

He Was Raised on the Third Day

I Corinthians 15:1-5

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If you have ever had the opportunity to read one of the four Gospel accounts that are found in the bible, you probably noticed something about the way the Gospels are constructed. Matthew and Luke both have infancy narratives. John speaks of the Christ who was with God in the beginning creating the very world in which we live. Mark's Gospel roars out of the gate as John the Baptist appears in the wilderness preaching a baptism for the repentance of sin and by the ninth verse of the first chapter Jesus stands at the Jordan River as a full grown man. Once Jesus is on the scene he sets about his work of preaching and teaching, demonstrating the power of God to bring healing to a broken world. While his ministry is marked by amazing displays of power, there is also the ever present witness that Jesus had a gentle spirit that was marked by compassion and that he poured his heart out to the weak and the vulnerable, the least, the last, and the lost. His life story is captivating. Many followed him, filled with the hope that he might be God's promised Messiah, the Savior of the people of Israel.

On an Easter Sunday when so many gather in worship at churches all over the world, these things I am telling you might sound very familiar. But those who have the opportunity to read one of the four Gospel accounts are often struck by how much time and attention is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. In Matthew Jesus reaches Jerusalem at the beginning of chapter 21. That means eight of the 28 chapters focus on the final week of his life. In Mark it is six chapters out of 16. Luke dedicates nearly six of his 24 chapters to the days in Jerusalem, and in John almost nine of the 21 chapters record events that happened between Palm Sunday and Easter. But, the events of Holy Week do not necessarily overshadow the life that came before. Instead, it seems the events of Holy Week drive us back again and again to the life of Jesus, to his teachings, his miracles, his commitments, indeed, his passions, so that in a real way God keeps pointing to Jesus and saying, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." The events of Holy Week do not overshadow the life of Jesus, but they do tell us of the mighty acts of God that have been the foundation of faith for countless men and women and boys and girls over the last two thousand years.

So when Paul writes the opening verses of I Corinthians 15 he is not intending to overshadow the life of Jesus. But he does want us to know the things that are of utmost importance. He wants us to know the things that have lifted Jesus up, glorified Jesus, so that we would embrace Jesus as our Lord, as our Savior, and follow him with hearts filled with love and devotion. Hear what Paul says on this

Easter morning. “What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Those are nearly the same words we confessed together with the Apostles’ Creed: “He was crucified, dead, and buried...and on the third day he rose again from the dead.” What we did in remembrance of Jesus on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, remembering his suffering and his death, that is of first importance. What we did this morning with little flannel figures telling once again the great good news that the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and Jesus was risen from the dead, that is of first importance.

I stand here today to tell you that the good news is true. He is no longer in the grave. He is risen just as he said. Jesus is risen just as he said. And just like the resurrection of Jesus brought life to those who were with him that first Easter morning, the risen Jesus is among us now, and he continues to bring life. He continues to raise us from the death of sin and the powers of darkness. The resurrection of Jesus is here today to give life to us.

Now if you have ever tried to raise the dead, you will realize what God promises is not an everyday or ordinary task. It is hard to raise people from the dead. I know. I’ve tried. Back in the day I was a youth pastor in California. We were at a pretty large church and we had lots of kids in our youth group. Our senior pastor had the bright idea that I should get our group of high school students and go to a small church way out in the country, nearly 90 minutes away, and help them run their Vacation Bible School. They didn’t have enough workers to do bible school, and so our pastor said get our youth up and take them over to this little town called Esparto and make sure the kids in that town have a Vacation Bible School. The only problem was that to get to Esparto for a 9 am VBS meant we left Sacramento at 7 am. Did I mention the VBS was in the summer? So all of our kids were on vacation, and I’m trying to sell them on how wonderful it would be to get up, meet at church at 7 am, climb into our old, beaten up church bus, and drive 90 minutes so some kids in a small town could have VBS. But youth are amazing. They signed up and we planned and got ready to ride to the rescue for the little town that almost didn’t have bible school. (I’m thinking I should write this up as a Hallmark movie)

The first morning came, all the kids showed up, and we pulled out of the parking lot. We were right on time. As we left the parking lot I heard a kid holler from the back of the bus, “Where’s Kim?” Kim was one of our high school seniors. She had really taken the lead in helping us plan. She recruited all of her friends to come along. She was bright and energetic and enthusiastic...at 7 pm in the evening when we had all of our planning meetings. But here on the first day of VBS, it was

not 7 pm in the evening. It was 7 am in the morning, and there was no Kim to be found on the bus. She was in charge of about half the activities. I didn't know what to do. So I told the bus driver to go by her house and see if we could wake her up. Now isn't that what every high school student wants? To have an old run down church bus park in front of your house on a summer morning at 7 am and honk the horn. "Can Kim come out and play?" There we were, parked in front of her house, the horn was honking, and poor Kim was snoozing away. We were trying to wake up a high school teenager on a summer morning at 7 am. We were trying to raise the dead. And it was tough. It was tough. It's hard to raise people from the dead. I know. I've tried.

I heard a fellow named Bill speak at a pastor's conference. He stood up and told us what he did. He said he drove a bus. Bill had long hair that reached way down his back, he was pretty gruff, and there was an intensity about him that was intimidating. It turned out Bill was a pastor in Bedford Stuyvesant, and in the course of a week his church reached out to 15,000 children from the neighborhood. Bill would drive the bus through the neighborhood and pick up child after child.

He told some stories that were beautiful in their simplicity. These kids were poor, surrounded by a culture of drugs and violence, many without fathers. Pastor Bill's church provided a place of safety and security in a world of turmoil and aggression. Pastor Bill told about helping one small child fix their eye glasses. The child said, "Thanks, no one else would help." Then the child said, "I love you, Pastor Bill." After recounting numerous other encounters like this, Pastor Bill said, "I will always drive the bus." One summer morning our bus was parked out on the street, horn honking, trying to raise the dead. That's what Pastor Bill did every day. He drove his bus into a world of death and despair and he honked the horn, inviting kids to get on the bus. And as kids climbed on board, as they got their glasses fixed. They stepped away from a world of drugs and violence and gangs and so many other challenges. In ways big and small, child after child found out God does raise the dead. God does bring new life. The beauty of the story is the kids didn't just say, "I love you, Pastor Bill." These kids learned about Jesus. They learned Jesus was the one who brought the healing and the hope. These kids learned to say, "I love you, Jesus."

Toward the end of his talk Pastor Bill told a story about a little boy whose mother had left him all alone. The child was all by himself for several days. Then a man came by. He was driving a bus. He picked the child up, and took him to camp. The man who picked the child up was a Christian. The camp was a Christian camp. At the camp, the boy heard about a God whose love was so great for his children that he would send his Son to die, so that nothing could ever separate God and his precious children. The little boy believed the good news and accepted God's gift of

love. By this point, Pastor Bill had tears flowing down his face. Through his tears he said, "I was that little boy. That is why I drive the bus. That is why I will always drive the bus." I guess you understand why Pastor Bill believes that God raises the dead. It happened to him.

The cross of Jesus proves the love of God. God proves his love for us, while we were sinners, while we were stuck in a world that is a broken mess, Christ Jesus died for us. God proves his love on the cross. And God proves his power at the empty tomb. God raises Jesus Christ from the dead, and he puts his stamp of approval on this very Jesus whose kindness and compassion brought healing and hope to people in the most desperate of situations. Because Jesus loves us and rose from the dead, some man picked up a kid who was all alone and brought him to a camp where he learned that Jesus loves him. Now that kid has grown up, and what does he do? He drives a bus and he picks up kids and he tells them Jesus love you. That's pretty sweet isn't it? A little boy looks up at that bus driver and says, "I love you, Pastor Bill." And how sweet is it to know that little boy closes his eyes at night saying, "I love you, Jesus."

I stand before you this morning to say I believe in miracles. I believe God rolls stones away. I believe he did it 2,000 years ago. I believe he does it even now. I believe in miracles. It's hard to raise people from the dead, but God does it. The stone is rolled away and Jesus is alive. And that summer morning, at 7 am, parked out in front of the house of a high school senior, sitting on a bus, honking the horn, God raised the dead. Kim opened the front door. She wiped the sleep out of her eyes. She squinted at us. She must have been wondering, "Is that the church bus? Is it in front of my house? At 7 am? Horn honking and all my friends shouting, 'Come on, let's go?'" Five minutes later Kim was on the bus and we were off to teach Vacation Bible School in Esparto, California, with a population of less than 2,000 people.

We drove in the rickety bus the church owned, a bus with no air conditioning. In the summer the weather there can go well above 100 degrees. We pulled into Esparto and started walking up and down the streets inviting kids to VBS. The first day we drove in, these really tough looking 5th graders were parked in front of the church on their bicycles. They had their arms folded and a scowl on their face. They weren't impressed with us, our bus, or our VBS. If they showed up, it would be just to check us out, not to join in.

Well, the week turned out to be a huge success. The 5th graders, along with just about all the kids in Esparto, not only checked us out, they joined in, and by the end of the week there were hugs and tears and promises to stay in touch. We knew God had blessed our work when on the way out of Esparto on the final day of bible school, those tough 5th graders on their bicycles rode in front of the bus, giving us an escort out of town. Not a bad week's worth of work.

I still get a ringing in my ear when I think of that final bus ride home. We were spent. We were exhausted. But above all else, we were joyful. As I said, there was no air conditioning on the bus, so we had the windows down. Our driver was Jack Douma. This all took place in the 1980s, and if you happened to watch movies in the 1980s you will remember one of the blockbusters starred Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark. It smashed box office records. So they made a sequel, "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom." Our bus driver that summer was Jack Douma, a really nice guy. And God is so good. Jack had the perfect name for driving our bus. We named our bus the Temple of Douma. With a name like that we all sat a little higher in our seats, even though we were still sweating profusely in that 100 degree heat.

So there we were, heading home after our last day of VBS in the little town of Esparto, California. The Temple of Douma was rumbling through the Capay valley at 45 mph when one of the kids shouted out, "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands." Now, one advantage of an old beat up church bus is that you don't have to worry about damaging it. This old bus was battle tested, and it could stand up to some pretty rough wear and tear. So when the kids decided instead of clapping their hands they would bang the roof, I wasn't worried. "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." BOOM! BOOM! The roof was rattling. If you're happy and you know it stomp your feet. Oh, the Temple of Douma was rocking and rolling. If you're happy and you know it shout AMEN! In those precious moments the Temple of Douma became a temple of praise. Does God raise the dead? That busload of high school students believed it. They spent a week sharing the love of God with children, and those children responded with open hearts. Shoot, the rough and tough fifth graders even gave us a bicycle escort out of town.

Does God raise the dead? On that bus was a kid named Monte. When we met Monte as a seventh grader he was really shy and timid. He didn't seem to have much confidence. For several years I couldn't even talk Monte into coming with us on trips like the one to Esparto. But about his junior year in high school, something clicked in Monte, and he started to believe God loved him. He started to believe God had a plan for him. He started to believe God wanted to use him to share his love with others. That year as we were clapping our hands and stomping our feet,

Monte was the leader. I can still his big, beaming smile as we clapped our hands and stomped our feet and shouted Amen. I do believe God raises the dead.

Monte finished high school, got a college degree, and then one day he told me he was going to seminary. He went to seminary, he fell in love with youth work, he took a call to France where he served as a missionary to a post-Christian culture. Later he became the pastor at a church in Oakland, California. He's serving that church now. I wish I could be there this morning when he stands up his pulpit, in his church, and tells his people the great good news. God raises people from the dead, because Jesus is risen from the dead...just as he said.

And that sleepy headed girl named Kim? She stopped by to see us when she was in college. She was attending school in Southern California, and the neighborhood around her school was filled with gangs and drugs and violence. Sure enough she volunteered with a Christian organization that was working with kids in these rough neighborhoods.

The Apostle Paul is telling us today things of first importance. Christ died for our sins. Friends, our sins are forgiven. The slate is wiped clean. We have a new beginning. This is of first importance. Christ Jesus died for our sins. And he really did die. He was buried. But then...but then...cue the earthquake...stand back because the stone is rolling away...put on your sunglasses for the appearance of the angel is like lightning...and lean in...lean in real close to hear the good news...the good news that is of first importance...more important than anything else in this whole wide world...hear the good news. "He is not here. He is risen from the dead...just as he said." Good news like that will start a bus to rockin' and rollin'. You'll start to hear some hands clapping, some feet stomping, and some joyful people shouting, "Amen."

He is risen!

He is risen, indeed!