

Why Hasn't Easter Made a Difference?

Acts 1:1-11

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This first Sunday after the day of resurrection, we do well to turn to the first chapter of Acts. Today we'll glimpse that marvelous season when the risen Christ appeared to more than 500 witnesses. As we do, we'll face the question that many people ask, something you might have wondered: *why hasn't Easter made a difference?* On Easter Sunday we have this big fanfare, some churches play the "Hallelujah Chorus," but really, what has changed? Evil continues, seemingly unchecked. Brutality, injustice, immorality, suffering, and death all go on as though nothing happened.

Actually, Easter *has* made dramatic difference that everyone should recognize: **Ever heard of Western Civilization?** The improvements that make life better: government by the people, universal education, scientific inquiry, medical progress, economic opportunity...these things didn't just happen. China, India, and Africa have beautiful cultures, but humanitarian progress did *not* happen there as in Europe, and until they incorporated Western values. Not all the credit goes to religion; the Greeks and Roman pagans developed democracy and the rule by law. But more than any other influence, the Jewish view of God, God' creation, and God's justice, which were fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead, gave birth to Western Civilization. People need to know how much we have benefitted from generations who believed that human beings mattered so much to God, that He gave His only begotten Son, that the world might be saved.

The message of Easter, combined with worthy aspects of paganism and other religions, has brought progress to this planet. A better question is to ask "**Why hasn't Easter made more difference?**" Yes, Easter helped to create Western Civilization, but civilization is a mixed bag at best. Why aren't things dramatically better?

The first and most important reason is that **Jesus isn't done!** Let's look now at Acts 1:

*¹In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

⁶So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrated that God had brought His Heavenly Kingdom to earth. The disciples assumed that Jesus would finish it right then and there. Their vision was still too small. The Father didn't send the Son only for Israel. The Father resurrected the crucified Son in order to reach all the nations. Verse 7:

⁷He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

I can't help but wonder how they felt. They were in the presence of the risen Lord. He promised them the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, which would send them out as witnesses to every region on earth. Then Jesus ascended, leaving this little band of maybe a hundred disciples to go without him. They probably wanted to cry out, "Take me with you." But then two angels appeared to assure them that Jesus would return.

For ten days it must have been real scary, so they met in secret. Till the Day of Pentecost, when the Lord delivered on His promise. The Spirit came down as fire, and they went public, as Spirit-filled witnesses.

Part of the reason that Easter hasn't totally changed this planet is because Jesus isn't done. **The Kingdom of God has already come, but is not yet finished.** His disciples are the Spirit-filled witnesses who live out that Kingdom, making the world much better, living out the disciples' prayer: "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," trusting that He will finish what He started. One day there will be no sickness, no suffering, no injustice, no wars, in the light of glory, peace, justice, and prosperity will be all in all, when God brings heaven to earth.

In the meantime, Jesus' disciples are supposed to bear witness to God's Kingdom in the here and now. Sadly, Easter hasn't made more of a difference the past 2000 years because Christians tend to **shrink-wrap the Gospel**. I first heard that term from our friend Reggie McNeal; "shrink-wrap" refers to our tendency to reduce the radical message of the Gospel into something manageable.

This didn't happen as much for the first three hundred years, thanks to leaders like Paul, who wrote letters like Galatians, which would not compromise the life-changing Gospel of God's Kingdom through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But when the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, the Gospel got watered-down. Soon it became popular to believe in Jesus as your Savior from sin without making him the Lord of your life. Salvation became just about going heaven, not living like heaven on earth. This separation of the spiritual from the physical is called "**dualism**." To make it worse, people have become **private** about their faith—instead of being public Christ followers. Well no wonder Easter hasn't made more difference...if the message that his resurrection means we can live God's Kingdom on earth gets shrink-wrapped!

By the way, in ten days Reggie McNeal will be here to teach at Trinity's Purposeful and Missional Presbyterian Conference. Leaders from many churches travel from far away to be here. As a part of our church family you are welcome to come for free on Wednesday afternoon and evening, April 21. Reggie helps Christians see how a more

missional kind of Christianity can thrive in the future; and makes you laugh in the process.

Reggie will make us squirm when he talks about the other reason that Easter hasn't made more of a difference; a few hundred years after Jesus ascended, **the church became a club**. One of the byproducts of shrink-wrapping the Gospel was that the Jesus movement that was intended to bring God's Kingdom to earth became an **institution**. Instead of changing the world to resemble God's Kingdom on earth, the church become focused on making church people **comfortable** with the status quo.

This clubbishness has been most apparent in Roman Catholicism, but even the Reformation did not go far enough. Protestant churches have been too institutional and too concerned to use buildings and clergy to meet the needs of church people. Here at Trinity, we've been changing our traditions and programs so that this institution advances God's Kingdom in the world God loves. It's so encouraging to see so many examples of life change here on this campus. And our continued efforts to be a congregation continually in mission are making a huge impact in this community. This month's **Space Coast Living** magazine has a wonderful article by Debbie Shannon, and gives many non-religious readers a close-up look of our recent medical mission trip to Haiti. What an incredible opportunity to live our light shine! By God's grace, affluent people seeking the "good life" can be intrigued into our vision of beautiful adventure, because our greatest mission is to reach this community.

Wanting to be faithful, we invite God to prepare and send us. The goal is to become a **world-changing Easter people—filled with the Holy Spirit...expecting the Lord's victory...living the Gospel of God's Kingdom.**

And when God sends us to partner with non-religious people, we'll strive to be gracious, to do things Jesus' way. And we'll trust that if we minister in Jesus' way...that many spiritually-thirsty people will see Jesus... and drink of his grace.