

**Why Christians Celebrate the Death of Jesus**  
**Part Four: The King who Came to Raise Us to Life**  
**Matthew 27.51-53, Ephesians 2.1-10, John 11.25-26, John 10.10**

**April 5, 2026, Easter Sunday**

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Today we celebrate the amazing hinge point of human history when Jesus – having been crucified and buried and thrown into a grave – rose from the dead, triumphant.

In his account of the resurrection, Matthew in chapter 28.1-7, writes:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead!'"

Through his resurrection, Jesus confirmed and validated everything he ever claimed about himself during his lifetime: he is the Son of Man, the promised King, revealing the presence of God, speaking the word of God, doing the work of God, fulfilling the purposes of God, forgiving sin, redeeming humanity, ushering in the Kingdom.

The resurrection is Jesus saying, "I am who I said I am!"

### The Resurrection, Piero della Francesca, 1460s



This is a fresco from a church in Tuscany, Italy, from the 1400s. For centuries this is the way the church – especially the church in the West – has imagined the resurrection and its significance.

Jesus, utterly regal and powerful, hardly touched by his skirmish with mortality, clothed and crowned as a conquering king, flying the victory banner, steps out of his tomb, triumphant over death, staring down all who would defy his claims to divinity.

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For twenty centuries, all around the world, followers of Jesus have celebrated the resurrection on Easter.

But a lot of people miss the fact that, according to the gospels, there wasn't just one resurrection on that Easter Sunday two thousand years ago. There were a number of them!

Listen to this mysterious account in Matthew's gospel, describing something that happened at the very moment of Jesus' death, and then coinciding with Jesus's resurrection two days later.

Matthew 27.51-53

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. [*That was Friday, on the day Jesus died. And then on Sunday ...*] The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

What a wild and mysterious passage!

Each of the gospel editors – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – had a particular audience in mind for their historical accounts, and they each gathered together the parts of the life and ministry and death of Jesus that they believed would connect most with their readers.

Ancient people who were religiously minded, the audience Matthew had in mind, had an almost superstitious expectation that God would use celestial signs, miraculous proofs like comets and earthquakes and eclipses and angelic visitations, to underscore whenever he was moving.

So Matthew made it a point to include and emphasize all of those details that added a supernatural gravity to the events of Jesus' life: such as the star that appeared when Jesus was born, interpreted by foreign astrologers to portend the birth of a King; and at this death, an earthquake, darkness, and the temple curtain being torn in two; and then at his resurrection, an angelic visitation, and a guard detail at his tomb being overcome and collapsing as though they were dead.

I'm convinced that the reason Matthew included this remarkable detail about people being raised from their graves and being seen by people in the city is because this is a miraculous foretaste of what's to come, a lived metaphor, demonstrating on a physical level what Jesus would do on a spiritual level with every person who gave their life over to him, lifting us out of our spiritual graves, bringing us from death to life, and then sending us out into the world, where many who knew us when we were dead now experience us as changed people brought to life.

Matthew makes it clear: when Jesus rises from the dead, he takes us with him.

### **The Resurrection, Church of Chora, 1315**



This is a fresco from a church in Istanbul, Turkey, from the 1300s. It shows the most common way the church in the East has captured the meaning of the resurrection.

The difference is immediately apparent. At Jesus' feet are not living people who became like the dead, but the dead coming to life.

Jesus has already stepped out of his tomb. Now he is bringing *them* out of *their* tombs.

Jesus, risen from the dead, surrounded by glory, draped in divine splendor, takes hold of the wrists of Adam and Eve, who represent all those human beings who have put their trust in Jesus and his saving death, and who have been made new by his redeeming work on the cross.

One detail you don't want to miss. I love this. Notice the sleeves of the arms that Jesus touches. Already, even just in this brief moment of contact as he brings them out of their tombs, they are being transformed by his touch. Their drab earthly clothes are being changed into the color of heaven.

A follower of Jesus writing in the 300s imagines this moment:

Then Jesus stretched forth his hand, and said, "Come to me, all you my saints, who were created in my image, who were condemned by the tree of forbidden fruit, and by the devil and death. Live now by the wood of my cross! The devil, the prince of this world, is overcome, and death is conquered!"

Then presently all the saints were joined together under the hand of the Most High God; and the Lord Jesus laid hold of Adam's hand and said to him, "Peace be to you, and all your righteous offspring, who are mine."

And taking hold of Adam by his right hand, he ascended . . . and all the saints of God followed him. (*Evangelion of Nicodemus*, chapter 19, sections 1-3 and 12)

It's what Jesus did wherever he went during his lifetime:

- coming to Jairus's daughter, her dead body lying on her deathbed, taking her by the hand, and telling her to get up (Mark 5:42)
- stopping the funeral procession for a widow's dead son, leaning over into the coffin, and telling the young man to rise up (Luke 7:11–17)
- standing outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus, shouting, "Come out!", and watching his friend, still wrapped in graveclothes, step out of the grave (John 11:41–44)

It's what Jesus still does today: taking us by the hand, speaking our name, and bidding us come out of the grave and rise up into new life.

Turns out it wasn't just dozens who rose with him that day. According to Scripture, every person who ever was or ever will be a follower of Jesus rose with him when he rose. When he stepped out of the tomb into new life, we stepped out with him.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 4.8:

When he ascended on high, he took many captives.

Listen to this wonderful account from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, in which Paul describes what happens to each of us who are his followers.

First Paul describes our spiritual condition when we are outside of a relationship with Christ, beginning in Ephesians 2.1:

Ephesians 2.1-3

As for you, *you were dead* in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were subject to God's anger.

Though we are alive physically, spiritually, we are like dead men. But then Paul describes how our spiritual condition changes when we entrust our lives to Jesus by faith. We are brought from death to life, lifted up out of the grave and brought home to God:

Ephesians 2.4-7

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive with Christ* even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

*And God raised us up with Christ* and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

\* \* \*

Jesus raises us up from death to life. But there's another dimension to this that we can't miss.

We have long associated heaven with the idea of a future that never stops, of time going on and on. But when Jesus offers us new life, that's not primarily what he has in mind. Certainly that's included, but mere length of time is not what Jesus has for us.

Just before he shouted at that tomb and watched his good friend stride out, Jesus had an intriguing conversation with his dead friend's grieving sister.

John 11.21-26

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

The word here for life is *zoos*.

This is something I love about the Greek language, which as you may know is the language in which the New Testament was written. Greek had two different words for time, for place, and for life. One word is for the ordinary version, and the other is for an extraordinary version, an altogether different sort.

So, for example,

- *chronos* time is ordinary time measured out in equal portions, in minutes and hours and days and years, while *kairos* time is storied time, moments when time stops, rich with meaning and purpose
- *topos* describes ordinary places and spaces, bits of ground measured off into feet and yards and acres and miles, but *chora* places are special places, sacred places filled with gravity and beauty and deep significance
- in the same way, *bios* life is ordinary life, describing any creature that has a body and processes energy and grows, but *zoos* life describes fullness of life – not just the length of life but its depth and breadth.

I remember when the pastor who did my parent's funeral said, "There are more dimensions to life than length." That's exactly what the difference between *bios* and *zoos* is getting at.

Jesus didn't just come to offer long life. He offers something way better than that: depth of life, richness of life, fullness of life.

When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he is saying, "I am the One who declares to all of humanity – get up from your deathbed, rise up from your coffin, come out of your grave. Trust in me and enter into the fullness of life – beginning the moment you give your life to me!"

Just one chapter before these words, in John 10.10, Jesus says:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full!

Life in abundance, the fullest possible sort of life. Something way beyond, something far exceeding, normal biological life.

I have come to give you depth of life, richness of life . . . *newness* of life. Life of an altogether different sort. And isn't that our heart's deepest desire – not just more of same, but the possibility of a fresh beginning?

Earlier in John's gospel, in chapter 3, Jesus has a conversation with an old religious man named Nicodemus.

John 3.3-7 says:

Jesus says, "No one can take part in the kingdom of God unless they are born again. You should not be surprised at my saying that. Flesh can only give birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

This kind of language of being born all over again conveys a profound spiritual reality. When we come to Christ, we don't remain the same! If our encounter with God is genuine, if our conversion is real, we *can't* remain the same. Something dies in us, and something is brought to life in us.

As Paul says in Romans 6.4:

For we died and were buried with Christ, and just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

Søren Kierkegaard writes:

When an oak seed is planted in a clay pot, the pot breaks; when new wine is poured into old wineskins, they burst. What happens, then, when God the king plants

himself in the frailty of a human being? Does he not become a new person and a new vessel! Oh, this becoming – how difficult it is, and how like birth itself! (94)

We die to our old way of life centered on us, built on our own effort, full of our own purposes. And the life of *God* gets planted in us and begins to grow. As a result of his work within us by his Spirit, we are transformed into people whose lives are shaped and governed by the loving purposes of God.

For centuries, butterflies have been a symbol for Christians of the Christian life.\* Why? Think about it. Into a little cave goes a worm, out comes an airplane! It is the same creature, and at the same time it is absolutely not! It is a brand new creature!

In the German town of Regensburg there is a monastery with an ancient crucifix hanging in the sanctuary. As best they can tell, that sculpture of Jesus on the cross was made around 1320. In 1991, after it had hung there for more than 650 years, they took the cross down to restore it. When they did, they discovered a little green cord attached to a small door on the back of Jesus' body. When they opened it, they found a leather pouch. And inside the pouch they discovered this. An enameled butterfly, made of stained glass and lined with polished silver.



The maker of that crucifix had his theology exactly right. When Jesus died, his death didn't have the last word. After his death comes the resurrection. And with the resurrection comes the promise of new and transformed life for each of us who are his followers.

Simone Weil was a French philosopher who became a follower of Jesus. She wrote this about how transformation in a Christian comes about:

There are people who try to raise their souls like a man continually taking standing jumps in the hope that, if he jumps higher every day, a time may come when he will no longer fall back but will go right up to the sky. Thus occupied he cannot look at the sky.

We cannot take a single step toward heaven. It is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction. If however we look heavenwards for a long time, God comes and takes us up. He raises us easily. There is an easiness in [the Christian life] which is more difficult for us than all our efforts. (106)

I've asked Ana Ragheb, who we just had the joy of welcoming as a new member of our church family a few weeks ago, if she would share with us the story of transformation that God is writing in her life:

*My name is Ana. I have been part of this church family for several years. I studied at Purdue and currently am working as a pediatric speech-language pathologist. Pastor David asked me to share a little bit about how God has been transforming my life.*

*When I was young, God was like an unclear idea to me, and I didn't know what it could mean to have a personal relationship with Him. I came to know the Lord around age 14-15 after a friend invited me to the youth group at this church. Through getting involved here and through reading the Bible on my own, God revealed to me who He is and who I am as His child. I can't point to a specific moment that I chose to put my faith in Jesus, but when I look back at that time, I can identify specific reasons. There are three that stand out.*

*First, in Jesus I found acceptance and belonging. God through Christ welcomes me as I am, forgives my wrongs, and gives me a secure place to belong in His family.*

*Second, in Jesus I found hope that there is more to life than just our limited days on earth. There is life that extends beyond death, and hope for restoration of the brokenness around me.*

*Third, in Jesus I found purpose and direction. I had been primarily looking for direction for my life through academic achievement. While that has remained a recurring battle, in God I've found purpose beyond myself, a purpose that is given to me rather than being dependent on my performance or achievement.*

*As I have continued to walk with God, He keeps taking me deeper in my knowledge of Him. God has helped me understand more deeply why I need the person of Jesus specifically, to be the substitute for my sins and to bring me back into relationship with God. He has solidified my identity by rooting my worth not in what others think of me, but in HIS ultimate worthiness and my being His child. In addition to deepening my understanding, God is also helping me to become a new person. He continues to reshape the way I view others, from a self-centered and judgmental point of view to seeing others as fellow image-bearers of God. He is helping me to submit more and more of my life to Him as my Lord. And He has helped me see His heart for people from every part of the world to know Him and to experience how good He is.*

*I praise God for His work in my life and in the lives of those around me. While I still often feel stuck in my old ways, and even as I am sharing with you there are many ways in which I don't yet feel made new, I am encouraged by verses like Romans 8:29 which says that God has predestined His children to be conformed to the image of His Son. He will complete the work that He began to make me fully into the new creation He intends me to be.*

*I will end by rereading a passage of Scripture that Pastor David shared earlier. It's one that continues to anchor and encourage me. Ephesians 2:4-5 says, "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved." Thank you, Jesus, for raising us up to fullness of life with You.*

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In II Corinthians 5.17 Paul writes

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here!

And this transformation – this work of God in each of our lives: we don't have to wonder what that newness of life will look like, and we don't have to guess where that inner mastery of the Spirit will lead us.

The shape and texture of that new life is described in a number of places in the New Testament, one of which is in Paul's letter to the church in Colosse, Colossians chapter 3. Paul writes:

Colossians 3.1-5, 9

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . . since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, *which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

When we are raised from death to life, when Jesus breaks us free of our graves and lifts us by the hand and breathes his life into us and sends us walking into the city, all of us, different though we are, are being shaped by the Spirit of God in such a way that we will all come more and more to resemble the same person: Jesus, the one who raises us into newness of life.

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On Easter morning we celebrate the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus from death.

Let me bring us back to those two frescoes with which we began, both depicting the resurrection of Jesus.

Both declare the fact of the resurrection. But in one, those in the painting are sleeping through the most important event in human history. In the other, they are taking full part in it, and his resurrection is their resurrection.

Which painting depicts your Easter experience?

On Good Friday I was reflecting on the accounts in Matthew's gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and on this mysterious account of the resurrection of others as well, and on the mystery of my own experience of Christ, of going from being spiritually dead as an atheist to being brought to life and becoming a follower of Jesus. It sparked this poem. Maybe it will connect with you:

#### Exchange

The soldiers reached for my hand  
 but you let them take yours  
 and to my death were led  
 They went to strip and kill me  
 but you let them pierce you  
 instead  
 the living for the dead

And when you cried "It's done!"  
 and breathed your last  
 I gasped  
 and with my first breath  
 cried, "It's just begun!"

Today is Easter, the day we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead.

I wonder . . . is today the celebration of another resurrection as well? Of *your* resurrection, of your being taken in hand by the risen Lord Jesus and raised from death to life? As we sang earlier, "Soar we now where Christ has led."

It can be. All you need to do is ask, receive the gift, let him take you in hand and lead you from death to life.

And if today is the celebration of your being raised from death to life, then today is also the celebration of your being transformed, being clothed in the colors of heaven, transformed by the Spirit of God into a more and more Jesus-like version of you.

Hallelujah! He is risen. And so are we ...

As our worship team comes up to conclude our service, I'd like to lead us in an anonymous, centuries-old prayer. Maybe you would want to make it your prayer this morning:

O Lord, I marvel that you became incarnate,  
 And that you were crucified, dead, and buried.  
 [Even more] the tomb calls forth my adoring wonder,  
 For it is empty, and you are risen.  
 Allow me to die with you that I might rise to new life.  
 For I wish to be as though I were dead to sin and self.  
 Purge me from selfishness, from the fear of man, from the love of approval.  
 Help me to be a holy, happy person.  
 Grant me more and more of the resurrection life:  
 May it rule me, may I walk in its power, strengthened through its [transforming] grip.  
 In the name of Jesus our King. (from *The Valley of Vision*)

## Notes

\*The Fathers of the Church used the butterfly to symbolize the transformation from death to life. Basil the Great (330-379) compared the butterfly to the resurrection of Jesus in a message to doubting Christians in Caesarea: "Think of the transformation of this little animal and recognize in it a clear sign," he wrote. Not surprisingly, Aristotle uses the same Greek word for butterfly (*psyche*) to refer to the soul.