

“Co-Laborers in God’s New Creation”

Introduction: In this season of Easter, we’ve begun to look at some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to see what we can glean from these encounters about the impact of the resurrection on our lives. I think these are some of my favorite passages as we see both the gracious way Jesus comes to be with his followers, giving them hope in the midst of their discouragement and despair, and renewed purpose in their calling to be co-laborers with him in God’s new creation.

This period between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension is described by Luke in his chronicle of the development church, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, known as the book of Acts:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. [1:1-3]

It seems like there was a great deal Jesus wanted to communicate to his followers that could only begin to make sense after his death and resurrection, and so he embarked on what had to have been a jammed-packed five-week seminar on the kingdom of God. We might boil it down to an understanding that the resurrection of Jesus is not just the ground of our future hope but of our present work. It’s about the fact that not only will there be life after death; it also signifies that God’s new creation has begun, a new creation in which we have a significant role to play.

As we pursue this, let’s dip back to that room in which many of Jesus’ followers were hiding out on the evening of his resurrection, and then hear a theological reflection on the resurrection of Jesus from the pen of the apostle Paul.

I. Behind Locked Doors

A. These last couple of weeks we’ve been walking with two Christ-followers as they first made their way back to their home in Emmaus. There we saw Jesus make himself known to them as he listened to their stories, shared with them his own, larger story, and then broke bread for them around their table. Their despair had turned to joy and, excited to share their experience with others, they bee-lined it back to Jerusalem. There, they found their way to a room where a group of disciples and friends had gathered and were trying to get a handle on reports that Jesus was indeed alive again. To these reports they added their own. I imagine it must’ve felt a bit like a newsroom into which various newsflashes were pouring and those there were trying to piece it all together.

B. At the same time, along with all the excitement, John reports that there was also an undercurrent of fear in their hearts, so much so that it caused them to lock the doors of the room they were in. On one level, they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. If these powerful men, in concert with the Roman authorities, had arrested Jesus and put him to death, what would stop them from putting into play a kind of sweeping up operation through which his followers would be arrested and crucified as well? They also, perhaps, might have been fearful of the ridicule and scorn that friends

and neighbors could have directed toward them.: “You said this guy was wonderful and powerful, even the Messiah! Well, where’s your hero now?!” And, at an even deeper level, there may have been some fear of Jesus himself, for, if the reports were true, and Jesus was alive, how would he respond to the fact that they had all deserted him, just like he told them they would...and they had assured him that they would not?! Could they even face him?

As many a spiritual writer has observed, it isn’t always comfortable to encounter God in all of his fullness. Consider Isaiah, who declared, when God appeared to him in all of his glory: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips ...” (Isa. 6:5). Or Peter, when Jesus had led him to a miraculous catch of fish: “Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Lk. 5:8). Or John, who met the risen Christ on the island of Patmos: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17). As writer Mark Galli puts it, “Some days the last thing I want is to meet the resurrected, glorious Christ. He just exposes too many flaws.” And yet, when the old paint in our lives is exposed as the bright light of Christ begins to shine, it is often when true healing begins.

C. It is worth pausing and asking, where might fear be present in your life right now? How might fear be causing you to close off your life, to lock the doors of your heart, to what God might want to do there? Maybe it’s a fear about what’s happening in the world? Maybe it’s a fear of how friends or neighbors might respond if they knew you were a Jesus-follower? Maybe it’s a fear of how someone you’ve offended might respond? Maybe it’s fearing that God is somehow going to punish you because both he and you know you haven’t lived a very virtuous life?

D. And so, in that room, in the midst of the excitement and the fear, when everything must’ve become incredibly quiet as people began to notice that Jesus had somehow joined them, don’t miss how gentle Jesus is. He didn’t scold them, he didn’t say “I told you so.” Instead, he said: “Peace be with you.” And then he showed them his scars. We become afraid, I think, when we forget who we serve, when we forget who Jesus is – the Lord of heaven and earth; the firstborn over all creation and the firstborn from the dead – and the lengths he went to bring reconciliation to us (Col. 1:15-20). He has come not to destroy us but to heal us and to bring us peace – well-being – with God, with ourselves, with our neighbor, and with creation. As one devotional writer has put it, Jesus has come to unlock the doors of our hearts with a key, not a hammer. He has the key to our hearts. Where do you need him to say “Peace” or “Be not afraid” to you?

II. Sent out by the Son

A. So Jesus came to restore hope to his followers. He also came to renew their purpose. He does so by repeating his blessing of “Peace be with you,” and then he calls them to extend that peace to others: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” He calls us, in other words, as John Piper has put it, not to be cul-de-sacs of God’s hospitality, the place where it ends, but conduits, the ones through whom it extends. If Jesus is our model for such extending, let’s consider a few of the ways he did this.

1. He came to us as a servant, as one who did not hide or withdraw from the world, or place himself above others, but one who rolled up his sleeves and engaged with all kinds of people in all kinds of ways. May we be so willing to reach across lines that typically divide people in order to bring the love of Christ to all.

2. He came as a translator, or ambassador, from God. That is, what the world learned about God and God's love came through Jesus. As someone once put it, you may be the only Jesus your neighbor will ever encounter. How are you doing at translating his love?

I read about a doctor serving as a medical missionary at a hospital in India. Before going she had no opportunity to learn any of the local dialect, so she worked through an interpreter. Several weeks into her stay it seemed that although she was trying to be loving and kind to the people who came into her care, it didn't seem as if they were responding. About a month later she discovered the problem. While she had been loving, it turns out that her translator was a rude and arrogant fellow who never conveyed her concern for her patients. His life had been a barrier to her message.

We are sent, the apostle Paul reminds the church, as ambassadors and translators, as those who are called to represent the Son as the Son represented the Father. May we not be a barrier.

3. Jesus ministered in both word and in deed; he both cared for the sick and the hungry and spoke about the spiritual healing and feeding that he was bringing. He was, as Tom Wright puts it, both a "symbol maker" through what he did, and a "story teller" through what he said. So, for instance, if you have ever spent some of your vacation time doing some kind of ministry project, or maybe spend regular time working at a homeless shelter, you are being a symbol maker. When others learn about this and want to hear about your experience or why you did this it gives you the opportunity to be a story teller, to explain that you are seeking to love others as Jesus has loved you.

4. Jesus did not come alone but within the context of the trinity. The Father sent him and the Spirit guided and empowered him. Have you ever been given a job that you found overwhelming and wondered how on earth you were going to accomplish it? If you have the courage to ask your employer, you may get an answer along the lines of, "Oh, don't worry, we'll support you. You'll have the full resources of the company behind you."

Thinking about the coming end of my tenure with you here took me back to the night the chairman of the search committee, Jim Sullivan, called my home and informed me that the church would like me to be your pastor. I responded, "yes, absolutely." Then I remember sinking down in bed and thinking, "How in the world am I ever going to do this?!" What then came into my mind was a promise that sustained me then and has many times since. It is a promise that speaks of the "full resources of the company" that stand behind every follower of Jesus:

This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty. [Zech. 4:6]

Besides being another guy having a cool "Z" name, Zerubbabel was the governor put in charge of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem when the exiles began to return around 450 BC. Such rebuilding was to get done, not by his power, but by God's power, through the person of the Holy Spirit.

And so we see Jesus symbolically breathing this Spirit onto his followers, in anticipation of his powerful coming in just a few short weeks at Pentecost, to empower their being sent with the good news of forgiveness in all of its fullness. The same Spirit who accompanied and empowered Zerubbabel, is the same Spirit who accompanied and empowered Jesus, and is the same Spirit who accompanies and empowers us, as we co-labor with the risen Jesus in God's new creation. May he renew our hope, and our purpose.