

Rich Nathan
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The Cross
Matthew 27:45-54

What Happened on the Day Jesus Died?

We just heard John speak about the Summer Harvest Festival that we are going to do at the end of the summer. I want to share a little bit with you about why we do this. The other evening, in our kinship group, I asked the question about what is it that keeps people from sharing their faith with friends, neighbors, co-workers? What is it that holds you back? And folks shared a variety of reasons why they don't share: fear of rejection, I am not sure I know what to say, I feel like I might be invading someone else's privacy by talking about so personal a thing as faith in God, I don't want to come across sounding religious, it is not popular to be a Christian, and on and on.

We went around and folks were being honest about what holds them back from sharing their faith and I said, "Well, I will tell you that I experience all of the things that all of you are sharing, but you know what keeps me, holds me back, if I am going to be really honest? Do you know what holds me back from sharing my faith more often with more people? It is simply a lack of focus."

I spend a large part of my life just not being in touch with, not being sensitive to, or aware of what matters most. I get out of focus. And so when I am sitting down with folks who may not know Jesus, I can be so absorbed with myself and my own work and busyness, my own feelings, finances, and family that the fact that God loves the person that I am talking to, that God paid an enormous price to offer this person salvation, that God has

called me to represent him to this person, that if the person that I am with does not respond to God in faith and repentance, they are going to be cut off from God forever, that I have something really valuable to give—lots of times these ultimate truths are not right in front of me or in front of my face. They are off to the periphery of my vision. And what is in front of me is me looming very large and my immediate circle of relationships and the hundred things that I need to do on my job.

There are lots of reasons why we do Summer Harvest. We certainly here in Vineyard Church of Columbus believe what the apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul tells us that he used all means to save some. All means. You know, I never like it when I hear someone put down a means of reaching people.

“Well, you know, door-to-door work is really stupid.”

“Standing on a street corner, no one should do that.”

Paul said that he used all means to save some. And here in the Vineyard, we have some general means that we use to reach our community. One of them is preaching the gospel at our main worship services. I believe the critical person in a church becoming evangelistic is the senior pastor. Evangelism really flows from the top down. Simply pulling the trigger each week models evangelism for the church. It encourages you to invite friends to church, to include people in your life, so that you would be a bringer and an includer. Another means is training you to share your faith in the work place. Not just trying to bring people in, but sending people out. Conferences like Summer Harvest refocus us on God’s priority of evangelism.

Now, as part of that refocusing on one of our chief priorities here in the Vineyard, evangelism, I am going to start a new series today on the cross. Let me explain how I am going to be approaching the cross. What I want to do is approach it from the circumference

of the circle and then week by week, move in closer and closer to the very heart and meaning of the cross.

I want to start with the shadow, with the signs surrounding the cross today, the part farthest away from the cross. We are going to be looking at the signs surrounding the cross today. Next week we are going to take a step closer and talk about the words spoken from the cross. And then we are going to take a step closer and look at the blood shed at the cross. Finally, we are going to consider the person who died on the cross. We are going to move from the signs around the cross, to the words spoken from the cross, the blood shed at the cross and finally, the person who died on the cross.

In considering the signs surrounding the cross, I have called today's message: "What Happened on the Day Jesus Died?" Let's pray.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to open up to Matthew 27:45-54:

"From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of those standing there heard this, they said, 'He's calling Elijah.' Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. But the rest said, 'Leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.'

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

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

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God.’”

What happened on the day that Jesus died? There were four supernatural signs surrounding his death. First of all, in verse 45, we read of the supernatural darkness that came over the land. “From the sixth hour to the ninth hour darkness came over the land.”

And then in verse 51, “The curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

And then the third sign is a supernatural earthquake that took place. The earth shook and the rocks slipped.

And finally, the raising of some people who had died. “The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs and after Jesus’ resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”

We have supernatural darkness, the tearing of the curtain in the temple, a miraculous earthquake, and finally, the raising from the dead of certain people who had died and were buried in the Jerusalem area. These four things are properly called “signs”—signs. They don’t have meaning in and of themselves, but were used to point to something beyond themselves. A sign is a pointer.

During the renewal that we were experiencing a few years ago, we saw a lot of people have a lot of different physical manifestations. Some people shook. Some people fell. Some people did some other unusual things with their bodies. And there was a lot of excitement and things written about these manifestations as they became known. Books were generated about this.

But the whole purpose of these manifestations was to point to something beyond them. They were signs. And we weren't to get excited about the manifestations or the signs, but what they pointed to. I heard Jack Hayford once say that if we were on vacation and coming home to Philadelphia and we saw a sign on the highway that said, "Philadelphia 78 miles" we wouldn't jump out of the car and rush to hug the sign and say, "Oh, this is so exciting. Look at that sign. 78 miles. Martha, get the kids. Let's take a picture, it's a sign." No, we would be excited because the sign pointed back home.

And so you don't celebrate signs, manifestations, but what they point to which is a deeper truth. And in each of these four signs that we are going to examine, we will find that everyone of them points to something profound that was occurring on the day when Jesus died. There is a deeper meaning here behind the darkness, the tearing of the curtain, the earthquake and the raising of the dead of these saints.

Let's look at the first sign, the darkness that came over the land. Verse 45: "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land."

Now, it is important for you to understand that what we are talking about is a supernatural occurrence that involved the intervention of God. There really is no natural explanation for the darkness that occurred. It isn't the result of an eclipse. We don't know of any eclipses that completely blocked the light out for three hours. The longest solar eclipse lasts for about 6 minutes. It doesn't say that a volcano erupted in the region. Israel is not a volcanic region, in any case.

What we have is also not a gradual dimming of the light in the way that the sun goes down and you have a gradual dimming until you have night. At noon, we had total darkness and the total darkness lasted for three hours. It was a sign.

One of the interesting things about this supernatural darkness is that it is recorded outside of the Bible by an opponent of Christianity in the 2nd century named Celsus who concedes that it did happen. One of the early church fathers, a man by the name of Tertullian, refers in one of his letters to the supernatural darkness and quotes from Roman records and Roman archives, something apart from the Bible, that indeed, this happened on the day that Christ died. So, we have an opponent of Christianity admitting that this happened and an early church father quoting Roman records suggesting that it happened.

We not only have good historical evidence, but this event was prophesied about 700 hundred years before it occurred. I want you to see this prophecy in the book of Amos. Amos 8:9ff—it says, “In that day, declares the sovereign Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad day light. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sack cloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only Son.” Here is the prophetic word about darkness at noon and the mourning for an only Son, namely the only Son of God.

An historic event, a prophesied event. And since this is a sign that points beyond itself, what is the meaning?

Well, the darkness is meant to communicate, I believe, first of all the total and utter absence of God. Remember that in the Bible, God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1:5. Psalm 104:2 says that God wraps himself in light as with a garment. Habakkuk says his brightness was like the light. Psalm 27 says the Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The whole Bible affirms that God is light and is an approachable light. He covers himself with light.

And so, when we read of darkness, we are talking about the absence of God. When he is completely absent, we have total darkness. Think with me about this for a moment. What is the portrait of heaven that we find in the book of Revelation? Revelation 21:23 says concerning the heavenly Jerusalem, “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and the Lamb is its lamp.” Verse 25 says, “On no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there.” Revelation 22:5 says, “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun for the Lord God will give them light.” Heaven is described as a place where there is no night, no darkness, because it is God’s dwelling place. Wherever God is there is light.

And how is hell described? Hell is described as outer darkness. Matthew 8:12: “But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In fact, Jesus used that phrase, “outer darkness,” to describe hell very often. Hell is the place where God isn’t. And people live in hell when they are alienated from God. No blessing, no presence of God, no favor, no love, no comfort, no peace, no hope, no nothing.

What is the darkness meant to communicate? It is meant to communicate the total absence of God. That is why the first thing that Jesus says at the end of this darkness is, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” We are talking about total God forsakenness. Unimaginable suffering. Jesus is not only tortured in body, but he becomes the most wretched being who ever lived in soul. No one ever experienced on earth the complete withdrawal of God the way that Jesus did as he hung on the cross. No matter how bad things get for any human being, no matter how awful, there has been at least a ray of light from God’s face. A ray of love. But not on Jesus when he became the sin bearer. God completely withdrew.

Here is a man who came to earth in a blaze of light. His birth was attended by this great sign in the sky, a star. There was a blaze of light with the angels. And he leaves the earth in total darkness. The darkness points to the absence of God.

And the darkness more fundamentally points to the judgment of God. God's judgment in the Old Testament and New Testament is always attended by darkness. For example, in Amos 5 when Amos talks about the day of the Lord being a day of judgment, he speaks to those Israelites who were longing for the coming of the Lord. Amos 5:18, he says, "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear. As though he entered his house and put his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him." He thinks: "Now I am safe" and then wham! Judgment. The day of the Lord will be darkness, not light, pitch dark without a ray of brightness.

And, of course, as the New Testament portrays the judgment that is coming on the earth, the darkness that is coming on the earth as the second coming of Jesus, Mark says: "In those days following that distress, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

The darkness refers to the judgment of God and part of the judgment of God is to hand us over to our sins and to Satan. We think that we can continue in sin and play with sin, and toy with sin and that everything is going to be okay. It is not going to be okay. And in the Bible, the way that judgment is described is that we are handed over. We are taken captive. We are handed over. We experience, then, the reality of what sin brings. At the cross, as the judgment of God fell on Jesus, all that sin brings fell on Christ. You could say, "All hell broke loose." The cross, at least it appears, the moment when Satan had his triumph as all the demons of hell were arrayed against Jesus.

I don't know if anyone has ever portrayed it better than C.S. Lewis did in the children's story, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." Many of you are familiar with Lewis' story, but he portrays Jesus as a lion named Aslan. And this lion is being put to death by the one who represents Satan, the witch. And in Lewis' portrayal, the witch has Aslan bound and tied up with ropes. And then she says, "Shave him." Here is the way that Lewis communicates "all hell breaking loose." He writes: "Another roar of mean laughter went up from her followers as an ogre with a pair of sheers came forward and squatted down by Aslan's head. Snip, snip, snip went the sheers and masses of curling gold began to fall to the ground. The ogre stood back and the children, watching from their hiding place, could see the face of Aslan looking all small and different without his mane. The enemies also saw the difference. 'Why he is only a great cat after all.' cried one. 'Is that what we were afraid of?' cried another. And they surged around Aslan jeering at him saying things like, 'Puss, puss, poor pussy. How many mice have you caught today? Would you like a saucer of milk, pussems?'

'Muzzle him,' cried the witch. And even now as they worked about his face putting on the muzzle, one bite from his jaw would have cost two or three of them their hands, but Aslan never moved. And this seemed to enrage the rabble. Everyone was at him now. Those who had been afraid to come near even after he was bound began to find their courage. And for a few minutes the two girls could not even see him so thickly was he surrounded by the whole crowd of creatures, kicking him, hitting him, spitting on him, jeering at him."

That is what was going on the day that Christ died. A whole crowd of rabble surrounding him, mocking him, spitting at him, stripping him, cursing him, kicking him.

God delivered him up. The judgment of God fell and all hell exhausted its evil and its fury on Christ.

You know, every one of us has a choice regarding where we want to face judgment for our sins. We can face judgment for our sins at the cross where all the wrath of God was poured out on Christ and all the power of the evil one was directed and exhausted against Christ. We can face judgment for our sins at the cross. Or, if we reject the cross, we can face judgment for our sins at the great white throne of judgment as we stand before Almighty God on the very last day. And everything that I just read will be poured out on us. Human beings really only have two alternatives regarding where they face judgment for their sins: at the cross or before the judgment seat of God.

We have the darkness.

And then we have the torn curtain in the temple. In Matthew 27:51: “At that moment, the moment when Christ died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” They are talking about the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place called the holy of holies.

You need to picture the temple scene in Jesus’ day. There were a number of divisions in keeping people out, from getting to the place where God was. First of all, you had the court of the Gentiles where the Gentiles were allowed to congregate. And then they were walled off and there was a court of the women. And that is where Jewish women were allowed to be. There was another court where Jewish men were allowed to come. And then you got to the temple itself. This was the practice in Jesus’ day. You don’t see any of this laid out in the Old Testament law. This is what the religious people did. They had these series of walls with gates. The court of the Gentiles. The court of women. The court for Jewish men. And then the temple itself had two divisions. One was where the ordinary

priests would go and that was called the holy place. And the holy place was separated by a thickly woven veil, a thickly woven curtain, that covered the most holy place. And no one was allowed into the most holy place except the high priest, the one who was over all the other priests, the high priest was allowed in there one day a year on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year. And only with the shed blood and attended with lots of rituals.

So, we are talking about a progression into this most holy place and the tearing of the veil that covered the most holy place. This was a supernatural occurrence like the darkness that came over the land for three hours. Matthew was communicating that this tearing of the veil occurred by the direct intervention of God. That is why he says that the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. The curtain was not torn by the action of men, starting at the bottom and ripping up. But there was an invisible hand at the top of the curtain, God's hand, and he ripped it down from top to bottom, from heaven to earth.

What is the meaning of this sign? First of all we have the mysteries contained behind the curtain revealed. One of the things that you see in the Old Testament is the hiddenness of God's activity, the concealing, the covering up. There is all this mystery surrounding the most holy place. Only one person could get back there one day a year. No one else could look at the Ark of the Covenant that contained the Ten Commandments or look at the Mercy Seat on top of the Ark. Or look at the pot that contained manna from the wilderness. All of this was behind the veil.

And suddenly you have this ripping. And it is as if the things that were formerly concealed are now made known. The mystery is unveiled and the curtain lifts.

Friends, I think that is what we have in the death of Jesus and the tearing of his flesh. We suddenly are able to look into the very heart of God. When Jesus walked around on earth, deity was veiled in flesh. If you met Jesus, it wasn't immediately apparent that you

were talking to God Almighty come in a human person. It was cloaked like that most holy place was cloaked. It wasn't apparent that in this person we find the mercy seat of God. That in this person we would have the bread of life like the pot of manna in the most holy place. When his flesh was ripped, God revealed himself and uncovered the mystery.

1 Timothy 3 puts it this way: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great. God appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world and was taken up in glory."

We are able to look into the very heart of God at the cross. The tearing of the curtain also means that the Old Testament law was fulfilled. Do you understand that if the curtain was torn and we are able to look into the presence of God, then the Old Testament ritual system is obsolete? There is no need anymore for the high priest. No need for priests at all or a special class of priests. No need for blood and the Day of Atonement and all the attending rituals because now according the book of Hebrews, we have a heavenly high priest, Jesus, the true Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The true mercy seat. Blood shed in the heavenly courts. The tearing of the veil means that the Old Testament ceremonial law has been fulfilled and no longer applies to us.

And ultimately, what the tearing of the veil means is that access is achieved. Access was achieved. It says in Hebrews 10:19: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

Access has been achieved. This is so unbelievable. In the temple, in Jesus' day, the wall that separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple had inscriptions on it, in both Latin and Greek, forbidding Gentiles to enter. In excavations done around the temple mount in 1871 and in 1934, the inscriptions on the walls were found. They read: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

Those who are far off and kept away can now draw near. The barriers have been removed. The walls have been knocked down and the veil has been torn. Anyone who embraces the blood of Jesus as the way that their sins are going to be paid for, anyone who does this can draw near. Look what it says in Hebrews 10:19: "With confidence..." It says we are to have confidence to enter the most holy place. It literally means that we can draw near with freedom, total freedom. Not this one day a year, one person with all these rituals and all these restraints, having to fit through the system. No. Any time, any place, any one can freely come and speak to God with boldness. Boldness means frankness of speech. The degree to which you are free before God and approach him with confidence and frankness of speech is the degree to which you understand what happened when the veil was torn.

I have often illustrated this business of freedom by comparing the attitude that my son has when he comes into our house and his friends have when they trail along with him. Because my son is confident, he is at home in our house. He knows it is his. He walks in the house and the first thing he does, like all teenage boys, is he opens up the refrigerator and stands in front of it. Looks into it like he is watching a movie. It is entertaining, I guess. He often stands there for minutes on end just looking in. His mom and I have to tell him, "Shut the refrigerator if you aren't going to get anything." His friends come in and say,

“Hello, Mr. Nathan.” They don’t throw the refrigerator door open and stand there. There is not that kind of liberty. They have to be told that they can get something to drink.

Children of God, because of the torn curtain, can walk right in, not on our own merit because we are something, but because of what Christ achieved at the cross.

And this torn curtain finally tells me that priesthood is conveyed to all of us. Not one high priest, not a special group of high priests, but every single Christian according to the New Testament becomes a priest and can enter through the veil. One set of values that we hold most dear in the Vineyard is that we are all priests. We don’t need a special person to pray for us for healing. Anyone of you can pray for healing and see God heal. We don’t need a special person who will communicate to us God’s mind at the moment. Sure, some of us are more gifted and less gifted. But all of us can hear from God. That is why every Sunday morning we illustrate our priesthood by inviting forward those who have been trained to pray—lay people in the church, no special grouping. If you communicate with affection and love, understanding how to pray for the sick, come forward. Every Sunday morning hundreds of people who have been trained come forward and pray. We don’t line them up in prayer line with a priest praying. One of the values that we have and hold most dear here is that we are all priests before God. We all can represent people to God and we can all represent God to people.

And then there is the earthquake. Verse 51: “The earth shook and the rocks split.” Israel, of course, was subject to earthquakes. About every hundred years or so there is a significant earthquake in Israel. It is in an earthquake area that is centered in Turkey. The Bible records that some earthquakes happen historically. One during the days of the prophet Amos. There was an earthquake in the last century in Israel that apparently killed about 10,000 people.

But, again, the earthquake in v. 51 was a supernatural thing that happened at the very moment that Christ died. That is a sign. There are in the Bible three great moments in history where God reveals himself through an earthquake. One took place on Mt. Sinai when the law was given. It says in Exodus 19 that Mt. Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it with fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace. The whole mountain trembled violently and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

The earth quaked at Sinai.

And then we see the earthquake at the cross.

And the third great moment in history where there will be an earthquake is at the second coming of Christ when Jesus puts his foot down on the Mount of Olives in Israel. He is coming back and going to step down at the same place he lifted off from the earth. He ascended from the Mount of Olives and he is coming back to the Mount of Olives. He is going to step down back on the earth. Zechariah 14 says, "Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two east to west forming a great valley with half the mountain moving north and half moving south. It will extend to Azel and you will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him. On that day living water will flow from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea in summer and winter. The Lord will be King over the earth."

I believe that what we are seeing here in this earthquake that took place at the cross is Calvary's answer to Mount Sinai. It is the cross' answer to the law. See, the law was given for one reason: to point out to us how sinful we all are. Sin existed before the

commandments were given on Mount Sinai, but the commandments revealed our sin and underlined it. It made us look at it. It is when we are face to face with the commandments of God that we realize how sinful and how far short of God we fall. We resist God all the time, but it is only when we come face to face squarely with the commandments that we see how much we resist God. How hard we really are.

The law was never given as a stepping-stone for us to climb up to heaven. The law was given to cause us to be broken. It was given to condemn us. To cause us to shut our mouths and stop parading our ok-ness. To put it in a different way, the law had a purpose exactly opposite from all the self-help books out on the market today.

“The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success” by Deepak Chopra or “Chicken Soup for the Soul” or “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”—These books are interesting. They provide some help, but they run exactly in the opposite direction from the law of God. Because they all suggest that there are ways for human beings to be OK on their own.

The thing that keeps us from embracing the cross is this lie that we can be OK on our own. The only person that can embrace what Christ did for him or her on the cross is the person who realizes that they are not OK. The person who sees that they really are sick. The person who sees that they really do have a need that they can't meet. The person who realizes that they keep running their head into the wall and they need to try a different way, a different direction, a different road. They need to try God and to go about life God's way. While people continue to think that they are going to find meaning and purpose and satisfaction in their careers or in the accumulation of stuff, they will never get to the cross. It is only when they say, “You know, my house in the suburbs and my two cars, my spouse, my job—none of it has satisfied me. I need something else. I need something more” that they can get what is being offered at the cross.

The earthquake at the cross was God's answer to the earthquake at Mount Sinai. Sinai was there to condemn. The cross is there to save. Sinai is there to break us down and the cross is there to build us up. Sinai was there to curse and the cross was given to bless. Sinai was there to shut our mouths and the cross is given to open our mouths and to fill our mouths with laughter.

The last sign is these folks who were raised. The saints being raised. Verse 52: "Then the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

This is one of the most mysterious things that we read in the New Testament, these people who are raised from the dead at the moment Christ died. There are lots of things that we would like to know that these two verses don't tell us. We would like to know who these people were. All the verse says is that they were many holy people who came back to life. We don't know if they are Old Testament patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; or martyrs; or people who were just recently dead. We are just told that they are holy people. They had some relationship with God. We would like to know what they did in Jerusalem

I believe, though the text doesn't definitively tell us, that they were not in bodies like Jesus', they were merely resuscitated. There is a difference. There are six resuscitations in the Bible. Six people who came back to life after they were dead, but they came back in their own bodies and after a period of time they died again. There is only one person that we know was resurrected—Jesus. He came back in a different body. People didn't recognize him at first. His new resurrected body was indestructible, apparently it could pass through walls. Paul described it as a spiritual body. It is a real body, but it was pervaded by the Spirit.

I believe that because these people were raised from the dead before Christ's resurrection, that they were resuscitated. See, it was Jesus' resurrection that opened up the possibility that others would be resurrected. In fact, I believe that 1 Corinthians 15 teaches that there will be no other resurrections until Christ returns. It is at the trumpet blast at the second coming of Christ that the dead in Christ will be raised imperishable.

So, I think these folks were merely resuscitated and then like Lazarus they died again. What is the meaning? Every one of these signs had a meaning. What is the meaning?

I think the meaning of these dead people being raised is that it ties the cross together with the resurrection as something pointing to the resurrection. The moment Christ died, some dead people get up. And it is absolutely essential that we never think of the cross without thinking immediately of the resurrection. In the New Testament the cross was never preached without preaching the resurrection of Jesus. Look at the speeches in the book of Acts. It was always the cross and the resurrection. The cross and the resurrection. It was never just the cross. See, this last sign was meant to knit the cross and the resurrection so inextricably together that we don't think of them as separated. Jesus dies, the dead rise.

Peter says some thing in Acts 2 like: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross, but God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death. Because it was impossible for death to hold him."

And Paul preached the same thing in Acts 13: "Though they found no ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilot to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But

God raised him from the dead and for many days he was seen by those who traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.”

You say: “Well, what is the problem with not preaching the resurrection along side of the cross?”

The problem is that I think you have a powerless orthodoxy without the resurrection. I think so many believers in Jesus don’t embrace, except maybe on Easter, the resurrection. It is not enough to look back to the cross and know that 2000 years ago your sins are forgiven. We cannot leave Jesus in the pages of a history book, some great figure who lived back then. If we are to live the Christian life, we must lay hold of the power of Christ today. The risen Christ. The overcoming One. And there is a powerlessness in Christians because in this moment they don’t lay hold of the risen Christ.

The fact that the dead are immediately raised at the death of Christ turns the cross around in our minds and communicates to us that what looks like defeat of Christ, but actually turns out to be Christ’s victory. It puts a whole new light on everything that was going on.

I read to you about these hags and witches that were descended on the lion, mocking and shaving and shaming. They only looked like they were winning. But Christ was the real victor. Think about this with me. When Pilate was questioning Jesus and when the Jewish leaders had Jesus on trial and when Jesus stood before Herod and was questioned by Herod, tell me who was on trial? Who was on trial? It only appeared that Jesus was on trial. But it was Pilate that was being judged. It was the Jewish leaders that were being tried. It was the nation that was standing before God.

Everyone thought that they were trying Jesus, but Jesus was trying them. And their attitude toward Jesus was going to make all the difference for centuries. And you don’t get

it, if you don't get the resurrection. It looked like at the cross that power triumphed and lies triumphed and violence triumphed and cruelty triumphed. And sometimes that is the way the world looks. It looks like the people with the big boots can step on the necks of the others and they triumph. But the resurrection turns it all around. Righteousness will triumph, and so will peace making, meekness and purity.

And you know friends, that is true in your life. It seems like the world is triumphing over you. And your sins have triumphed and your addictions have triumphed. And injustice has triumphed and lies against you have triumphed. Your family has triumphed.

And then you look at the cross and you realize that at the cross people were raised from the dead. You realize the crucified one was the Conqueror. At the moment of his greatest weakness, he is already reversing the forces of sin. He was turning the tide at the moment his hands were nailed. He wrestled Satan to the ground. He is absorbing into his body all of the poison of the enemy, taking it all in, drinking the very last drop, conquering evil, conquering the devil and, ultimately, conquering death.

Was it not Christ who said, "Fear not. I am the first, the last and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forever more. I hold the keys of death and hell." And there is the sign, right there at the cross, the dead are being raised. The gates of hell can't hold back the power that is released at the cross. What a Conqueror. Be of good cheer. There is nothing in your life, however it looks like some force has triumphed over you, there is nothing that Christ hasn't conquered. Even death itself.

Let's pray.