

# Something Happened

William J. Carl, III  
First Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas

As I write these words Christmas has drawn to a close for 1985 and the year has ended with someone dying. I buried him on New Year's Eve and will start the New Year with another funeral. I'm still working on what I will say about death on Epiphany. And I'm still fumbling for the right words to say to the woman who even now lies waiting for cancer to finish its quiet torture. She will no doubt be gone by the time you are reading this. At least that's what all of us seem to "hope" silently so that we can eventually say in our own odd way, as we have said about so many others, "It's a blessing."

But is it, really? And what, after all, is the blessing in all this? Is it death itself which some seem to welcome? Is it the hope we have in the resurrection? How do I say that to the woman staring into the abyss? How do I say it to her husband without the words seeming hollow?

On New Year's Eve I stood before the congregation and said words that I believe:

Some say that death at Christmastime is such a sad thing and so it is. This is a time to be joyful and happy, not sad. But actually, if there is ever an appropriate time for death, besides Easter, it is Christmastime, for this is a time when real joy is mixed with tears—deep joy. Here is a time when Mary's pain and the baby Jesus' crying are heard amidst the angels and archangels singing "Joy to the World the Lord is Come. . . ."

And so it went. And so it seemed an appropriate thing to say. But imagine the audacity of the Christian claim you and I preach. We talk glibly about the hope we have in the resurrection. But do we really believe it?

There is at the heart of our age a nagging disbelief, an honest disbelief in outworn ideas. Thus, when a parent or a child, a spouse or a friend is lowered into the ground, or slipped into the sea, or scattered about as ashes to the wind, we wonder, wanting desperately to believe. In *Look Homeward Angel*, at the death of his brother, Thomas Wolfe falls to his knees and cries out, "God, whoever you are, wherever you are, if you are, take care of my brother tonight."

Is that your prayer as a pastor sometimes as you stand at a gravesite wondering "What really happened here? What have I said? What has God done?"

The problem with the resurrection for the contemporary mind is not so much wrapping our minds around the idea of a physical resurrection (a la Bultmann or Tillich), or what shape we'll take after we die, as it is comprehending that God Almighty "very God of very God" became "very man of very man" and in the process took sin and death by storm, something neither you nor I, nor anyone from Adam onward has ever been able to do. Note that the

*took* in this sentence needs to be read as a Greek “perfect tense”—has taken, is taking and will *continue* to take sin and death by storm. That’s what the resurrection means. It means that something happened so radical and so different that the world will never be the same.

Think about the word “resurrection” itself. It appears over and over in I Corinthians 15 - *anastasis*. This is no static word, but one that is lively. Walk your way through Gingrich or Kittel again and you will see. Jesus stood up again. But it was not his action; it was God’s. Jesus’ “standing up” is centered in the work of God. Listen to Hans Küng:

Today we speak, perhaps too glibly, of “resurrection” in the sense of Jesus’ action by his own power. In the New Testament however, “resurrection” is rightly understood as “raising by God.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was raised by the father and so you and I will be raised. Here is action! Something has happened that has changed and is changing everything completely.

But what exactly did the resurrection change? We know for sure that it didn’t change sin, death or the fact of evil. Then what exactly did it change?

### The Resurrection Did Not Change Sin

1. It didn’t change sin. *It changed sin’s power over us.* There are many in our time who, as Fred Speakman puts it, are “converted at every revival.” They stumble forward on the sawdust trail and start over again. Isn’t that what the resurrection is all about for us? Starting over? But for many, here is the rub. Why, they ask, if I am starting over in Christ, am I still in sin? Why didn’t the resurrection change sin? Even Paul wrestles with this problem. “Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Sin is ever about us, even post-conversion; but the power of sin has been diminished. With Easter, you and I are raised to the possibility of new life even now. “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away. Behold the new has come.” We say it every week as an assurance of pardon, as a weekly reminder that though we slip back continually, the possibility for new life is ever there. We can indeed experience a resurrection of mind and body, a conquering of the very sin that holds us back from salvation and growth in a sanctified life.

None of us, however, ever does this on his own. Only an atoning work of God in Christ, only the resurrection of Christ lifts us to new life here and now as we seek to live as citizens in the kingdom of God. The resurrection didn’t change sin itself. It changed sin’s power over us.

### The Resurrection Did Not Change Death

2. It didn’t change death. *It changed the power of death over us* by moving us on in our grief, by dispelling our fears, by pointing us to the hope we have in the resurrection.

The resurrection is not a denial of death or a nostalgic holding onto the past. To understand the resurrection we first have to accept the fact of death itself. As Edward Schillebeeckx puts it, “. . . in and of itself, death, even for Christians, remains impenetrable.”<sup>2</sup> It is the final cruelty, the final mystery which some of us never seem to get past. We want to hold onto the past as did the women at the empty tomb.

When I was a child I remember traveling year after year to the cemetery in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I remember being dressed up in a suit on a warm spring day, walking with Grandma and Grandpa Carl—both crippled—very slowly to the graves. I remember being told to be careful not to step on a grave. I spent a lot of time looking down and stepping sideways and then rubbing fingers over names carved in smooth marble. There we were, year after year, placing flowers on the grass over Uncle Warren, Aunt Ila, Aunt Mae and, oh yes, on the short grave of little Donald Ray, my father's older brother, who lived only a few hours on February 12, 1922. Perhaps he was the reason Grandma always baked a cake every February 12 but never said anything to anyone about it. There we stood rehearsing our memories of what they were like, of the way things were. We came looking for the dead, like the women at the tomb, still trying to hold onto the past.

But the dead are gone and we can't bring them back. Death is real, and in this life, final. Until we see that, we will never understand the power of the resurrection. How will I help this woman in my congregation greet death unafraid? How will I help her meet her death? It comes quickly now for her and for us all. The resurrection does not change that.

What the resurrection does change is the way we look at it—that despite its reality we look right through death to the hope we all have in the resurrection. Schillebeeckx again: “Through the death of Jesus, seen in the light of his resurrection, the Christian has the assurance that suffering and death cannot separate him from God. And in that case, death—his death—takes on new meaning for him. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Death is not something to be feared. It is only the final foe that has already been conquered by Christ. Again, something has happened, initiated and carried out by God; not by any action of ours, lest any one of us should boast. Our resurrection is an action of God. Joseph Haroutunian, used to pose the following question to students at McCormick Seminary: If the town drunk dies and is buried in the cemetery, and the best and most upright man in town dies and is buried next to him, and God comes and says “Get up!” which man will stand up? Haroutunian paused at this point. . . .neither, of course. For only God raises the dead. No matter how righteous you are, it is God's great act of grace that raises you and me in Christ.

Can you not hear in the background the alto in “Part the Third” of Handel's *Messiah* swelling up in “Death is swallowed up in victory” only to be joined by the tenor “O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?” Little wonder that it all turns into a full chorus singing, “But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The resurrection didn't change death itself; it changed the power of death over us.

## The Resurrection Did Not Change the Fact of Evil

3. *The Resurrection changed our ability to face up to evil and unrighteousness.* Evil is still all around us and in us and within the corporate structures of our society. But Christ is ever ahead of us, leading us into a battle against corporate and personal evil.

He will not remain in the tomb where we can keep him safe, where he won't meddle in matters of injustice that touch us all in one way or another. Jesus is out among us shaking us all.

But how much easier to keep a dead Jesus in his tomb. Once Jesus gets out of the tomb there's no telling what he will do. An irate woman once accosted her pastor in the hallway as he was going into morning worship, "Preacher, if Jesus knew what was going on in this church, he would be rolling over in his grave." Now that's an interesting theology of the resurrection. How we love to keep Jesus in the grave.

But we can't. "He has gone." "He is risen." "He is gone to Galilee." And where is that? Don't get out your maps. Mark is not talking about the place, but the work of Christ. Mark is not saying so much that Jesus worked in Galilee, but that wherever Jesus worked, there is Galilee. Galilee describes who Jesus was and what he did and what he is already doing in his church. Whenever you or I hold out a bowl of stew and a piece of bread to a street person, there is Galilee. Whenever broken down souls, battered by life's trials, pass to one another bread and wine, there is Galilee. Whenever enemies meet in peace and make the beginnings of real reconciliation, there is Galilee. And it is the resurrection that makes all of this possible. For God, in raising Christ, has broken the bonds of sin and death and evil in the world, so that you and I may be raised to new life.

Something has happened! Last Easter morn I drove to our church early to take another look at the large old cross we put out every year beside the marquee. I knew that the Texas wind had been strong the night before but as I drove by I saw the cross had been broken in half! Like a living symbol of that first Easter, death had been broken and Christ had been raised.

Something happened! For the one who was despised and rejected has become the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and yes, He shall reign forever and ever. Amen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn. (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, trans. John Bowden. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 799.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, p. 800.