

“Bad News/Good News”

Introduction: The parents of a ten-year old boy who was failing fifth grade decided to enroll him in a private, Catholic school, thinking the change might be helpful. After the first day, the boy stormed into his house, walked right past his parents, and disappeared into his room, locking the door behind him. Two hours later he emerged for a quick meal and then went straight back to his room until bedtime. This pattern continued for the entire quarter. When the boy received his report card, he brought it home, left it on the kitchen table, and continued to his room, without saying a word.

Upon opening the envelope his parents were thrilled to see an “A” next to what had been their son’s worst subject – Math. Wanting to share his joy they rushed excitedly to his room and asked him how this wonderful grade had happened. Was it the textbook and curriculum? Was it the nuns? Was it the one-on-one peer mentoring? To each question the boy answered “no,” Finally he explained: “From the very first day I knew these folks were serious about math and that I had better buckle down because when I walked into the school lobby on that day, I saw a guy nailed to a plus sign!”

My Catholic friends and I often have a friendly discussion about the different crosses our traditions have. In general, Catholics prefer a crucifix – a cross with Jesus hanging on it – to emphasize the all-important atoning death of Jesus, while Protestants prefer an empty cross to emphasize his finished work and his all-important resurrection.

But the truth of the matter is that we need both. We need both the bad news that took Jesus to the cross, and the good news that declares he is risen. Without the good news the bad news leads to despair. Without the bad news the good news is meaningless. Understand the bad news and the good news together and it will transform your life. Let’s look at each a little more closely, using our text from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth as our guide.

Hear again how he begins:

Now brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. But this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. . . For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...

I. The Bad News – “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...”

A. Paul is writing to this congregation, he explains, because he wants to remind them of something that he calls “of first importance.” Now there is certainly a great deal that is important to us as we go through life, from a safe and loving home, to a good education, to a meaningful job, to caring friendships. But this reminder that Paul wants to share is about something that rises above all of that. It is something, Paul recognized upon reflection, that took place “according to the Scriptures,” which refers not to just a few random verses from the OT, but God’s overall plan, beginning with Abraham, to rescue the whole of creation, a rescue operation that culminated in the one faithful Israelite, Jesus. More specifically, it has to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus upon which our faith is based and through which we are rescued from death and formed to live a new life within the purposes of God.

B. We need this activity of Jesus because of the bad news that is summed up by that powerful little three letter word – sin. Sin, there is no way around it, is bad news. Sin as Paul defines it elsewhere is the falling short of the glory of God (Ro. 3:23). That glory is the image of God in which we’ve been created so that we might reflect and reveal God’s beauty and goodness to the world around us. Sadly, that glory has become highly tarnished. Instead of living for God and reflecting his beauty we’re inclined to live for ourselves, reflecting our selfishness (cf. Isa. 53:6a).

C. Now, already you might be squirming in your pew, not believing that you got all dressed up to come and hear about how sinful you really are! “I’m a pretty good person, thank you very much” you might be thinking. And, I’m sure you are. But think about it. Our whole civilized society is organized around the reality of human sin. A handshake is not enough; we need a signed contract. Doors are not enough; we need a deadbolt. Trying to convince the gate attendant at Fenway Park that you paid for your entry to opening day weeks ago with your Visa card won’t cut it; you need to show some kind of receipt. Laws are not enough; we need police to enforce them. And sometimes not even police are enough; we need to police the police!

D. To work our way around this becoming personal we can try to dumb the word “sin” down by substituting “mistake.” “Mistakes were made,” says the politician, but to those who are listening we know there is more than just a mistake. A mistake is something you make on a math test because you didn’t study hard enough. A mistake happens when Siri says turn right and you keep going straight because you’ve been daydreaming. A mistake is pulling out what you thought was a weed, but your spouse informs you it was a flower.

E. The problem is that the category of “mistake” can’t hold all that we do in our living that brings about brokenness and dying. And none of us can really wriggle out of it when Jesus gently but firmly lays out that in God’s eyes, anger and lust are just as problematic as murder and adultery, and that’s only how the Sermon on the Mount begins! If we’re honest, we’re forced to recognize that our lives are not characterized by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love (Col. 3:12-14).

All of which means that there’s little room for thinking that we’re basically a good person. If we take Jesus seriously, we can’t help but conclude that, yes, we all fall short of the glory of God. We’re toast. The bad news is truly bad.

II. The Good News – “That [Christ] was raised on the third day...and that he appeared...”

A. But the good news is that Jesus loves toast! And, he talks about sin not to condemn us but to heal us and renew the image of God in us, as he pays sin’s penalty of death for us, so that God’s glory may shine again through us (2 Cor. 3:8; Col 3:10). Which means that the good news actually begins on Friday, at the cross, but becomes solidified, confirmed, a reality, if you will, on Sunday with the empty tomb. Paul summarizes the good news it this way: “Christ was raised on the third day . . . and he appeared. . .” Without the resurrection, Jesus would be just another well-meaning but still dead guy and we’d still be stuck in our sins.

As Paul puts it later in the chapter: “And if Christ wasn’t raised, then all you’re doing is wandering about in the dark, lost as ever” (15:17, *The Message*).

B. In that sense, the resurrection is like a receipt, a receipt that says the penalty for our sin has been “paid in full” so we don’t need to wander. Just like we need a receipt that we’ve paid to get into Fenway, we need a receipt that says we’re welcomed into the Kingdom of God and all that God has for us because Jesus has paid our way. That receipt is the resurrection.

C. Well might we ask: Is that receipt valid, or has it been forged in some way? So that his readers can be assured that the resurrection is a valid event, a real receipt, Paul lists a number of individuals, as well as groups of people, to whom the risen Jesus appeared. Many of these were still alive at the time of his writing, so Paul is almost daring, or at least encouraging, his readers to seek these eyewitnesses out and hear of their experience.

D. Paul offered much the same thing when called to testify before a Roman governor named Festus and a king called Agrippa. He spoke about his experience with Jesus and when he got to the part about the death and resurrection of Jesus Festus concluded that Paul must be out of his mind. Paul responds:

I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things. . . I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice because it was not done in a corner (Ac. 26:23-26).

In other words, these events, including the resurrection, were being talked about and could be checked out with eye witnesses. We’re not dealing with metaphor, philosophy, or wishful thinking, but a living, breathing receipt.

E. Significantly, Paul singles out three individuals on whom the resurrection had an enormous impact. The first was Cephas, otherwise known as Peter. He, remember, denied three times ever having known Jesus. The second is James, the brother of Jesus. James, along with the rest of his family, thought their brother Jesus was crazy. The third is Paul, one who actively persecuted the church. To each of these men, men who had badly messed up and probably would rather have not seen Jesus, did the risen Jesus appear. He came not to scold them but to forgive them and heal them, and in that forgiveness and healing to transform them. Peter was transformed from a denier to a powerful proclaimer of the good news. James was transformed from a doubter to the leader of the Jerusalem church. Paul was transformed from a murderer to a missionary. Each became assured that their sin had been paid for and that God’s amazing love was flowing into their lives in order that it flow out into the lives of others.

Wondering if the resurrection was real and powerful and effective? These three men could give brilliant, personal testimony, testimony which reveals that we need both the bad news of our sin and the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We need both a crucifix and an empty cross. For, without the good news, the bad news will leave us in despair. Without the bad news, the good news is meaningless. Understand the bad news and the good news together and the combination may very well transform your life.