31] Humans were meant to rule over creation on God's behalf while at the same time being under God. Now, mind you, as humans, we only have this special position because of God.

There's nothing special about us particularly. That is why, if you read Psalm 8, this is what the psalmist says on the next slide. What is mankind that you are mindful of him?

Human beings that you care for them. You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. And here's the bit about Genesis 1. You made them rulers over the works of your hands.

You put everything under their feet. Now, sadly, as I said earlier, Adam and then all of us stuffed up. Instead of ruling, we rebelled. Instead of submitting to God's rule, we sinned.

And yet, God would not allow His great plan to fail. Now, did you notice that last, oh, it's gone already, but did you notice that last phrase in that passage? The one that says, God put everything under humanity's feet.

[19 : 33] Well, this is the exact quote, isn't it, in 1 Corinthians that Paul is referring to. Where humans have stuffed up, God now sends His Son, the perfect human, to rule as God intends, to rule as Psalm 8 intended, to have everything rightly placed under His feet.

And God raising Him from the dead was that crucial and pivotal moment in that plan. And now that that has been achieved and accomplished, Jesus has since gone about completing God's mission, that is, bringing everything under His authority.

He's done that, firstly, by preaching the gospel through His witnesses as well, so that every time someone believes, you believe, I believe, then what happens is that we who are one-time enemies of God, we repent of our rebellion and we put ourselves at the feet of Jesus.

We put our faith in Him, submit to Him as Lord. And as we do that, His kingdom is increasing. And the dominion and authority of those that are rebelling against Jesus diminishes.

Of course, not everyone will do this, but whether we do it willingly or not, one day, every knee will bow, everything will be placed under Jesus' feet.

[20 : 52] And then Paul says, the end will come, the last enemy that exists, death, that will too be destroyed. And when that happened, Paul says that Christ Himself will hand over the kingdom to God and Himself be subject to the Father so that God may be all in all.

If you want a visual representation of this, take a look at this diagram which I've just changed slightly. Now there is an intersection between God and humanity where Jesus stands because He's both God and man.

He's part of humanity even though He's not part of creation. And Jesus is like this army general, right? If you watch some of these movies, He's sent out by the King, sent out by God from heaven, and He comes to earth and He's waging war, as it were, against God's enemies on God's behalf.

The crucial victory, as I said, has now been secured on the cross. And so right now, more and more are coming under Christ's kingdom as the gospel is preached. And then finally, one day, when all this is done, Christ Himself will bring all that has been achieved, He will bring it back to God and then place that, as it were, at God's feet, at God's throne.

He's like that army general returning from war and reporting back to the King at His throne. And so as part of humanity, Jesus leads us, doesn't He?

[22 : 17] He's our representative. He presents us before God. He presents Himself as well before God. But as part of the Trinity, as part of the Godhead, Jesus then steps up to the throne and He takes His place by His Father's side so that He, too, will rule with the Father through all eternity.

And so that's why I have that diagram where Jesus, as part of God, is ruling over humanity, but He's also one of us, part of humanity, ruling over creation, which is below humanity.

And maybe I should have even said that it is the new creation because that is where we are headed as God's kingdom. But this is the picture as Psalm 8 intended.

This is how God had intended for creation to be ordered. And so, friends, this is the amazing thing about Easter because we're not just given a promise about the future, about the resurrected life, which, you know, wonderful though it is.

You know, it's just something that we cling on to and all we have to do is grin and bear in this life. No, we're also given a picture of what is happening now, what Christ is doing as part of God's great plan.

[23 : 36] And so, Christ's resurrection changes our lives now as well because we're already part of God's kingdom, God's new creation. All the things that we look around us that grieve us so much, the pain, the suffering, the injustice and evil, even our own failures and weaknesses and broken relationships, all this will one day fall away because we are part of God's kingdom, because we are part of this new creation.

Isn't it such a wonderful thing to be hoping for, to be working towards? But as we wait for that day to come, God has actually given us a part to play in growing this kingdom, in helping Christ bring others under His feet.

And so, I want to encourage you to know that wherever God may have put you in life, whether it's to work as nurses or teachers, lawyers or pharmacists, students or grandparents, the question we ought to be asking ourselves is, what is my part in helping Christ bring about His kingdom?

What can I do or say so that more will come under the feet of His rule? Fathers, friends, there are times where we can look at this world and think that Christ's kingdom is in retreat.

Particularly in the West where they're predicting the death of the church. But friends, let us not believe that. Because when we believe that we are simply looking at this world through human eyes.

[25 : 21] We're looking actually at what is passing away, the old creation. All the authority that's holding sway right now, the dominions and the powers that seem to resist Christ, all these things will actually be passing away as Christ brings everything under His rule.

Instead, we need to look at the world with glasses of faith. I tried to look around at my house to see whether I had some special glasses I could swap over. All that I could come up with was my goggles.

So imagine if I had to take off the glasses that are just looking at this world through human eyes and I put on the goggles of faith.

And as I look at you, and I can't really see much, what I do see are not people that are dying away. I'm seeing people with resurrected lives.

And every time someone comes into our midst and puts their faith in Jesus, this kingdom is growing. I don't need to put that on to find my notes again.

[26 : 30] But as I look out, and as we look out at what God is doing, maybe not in Australia, but across the world, and we hear testimony of people coming to Christ under persecution in the Muslim world, this is evidence of God's unshakable kingdom growing and taking shape of millions and millions of people bowing their knee to Jesus.

Some have fallen asleep, but they will rise again. And many more are actually coming to Him. And they are all doing it because they know that Jesus is alive, that He is the risen Lord, and that nothing can stop this kingdom from growing, not even death, because Jesus has already conquered that on the cross, and He's risen from the dead to prove that.

And so friends, let's not be discouraged. Our place, for those of us who belong to Christ in this kingdom, is secure. Yes, life may be difficult for a while, but we too will taste this great glory when Jesus comes again.

We too will one day have the same body that Jesus now has. What a great thing that is, especially for those of us, like me, starting to have aches and pains with each passing day.

Don't laugh, it will happen to you one day too. But we can hope, and we can look to this great day, because Jesus is risen. Let's pray. Father, on this Easter Sunday, we rejoice in the resurrection of your Son, Jesus, from the dead.

[28 : 13] And because of that, we are not fools for following your Son, and swearing total allegiance to Him. Even though we do not yet see this by sight, help us to see this by faith.

Help us to hold firmly to the Gospel and to encourage as many as possible to join us in this eternal kingdom. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.