

## An Easter Worth Celebrating, Part 2

We are in the midst of Easter week and over these two days, we're discussing the meaning of Easter. Our aim is to demonstrate that Easter is not merely to be "observed" or "remembered," but is indeed worth celebrating. And we are attempting to understand Easter within the context of the narrative of Scripture. The biblical story-line makes the death and resurrection of Jesus make sense.

According to the logic of creation, God gave Adam and Eve to each other as good gifts and set them in a world of unlimited goods and ever-increasing delight and pleasure.

Because of the fall, we no longer inhabit that world. When we now look out at creation, we see a world of limited goods and this vision provokes in us inhuman attitudes and behaviors. We hoard our possessions, we are selfish and petty. We don't delight in others, seeking to truly understand them. We now seek their destruction. And we protect ourselves from being truly known, afraid of how others might hurt us. We do this because we are profoundly enslaved. The cosmic powers of Sin and Death have hijacked creation and hold it in their enslaving grip. They have infected everything so that there's a relentless dynamic of destruction and decay at work in our bodies, in our networks of relationships, and in creation itself.

God was not satisfied with humanity in this oppressed condition, so He called Israel to be His special people, His agents of the restoration of the nations. They were to live the Genesis 1-2 life in a Genesis 3 world. But they failed. Sin and Death overwhelmed and enslaved them, turning them aside to the worship of false gods.

God made His radical move to set things right in Jesus. Jesus is God's emphatic affirmation that He still wants humanity to live according to Genesis 1-2. Jesus lived the truly human life that faithfully fulfilled God's intentions. He did not accommodate to a Genesis 3 world, but lived according to the logic of creation. He became a servant, loved others, spent time with the broken and the marginalized, and called Israel to re-inhabit God's good and plentiful world—to re-learn what it means to live with open hands in a world of unlimited goods.

### Rejection

Jesus was initially received very warmly by the Jews, especially by those on the margins of society—people loaded down with guilt and sin, the socially outcast. He brought them hope, especially because the Gospel of the Kingdom meant that anyone and everyone could receive forgiveness and salvation.

But as his popularity grew, so did the envy and jealousy of the Jewish religious leaders. They responded out of their captivity to Sin and Death. They manifested that their lives were shaped by Genesis 3. They had worked hard to attain their positions of power and authority, and they weren't going to give them up for some wandering teacher from Galilee. Because they were captive to strategies of self-protection, selfishness, and petty grasping after prestige and influence, Jesus was a threat.

The Romans didn't take sides between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. They were only interested in stability in Judea. They didn't care how many Jews were killed or which ones. They manifested their captivity to Sin and Death through their desire for control. They were only concerned that things were quiet on the far edges of the empire. Anyone creating instability or unrest was seen as a threat. Because Jesus upset people in power among the Jews, He was eventually going to face trouble from the Romans.

If you looked behind the scenes of this drama and got a glimpse of the spiritual dynamics going on, you would see that the cosmic powers of Sin and Death would not tolerate the Son of God entering their enslaved territory and living free of their designs for control and domination. Jesus was a mortal threat to Sin and Death, and they had to do something to preserve their grip on creation.

Sin and Death also overwhelm Jesus' inner circle so that they all succumb to the instincts of self-preservation. Judas betrays Jesus; Simon Peter denies Him; a young disciple is grabbed, but wriggles free of his clothes, fleeing naked into the night.

Sin and Death had perverted creation to such an extent that when God Himself showed up to invite humanity to enjoy His blessing, He was rejected, betrayed, denied, abandoned, and put to death.

This is not the way we would write the story, is it? We would have Jesus have a secret weapon so that at the last second He would hit a button or pull out a rocket-launcher and blast His enemies to smithereens! Peter actually tries to write such a chapter into the story when he grabs his sword and lunges at a guard to cut off his head.

"Put your sword away, Peter," says Jesus. "The road of violence does not end in redemption, but in destruction. Don't you realize that I could pray to My Father and He would immediately send the entire heavenly army to my rescue!?"

But if Jesus did that, God wouldn't be God, and Jesus wouldn't be Jesus. God does not heal His world from a safe distance. He does not solve the problem of creation's captivity to Sin and Death from a comfortable couch in heaven. God redeems by taking the full force of creation's brokenness, by submitting to the overpowering weight of Sin and Death, by experiencing the crushing loneliness of a Godless world, by loving recklessly and being rejected, by showing His friends the way of life and being abandoned.

God in Jesus becomes the God-forsaken one.

Jesus lives the truly human life according to the logic of creation. And in a world enslaved to Sin and Death, that way becomes the way of the cross. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats."

## Death

The enslavement of creation to Sin and Death leads to a bizarre series of unjust hearings and trials, a collection of false accusations, and some perverse alliances between political enemies. The Jewish leaders hand over Jesus to be crucified by the Romans as a common criminal.

So, is it really possible to live the truly human life in a broken and enslaved creation? Should we be living a Genesis 1-2 life in a Genesis 3 world?

On Friday of Easter week, we have an answer. “You’d be crazy if you did that. Totally impractical. That’s a good way to get yourself killed.” On Friday, Sin and Death win. On Friday, Jesus is defeated. Sin and Death gather the full force of their destructive power and with it they kill the Son of God.

The disciples get it. They go quietly back to their jobs, their hopes crushed. They gave it a good shot. But it really was an idealistic fantasy. Getting rid of the Romans by loving them and forgiving them? They should’ve known better. Well, back to reality.

## Reversal

But the Creator God is the God of wonderful reversals. He grants a child of promise to old and decrepit Abraham and Sarah; He delivers a nation of slaves from the world’s most powerful empire by making a pathway through the sea; He defeats the champion warrior Goliath through David, the shepherd-boy; He crumbles the walls of Jericho through songs of praise.

And God performs His ultimate reversal by raising Jesus from the dead. At the very darkest moment in human history, when humanity committed its most outrageous injustice, when the creation killed its Creator, when all hope was lost, God brings about His greatest triumph and radically alters reality forever!

God raised Jesus from the dead!

But, when this happened, what happened? Many things actually happened between Friday and Sunday, and all of them are reasons why we celebrate Easter. I’ll just mention two and then take time to elaborate on a third.

First, we find out that when Jesus died, He destroyed the enmity between God and humanity. Sin had corrupted our relationship with God, but Jesus took this upon Himself—Jesus became Sin, taking on the wrath set loose on creation because of Sin, and He put all of this to death. Easter is worth celebrating because it brings us to God, restoring that relationship. In His death, Jesus reconciled us to God, healing the breach in our relationship.

Second, Jesus dealt a death-blow to the cosmic powers of Sin and Death. Sin and Death mustered all their might and exhausted their power in putting Jesus to death. Because of this, when Jesus died, it was actually a mortal wound to Sin and Death, initiating their ultimate defeat.

We don’t find this out until resurrection Sunday, but it appears that the power of Death felt it right away. Jesus’ death was such a devastating blow to Death, that it shook loose Death’s grip on creation, and it appears for a few moments that the strike so staggered Death that there was some sort of cosmic hiccup. The cosmic hijacker was momentarily stunned. The world sort of flipped out for a while. Matthew 27 says that when Jesus died, there was an earthquake and a bunch of tombs broke open and the bodies of many righteous people came to life, came out of their tombs, and were walking around and into Jerusalem. It’s as if Death slipped and lost hold of its enslaving grip on creation, and some of Death’s captives escaped.

Further, in Romans 8, Paul says that Christ took on a body that was affected by the fall—a body like ours, infected by Sin, though He never did sin. And when He died, He put to death what Paul calls “sin-in-the-flesh.” Jesus’ death dealt with the problem of Sin’s infection and domination of our bodies. We now have the power to live truly human lives.

At Easter, Jesus began the process of freeing creation from captivity to Sin and Death. All those who are in Christ now have resurrection power to live according to creation rather than as slaves to the suffocating power of Sin. And even though we may die, we will one day participate in the celebration as God finally defeats Death, His cosmic enemy. If you have ever lost someone you love to death, you will look forward with great anticipation to the satisfaction of rejoicing at death’s final defeat at the day of Christ.

God’s triumph over Sin and Death definitely makes Easter worth celebrating.

Third, when God raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated Jesus. He showed Jesus to have been in the right all along. God does indeed want us living the life of Genesis 1-2, even though we still live largely in a Genesis 3 world. He was despised and rejected by the leaders of Israel, but God affirmed for all time that the life of Jesus is the supreme example of how God wants humanity to live.

This way of life takes on a new name—cruciformity. “Cruciformity” is a beautiful word that simply means “living in the shape of the cross; conforming to Jesus’ pattern of self-giving unto death.”

The way of Genesis 1-2 becomes the way of the cross. And because it’s the way of vulnerability and suffering, it’s so tempting to resist it. “I don’t want to lose. I don’t want to get hurt and be mistreated!” But this is the only way of life that brings about resurrection.

Easter is worth celebrating because it shows us how to live. The logic of creation becomes the logic of Easter, and the resurrection makes it all possible. If God can bring His greatest triumph out of humanity’s worst disaster; if God brings about the healing of the world from humanity’s most insidious injustice; if God can bathe creation in resurrection light in the world’s darkest moment, then the death and resurrection of Jesus makes possible a life lived in God’s good world of unlimited goods.

## The Logic of Easter: Cruciformity

This, then, is the logic of Easter. Jesus lives the truly human life, and it is a pathway to the cross. But this is the only pathway that leads to resurrection and exaltation.

Paul draws out this logic in Philippians 2:6-11:

Jesus Christ was God from all eternity, but He didn’t regard His being God as something to be exploited for His own gain. Rather, He poured Himself out, He gave up His privileges and became a man, and in fact became a servant to sinners and those on the lowest rung of the social ladder. He was faithful to God even to the point of death as a common criminal on a Roman cross. And because He lived that kind of life of self-humiliation, God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the highest place, giving Him God’s own name—the name above every name, so that when Jesus’ name is rung out at the final day, every knee will bow, even those corrupted Roman leaders and the Jewish religious authorities who grasped after power and exploited their positions, and every

tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, especially those who thought He was an idealistic dreamer and dismissed Him as irrelevant. And all of this will be to the glory of God the Father, whose character is revealed in Jesus' self-sacrificial servant-hood, and whose intentions for humanity were affirmed for all time in the cruciform life of Jesus.

The truly human life is a life of cruciformity, and that's the life to which Jesus calls us. This is the only life that leads to sharing in the final restoration of creation, and this is the only way that unleashes resurrection power into lives here and now.

Living a life of servant-hood, humility, self-giving, selflessness, delight in others, sharing, authenticity, vulnerability, fearlessness, openness to others, loving others with abandon, looking out for the poor, the orphan, and the widow—this is a way of life that constitutes true freedom, because it is the only way of life that draws upon God's resurrection power. It is a return to the life that we were meant to enjoy by God's design. It is the logic of creation, and it is the only way to true satisfaction.

When you are conformed to the dying of Jesus, your life is flooded with the resurrection power of God. "If you hold on to your life, you lose it; if you let it go, you will truly find it."

There are so many practical ways that the logic of Easter can shape our lives today, but I want to talk about just a few. Hopefully this will provoke further reflection on others.

## The Logic of Easter & Marriage

Many of you here today desire to be married at some point. And you should! It's an arrangement in which our deepest desires are satisfied.

When you fantasize about your future spouse, you typically idealize that person and imagine how wonderful your relationship is going to be. You imagine an ideal spouse.

When you begin a dating relationship that eventuates in marriage, you don't notice it right away, but you don't have an ideal partner—you have an actual one. It's just that you're still in the early phases of relational bliss where the little things that may drive you nuts later don't really matter yet. If you notice them or your friends point them out with barely suppressed alarm, you blow it off, call them cute, or imagine that these sorts of things will just fade away once you are married.

As you progress into an engagement, things may get rocky, but you more or less get along and make your way toward marriage. At this point, your vision is still dominated by hope. You still imagine your eventual marriage as a garden of delight the size of Yellowstone National Park with room to thrive and fresh air to breathe. You look over at your partner, like some of you may be doing right now, and say, "we won't have problems like the others; we'll be different—we're in love!"

Now I do realize that if that's you, you don't believe anything that I'm saying right now. That's okay. Listen to this in a few years, after you've been married for a while.

After several months or perhaps a year of marriage, things will change. You now are sure that you have not married your ideal spouse, but most definitely an actual one. With real problems. That

aren't going away. And your marriage no longer feels like Yellowstone, but a cramped closet with lots of stinky old shoes. And you're claustrophobic.

What's happened is actually pretty normal, especially for Christians. We value marriage and the commitments we make, so we want to make our marriages work. But when two sinners get together and face unanticipated stresses and pressures, we tend to go back to old, familiar relational strategies that come right out of Genesis 3.

We try to fix each other. This leads to manipulation and strategies of control. Before you know it, your vision is clouded and what formerly seemed like an infinite garden of wonder is now a very cramped and crowded space.

We blame the other person. "You know, we'd be happy if you would just..." "He's always..., it's so annoying!" "Oh really," your friends may say, "a year ago that was cute..."

You end up in a turf-battle. You will all face this temptation. It's very easy to envision your marriage as an arena of limited goods—limited turf. So you fight over everything. This makes you very stupid. You fight over every little insignificant thing, because each minor issue is a small battle in the larger war over turf in your relationship. We joke that many newly married people fight over whether to squeeze the toothpaste up the tube or roll it up as you use it; and which way to put the toilet paper on the roll. That's not far from the truth.

How can the logic of Easter transform a marriage?

You can indeed have a relationship that is like the wide open and beautiful expanses of Yellowstone, but the only way to get there is to have a marriage shaped by the cross.

Resist the temptation to play the blame game. And don't try to fix each another. Embark on a journey of discovering how your spouse is God's good gift to you. That's the logic of creation. Learn the practical skills of truly loving one another.

Become a servant. Adopt cruciform postures toward one another and be willing to lose ground in the turf battle. In fact, surrender all the turf to one another and you'll find your marriage overwhelmed by the resurrection power of God, producing more space to enjoy one another than you thought was possible.

You can begin to cultivate some cruciform skills even before you're married. Here's just one suggestion. Learn the skill of confessing your sin and asking for forgiveness. This is a very risky practice, but if you gain this skill and make it a habit, you will flood your life with God's blessing.

What I mean is, don't apologize. If you've wronged a person, don't say, "Uh, you know when I said that one thing? Yeah, well, it may have made you feel bad and I can understand how you may have taken it a certain way, and so if you did, um, I feel bad about it. I'm sorry."

That's terribly irresponsible and manipulative speech. It's a Genesis 3 way of talking. It's an attempt to clear things up, but it maintains power and keeps a wronged person from being satisfied. It's a refusal to love another person enough to satisfy his or her soul. And it doesn't really get rid of the wound and the hurt. That wound will linger and grow and develop into bitterness. If you bring that practice into a marriage, it will produce a suffocating relationship.

Try this: “Most of the day I got into a foolish rut in my thoughts and was a bit angry at you. When you came home I knew that if I said what I was thinking of saying to you, it would really hurt. And the situation arose in our conversation, and the opportunity presented itself, and I took it. I knew I would hurt you but I said it anyway. I know I hurt you and I regret it. I can’t act like that and say that I love you. It was wrong. I sinned against you. Would you please forgive me?”

That’s putting yourself completely in another person’s hands. You name what you did, open yourself up and reveal your motives, and satisfy the other person, giving them the option of letting go of it. It feels risky, but it’s a practice of humbling yourself that opens up the possibility of true forgiveness. And when you reconcile, it’s all gone—no bitter residue to create problems for later.

Learn to forgive and ask for forgiveness, confessing your sins to one another. That’s a good practice to cultivate for all your relationships, actually.

Paul says in Ephesians 4 that Satan gets a foothold in relationships when there’s settled bitterness and anger that’s not dealt with. Cruciform habits of humility are powerful to keep your relationships free of the destructive dynamics of Sin and Death.

There are thousand more things to say about marriage, but keep this one thing in mind: Cross-shaped practices create redemptive and life-giving space. Let the cross shape your marriage—you open up the possibility of enjoying an unspeakably satisfying relationship.

## The Logic of Easter and Your Dreams about the Future

You are all here because of the future. You all came here to leave and build a life elsewhere, and, just like your thoughts about marriage, many of you are already planning what your futures will look like. That’s normal. There’s nothing wrong with that. Many of you have come here with high hopes of training to become an engineer or a nurse or a teacher.

Because college is a period in life when you prepare for the future, you can’t help but fantasize about what it will be like. And when you do, what do you imagine? It may be a helpful exercise to actually talk out loud about your dreams and how they look. What direction do they take? What shape do they have? What trajectory? Do they take on the general contours of the cross?

Typically our imaginations are shaped by the American Dream. Starter home, mid-size home to raise a family, and then we arrive at the luxury home. One-car family to start, then, when the kids come along, we’ll get the trendy SUV and a sweet little convertible. We imagine an upward trajectory and the accumulation of bigger and better and more.

I’d like you to just consider the extent to which that’s an idolatrous conception. If you embark on that sort of journey, you may actually get what you want, along with the barrenness of soul and tragic emptiness of life that goes along with it.

I want to just suggest that you plan your life according to the logic of Easter. Let me just give you this passage in which Jesus talks about the cruciform life. John 12:25-26:

“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.”

There we have it—grab hold of stuff in this world and seek to accumulate more, and you will lose your life. But let it go and you will gain it. And if you serve Jesus, you will be honored by God Himself! That’s how the passage opens and closes, but look what’s in the middle—“If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.”

Where is Jesus? Read the Gospels. Where is He? Is He found with those who are so overcome by the pursuit of career advancement that they neglect their families? Is He among those who are concerned with accumulating symbols of their social standing so that people are impressed?

Jesus spent His days on earth with the poor, the outcast, the shamed woman in the Samaritan village, the despised traitorous Zaccheus, the single mother from the red-light district in Syro-Phoenicia. “Where I am, there My servant will be also. And my Father will honor Him.”

You are going to leave here and life is going to get busy. Far busier than you are now, believe me. Make sure to build into your life some components that put you purposefully where Jesus is.

Wherever you land, look around for people in pain, those whose lives are difficult, and come up with some creative ways to serve them. Find a single mom in your church with young kids and ask her how you can provide relief. Maybe free baby-sitting one night a week. And not just once or twice. Help to bear someone’s heavy burden.

Don’t play the blame game with people whose lives are difficult and complicated. There are already far too many people in our churches doing that. That’s taken care of. It’s covered. Far too few are getting involved and coming up with creatively cruciform ways to serve and relieve burdens.

Ask your pastor for the list of shut-ins—old folks who can’t get out and would just love to have a visitor once a week.

There are so many more creative ways to be where Jesus is. They’re not spectacular and they won’t make people think you’re a spiritual all-star. You probably won’t get noticed. You can’t put stuff like on your resume and you may get passed over for a promotion because you didn’t put in the long overtime hours at work.

But Jesus says, “you will be honored by My Father.” How incredible is that? And when you go to where Jesus is, you draw upon His very life, flooding your life with His resurrection power and presence.

When you dream and fantasize about your future, plan to serve.

## Conclusion

There are so many more ways that the logic of Easter can shape our lives, providing resurrection power, giving life, and restoring hope. I’ll have to leave you to think through those for yourselves.

Being Christian means orienting our lives by the logic of Easter. And the promise attached to this way of life is that when we conform to the cruciform life of Jesus, our lives are flooded with God's restoring, sustaining resurrection power and the presence of Christ Himself.

This is a risky way of life. You may get hurt, you may be misunderstood, you may be mistreated, but you will be on the pathway to resurrection and you will share in the exaltation of Jesus Christ on the day when He is revealed in all His glory.

Easter is truly worth celebrating. It is not Christmas, Jr. It isn't "mini-Christmas." Easter is really the completion of Christmas, the high point and center of the Christian year. God triumphed over Sin and Death and shows us the way to truly enjoy the life God intended for us.

May God magnify the exalted Lord Jesus through His cross-shaped people! Amen.