



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Living After the Resurrection

John 21:1-14

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In his book *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel tells of his conversation with Dr. Gary Habermas, professor of theology and philosophy and author of numerous books and articles. The question Strobel posed concerned the importance of the resurrection for Christians. He assumed he would get a stock answer about its centrality to the faith. And he did. But he got something more. Habermas went into a reflective mood in which he referred to the death of his wife Debbie in 1995 of stomach cancer. This is how Strobel describes it:

"I sat on my porch," [Habermas] began, looking off to the side at nothing in particular.... "My wife was upstairs dying. Except for a few weeks, she was home through it all. It was an awful time. This was the worst thing that could possibly happen."

He turned and looked straight at me. "But do you know what was amazing? My students would call me... and say, 'At a time like this, aren't you glad about the resurrection?' As sober as those circumstances were, I had to smile for two reasons. First, my students were trying to cheer me up with my own teaching. And second, it worked.

"As I would sit there, I'd picture Job, who went through all that terrible stuff and asked questions of God, but then God turned the tables and asked him a few questions.

"I knew if God were to come to me, I'd ask only one question: 'Lord, why is Debbie up there in bed?' And I think God would respond by asking gently, 'Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?'

"I'd say, 'Come on, Lord, I've written seven books on that topic! Of course he was raised from the dead. But I want to know about Debbie!'

"I think he'd keep coming back to the same question – 'Did I raise my Son from the dead?' – until I got his point: The resurrection says that if Jesus was raised 2,000 years ago, there's an answer to Debbie's death in 1995. And do you know what? If the resurrection would get me through that, it can get me through anything. It was good for A.D. 30, and it's good for 1995; it's good for 1998, and it's good beyond that... I believe that with all my heart. If there's a resurrection, there's a heaven. If Jesus was raised, Debbie was raised. And I will be someday, too. Then I'll see them both." <sup>1</sup>

Is this not the struggle we all have after the resurrection? We believe in our hearts by faith in the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of Jesus. By faith we believe the Bible and what it says and what the implications are for our lives; but sometimes what we believe is not what we have experienced, and so there is always this sense of living a parallel experience. I think that is something of what Paul meant when he said, "The things I want to do I cannot do, and the very things I don't want to do I keep on doing. What a wretched soul I am." This is, however, the life we live. We live between the surety of Christ's resurrection and the hope of our own. So, we find ourselves many times struggling with the promises of the Christian life.

If this describes you, then please know you are in good company. From the beginning of the days following the resurrection, the followers of Jesus have had to contemplate the meaning of Jesus' resurrection for their lives here on earth and for eternity. Jesus did not, after all, come back from the dead and stay. He did not set up his kingdom a few days later and set everything straight once and for all. That day is still in the

future in God's own timing. Instead, he came back to send the others to the world with the good news. He came back to encourage them for the living of their days and for the hope of heaven and eternal life.

Even after the disciples have seen with their own eyes the living Lord at least twice now, they are still unsure about what they need to be doing. They have not run out of the upper room shouting to the roof tops that Jesus is alive. They have instead gone back to living their lives much like they were before they met Jesus earlier. This is why this resurrection story is so interesting. It is a story of Jesus' coming again to the disciples to encourage them to live their lives here and now with the knowledge of the resurrection.

Paul would say that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power that gives us power to live each day. But how do we connect with this power? What are some of the issues we face that keep us from truly letting Jesus' resurrection impact our daily living?

If we look to our text I can find several issues that are keeping Peter and the others from experiencing the power of the resurrection at this point in their lives, although they know for certain that Jesus is no longer in the tomb. What does this story teach us about life after the resurrection?

This story is seen as almost an appendix to John's gospel. John has described the two appearances in the upper room and then says that Jesus did many miraculous things in the company of his disciples which are not recorded by John, but these were written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and by believing you may have life in his name. After John makes this grand statement, we find the story of another encounter with Jesus. The disciples have returned to Galilee by the lake, or the Sea of Tiberius, which is also the Sea of Galilee. It was a familiar place for them and it was home. They had left Jerusalem after the week of the Passover and gone home. Where else would they have gone? While home they returned to a familiar activity and that was fishing. This was not a leisure fishing trip. They returned to work that was familiar to them. They went out in their boats with their nets and were making use of the time they had. They were simply trying to have productive lives. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. That is when Jesus shows up on the seashore. "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. Then Jesus instructs them to cast to the

other side of the boat, and when they do the nets are filled with fish. John says to Peter, "It is the Lord." With that, the impetuous Peter dives into the water and swims to shore. He cannot wait for the boat and the others to arrive. Soon they all arrive on shore and find a small fire and some fish cooking. Jesus invites them to have breakfast and then there is this odd statement: "None of disciples dared ask him 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord." The following verses of the chapter tell us how Jesus reinstated Peter to ministry.



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Here are the disciples after the resurrection, back to fishing and back to living their lives with a chance encounter with Jesus. Here are the disciples back where they started on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus walking on the shore. It is such a familiar scene to the beginning of Jesus' ministry but with one important exception. There have been three years of ministry, discipleship and, most importantly, they had experienced Jesus' death and resurrection. Should not their lives have been different already?

How different should our lives be living on this side of the resurrection? What are the things that keep us from living with the power of the resurrection?

There is the power of our failure. If there is anything that is keeping Peter from preaching the good news at this point, it is that his failure has become too large of a sin to overcome. That is one of the reasons that Jesus spends his time to reinstate Peter. Peter is going to be needed, and he must realize the forgiveness of God. He must not only hear it, he must truly accept it as his own.

The power of our past failures in regard to God can be a great hindrance in our living lives which are different because of the resurrection. We, like Peter, make our promises and do not keep them. We, like Peter, never can imagine ourselves denying Jesus, and yet there are times we come to the realization that we have done just that, whether in word or deed. There are some of us that look at our past and ask what God can do with a life as messed up as mine. How can God love someone like me? How can God use someone like me? How can someone with my past have a future with God?

Failure with God can become a life sentence. But that is not what God intends. What God intends through the death and resurrection of Jesus is forgiveness and a renewed sense of purpose in our

lives. Some of us are still paying the penalty for a past sin. Some of us are still unable to believe that God really loves us, even when the Bible says if we will confess our sins before God that God is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now listen, our forgiveness does not depend on our actions. Our forgiveness does not depend on our being able to be better today than we were yesterday. Our forgiveness is not dependent on our righteousness but God's faithfulness and justice. It is because God does what God's word says he does that we can be assured that our sins are forgiven. It is a sad thing for someone to live their whole life under the penalty of a sin for which they have been forgiven.

We have read a lot recently about how DNA tests have exonerated many criminals who have been spending years in prison. How tragic it is for someone to spend his life in prison for something he did not do.

One man by the name of Johnny Briscoe served 24 years in prison for the crime of rape—a crime he never committed. He refused to say he was sorry or remorseful for something he had not done, and so year after year he was not granted parole. Then it happened. He had a DNA test to match the old cigarette butts which were left by the rapist nearly 30 years ago. The result was that the next day after the test, the officials showed up and told Johnny Briscoe, "You are in the wrong place. You are going home." After 24 years he was set free. He and his wife are trying to put their lives back together. He comments on how his children missed so much and how much he missed. He even finds it strange to venture too far from his home. In many ways he is still paying the price of something he never did. How sad it is for these inmates' families and friends? How can you begin to restore the years and the moments they have missed with family? The answer is, you can't. Those times are gone, never to be recovered. That is why it is such a tragedy.

There are some people who live their whole lives under the sentence of a transgression, a sin or a failure of which God has forgiven them. The sad part is that they are wasting their lives not realizing that they no longer need to live under the guilt and the shame. Jesus came to set us free from our sin once and for all. Jesus came that day to the Sea of Galilee to remind the disciples that things had changed. This was a new day, and life on this side of resurrection

was to be different. One way it was different was that past failure did not disqualify you for future purpose through Christ.

A second thing we notice on this side of the resurrection is our tendency to gravitate to the familiar. I find it very interesting that the disciples have returned to Galilee after witnessing the resurrection. They did not go immediately and preach the good news. We have no record of their going into the streets of Jerusalem. Now part of it might be they were following Jesus' instructions. Jesus had told them to go to Galilee and he would meet them there. So they had gone to Galilee to wait and see if Jesus would show himself again. In that moment of waiting, they return to the activity that is familiar. They go fishing. Some suggest this is a sign that Peter had abandoned his calling for ministry and returned to his vocation of fishing. That may be too much to be read into Peter's statement, although it does make good sermon material. I think the truth is closer to our tendency to gravitate to the familiar when we are confused and impatient.

The disciples have gone back to Galilee as Jesus instructed. They are there. They know that Jesus is alive, but he is not with them. They know things have changed, but they are not sure what that is going to mean for their everyday life, so they do what they know to do – they fish. When we find ourselves between knowing God has something for our lives but not sure what it might be, most of the time our choice in those moments is to keep doing that which is familiar.

Now first let me say that this is not always the wrong decision. Peter Gomes of Harvard University once noted that the disciples' going back to Galilee and to fish on the sea was like the Celtic idea of "thin places." A "thin place" was a place where the distance between heaven and earth was thought to be thin and thus one could encounter God more easily.

Maybe the Sea of Galilee was the disciples' thin place. It is where they had first encountered Jesus. Maybe in their minds they thought that is surely where he will show himself again. They gravitate to the familiar as they wait on Jesus to appear again.

Many times when we want a word from God we gravitate to the place or circumstance where we encountered God before. Can you remember your life as a young person and looking forward to going to church camp? Many times we look forward to those moments because in our minds it was a place we



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encountered God, and so we would put ourselves in the atmosphere where we believed God would speak. Sometimes it is good to go back to a familiar place and wait on God, but we cannot use the past experience with God as a crutch. In fact, if we are going to live on this side of the resurrection with a living Jesus, we must learn to find Jesus' appearing in unfamiliar ways and in new places.

This brings me to my final thought about living on this side of the resurrection. To live lives with the knowledge of the resurrection, we must learn to see Jesus in places where we have not seen him before. We are told the disciples did not recognize Jesus at first. Then we are told that no one dared to ask him who he was, for they knew it was the Lord. There is in this text this suggestion that they know, but they don't know that it is Jesus.

Albert Schweitzer wrote concerning this passage:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old. And those disciples, although they saw him then (as we do not now) with outward vision, experienced something of the same kind: they knew him quite well, and yet in a sense they saw him as a stranger, one who henceforth belonged to another order of existence.

What did he mean by this? He meant to remind us that the resurrected Jesus comes to us in familiar ways but also in moments and situations where we might miss his presence. There are these moments in life where we can sense it. We cannot put it into words. We dare not ask, but in our hearts we become aware that, yes, Jesus is with us.

I did not expect to find him at work in the middle of my busyness, but there was this moment today that I knew... he was with me.

I did not expect to find Jesus in the routine of family, but one of my children said something today and it reminded me Jesus is with us.

I did not expect to find Jesus today during my commute, but as I sat there I had some time to be reminded that each day God's mercies are made brand new.

I did not expect to find Jesus at the doctor's office today. I had my mind on the worry and the pain, but unexplainable in the soft and comforting words of a nurse, Jesus spoke.

I did not expect to find Jesus there... but there he was ... and here he is.

He is with us. Sometimes in a way that is so clear and understandable, and then at other times almost like a stranger to the place and situation, but we know... we know it is the Lord.

How are we to live on this side of the resurrection? Here are my suggestions: First, don't let our failure outweigh God's mercy. Remember God has forgiven you, now it is time to forgive yourself. Second, don't use the past and the familiar as a crutch for the future. It is true that there are some familiar places and moments where we seem to always find God's presence, but be willing to venture into the future expecting for God to meet you there. Finally, become more aware of God's presence everyday. Pray to become more sensitive to the spirit of God so that you can recognize the moments God is speaking and God is at work that you might join him.

In our living between Jesus' resurrection and our own, let us not live another day without reminding ourselves that because Jesus is alive, our lives can be different.



#### References:

1 Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), pp. 241-242 .



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