

# A Communal Resurrection

Acts 10:34



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You may recall the tragic earthquake that devastated Haiti in January of 2010. An estimated 3 million people were affected by the quake, and though we cannot know for sure, it is likely that over 220,000 people died from it. It seemed like the whole world waited with bated breath for the rescue of more lives. Morgues were overwhelmed by dead bodies, and eleven days after the earthquake the government of Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, officially called off the search for survivors.

I will never forget watching the news on television one evening. Two weeks had already passed after the earthquake, and search efforts had begun to wane. Still, small groups of individuals sought to find their loved ones buried beneath the rubble. It was one of these desperate efforts that a news cameraman caught on tape, and it happened to be one of the last successful rescues. From beneath layers and layers of rubble, a woman was pulled out alive. The camera caught her thin, collapsed body being carried by a few good men, and as I beheld this most remarkable scene, I was even more astounded by what I heard. She was singing. With a parched, frail voice, the woman came out singing. Leaning in close, I wanted to hear her song. I didn't know what she sang, but I imagined it was a song of thanksgiving, thanksgiving that she lived, that she had been found and not forsaken.

Though hers was not a story of resurrection from death, I remember it each year at Easter. The image of being pulled out of the rubble and out of one's total separation from the living world acts as an Easter icon in my mind. It reminds me of those icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church in its vision of resurrection, in which Jesus, who has been raised up from death has his hands gripping the wrists of Adam and Eve. By their wrists, Jesus pulls them up, wrenching them from a sepulcher. On the ground below him are scattered locks, bars, and bolts - things that bound people in death - all shattered and broken apart. In these icons, Adam and Eve are not alone with Jesus. As representatives of the human race, they are joined by others.

In their study of Easter icons of the Eastern Church, John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan have discovered a pattern in Eastern Orthodox depictions of the resurrection, and they contrast it with what we find in Western iconography. Unlike the Western church, which predominantly depicts Christ as rising triumphantly from death utterly alone, the Eastern Church depicts Christ as rising triumphantly from death, taking all of humanity with him (*The Christian Century*, Vol. 135, No. 3, p. 24). The pattern found in Eastern Orthodox resurrection icons is a powerful reminder of what we celebrate on Easter. We celebrate not only that Christ has been raised up, but that all of humanity is raised up with him.

It is remarkable really. Given all that has happened in the week past, it is unbelievable that Jesus would want to have anything to do with us. Persecuted, betrayed, deserted, and crucified, Jesus suffered the worst of humanity. Innocent as he was, he knew our guilt through and through. And yet, here we are on Sunday, being forgiven by Jesus and because of that, being raised up by him.

Recently, I have come across essays, editorials, and books here and there that are trying to insert a bit of optimism into our pessimistic era. No one is overjoyed with our current state of affairs. The 24-hour news cycle, once an exciting adventure to share what is happening live anywhere in the world 24 hours a day, has become a parade of negative punditry. So, in the midst of this negative marketplace, it is noticeable when a more positive perspective is spun. The latest such perspective I have come across is Harvard Professor Steven Pinker's new book entitled *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. As a student of Ethics, I thought that World War II and the Holocaust had called into question the complete trust once placed in the Enlightenment. After all, reason, science, humanism, and notions of "progress" - all values

that had been born in the cradle of the German Enlightenment - were put in service of moral atrocities on a scale like never before. Therefore, given history's hard lesson and its resulting moderation of our confidence in human reason alone, I was slightly taken aback by Steven Pinker's positive, progressivist assessment of humanism today. Making the case that life, health, wealth, safety, happiness, peace, and scientific knowledge about the environment are all on the rise, he thinks we are justified in being encouraged that humanity is making progress in the third millennium.

In order to make this case, Steven Pinker has to take a long view of history. Good things, you see, aren't built in a day. Unlike bad things, which can happen quickly, good news is not as fitting for a 24-hour news cycle. He points out what John Galtung, a peace researcher, understood: that if a newspaper came out once every fifty years, it would not report half a century of political scandals and blow-by-blow political posturing. It would instead report momentous global changes such as the increase in life expectancy (*Enlightenment Now*, 41).

The kinds of progress that Steven Pinker is talking about are improvements that are measured everywhere in the world, not just in the wealthier, developed nations. In fact, embedded in the Enlightenment idea of progress is a universalism. "Progress," he writes, "consists of deploying knowledge to allow all of humankind to flourish in the same way that each of us seeks to flourish." By universalizing each individual's desire to flourish, humanism, he thinks, can be responsible for raising up humanity. Listen to his confidence in our human ability, grounded solely in our rationality and nothing else, to raise ourselves up:

We penetrate the mysteries of the cosmos, including life and mind. We live longer, suffer less, learn more, get smarter, and enjoy more small pleasures and rich experiences. Fewer of us are killed, assaulted, enslaved, oppressed, or exploited by the others. From a few oases, the territories with peace and prosperity are growing, and could someday encompass the globe. Much suffering remains, and tremendous peril. But ideas on how to reduce them have been voiced, and an infinite number of others are yet to be conceived. We will never have a perfect world, but there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing (453).

What I find troubling in this confident view of human nature is the overwhelming absence of any profound recognition of our sin and what it takes to heal the damage we cause by it. It makes sense that a shallow sense of our sin would be accompanied by an overconfidence in ourselves. It is uplifting and heartening to hear Steven Pinker and others like him speak about the promise of human beings to raise up the quality of life for all humanity. The tragic truth, however, is that there are times when we cannot rely on human nature alone to pave a way forward. There are times, when we are at our worst, that our natural human response would reduce, not raise up, humanity. Human reason, for example, requires justice, and justice more often than not requires getting even, exacting revenge, an eye for an eye, tit for tat. But revenge, we know, does not help humanity to flourish. It only causes more suffering and perpetuates cycles of violence.

Sometimes it takes much more than our human nature to raise up humanity. Jesus knew this. God knew this. Taking the very long view of history, God knew that we, if left to our own devices, would spiral down. So he sent us Christ, who, having suffered at our hands, would still forgive us - all of us - and thereby pull us up by our wrists, that we might be reconciled with him, with God, and with one another. By his forgiveness we are raised and reconciled. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God that we come to know in Jesus Christ.

Friends, this is the Easter message: that Christ forgives all of us and thereby makes it possible for all of us to be raised. It is an astonishing message, perhaps as astonishing to us as it was when Peter first preached it to a Gentile audience. Peter, the apostle whom Jesus had charged with establishing the church, had already been witnessing to Jews in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria. He had been growing the church by converting many Jews to Christianity. Like Jesus himself, Peter was a Jew and just as Jesus had done, Peter preached and taught among fellow Jews. Carrying out Jesus's ministry, Peter grew the Jewish-Christian church. It was not until Peter had a vision in which a voice told him, "What God has made clean you must not call profane," that his mind was jarred open to consider something he had never thought before: "that God

has made no distinction between them and us” (Acts 15:9). This vision enabled Peter to become intimately involved in the first baptism of a Gentile in the history of the world. It enabled him to preach his first sermon to a Gentile audience, which he began with these words: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34).

That God makes no distinctions among peoples was truly astonishing to Peter. It’s necessary here to qualify this point: the idea that God executes justice impartially was not a new discovery to Peter. It is likely that, as a good Jew, Peter would have known that “the Lord your God . . . is not partial and takes no bribe,” as it states in Deuteronomy (10:17). The Hebrew scripture insists that God’s justice may not be bought, that God’s righteousness was not subject to corruption. As far as Peter had been taught, it had always been true that God was impartially just.

What was new for Peter was that God impartially extends grace and forgiveness to any and all who repent. Having always thought that Gentiles were unclean and unrighteous, Peter never even considered the possibility that they could be recipients of God’s grace. That God shows no partiality in offering forgiveness is what astounded Peter.

Repentance and forgiveness - these are the actions that re-order the world. They are the only actions that can truly - from the inside out - end cycles of violence and change the whole course of humanity from spiraling downward to being raised up. Nothing else can suffice. Without forgiveness, no amount of reason, knowledge, science, or artfulness can reconcile and raise all of humanity. And there is nothing natural about it. Forgiveness is God-given, Christ-won, and Spirit-led. That is why we can place our total trust and complete confidence in it. Friends, this is the astonishing truth that was revealed on Easter so many years ago. It is this truth that we, like the first disciples, are called to witness, extending it, without partiality, to all.

Charge and Blessing:

Go from here renewed and strong, knowing that our Lord is risen and that you are risen with him.

Now may the blessing of God go with you this day and forevermore.

Alleluia! Amen.