

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“How did a ragtag band of nobodies from the far edges of the Mediterranean world become such a dominant force in just two and a half centuries” such that the Emperor of the Roman Empire ended “all legal sanctions on the public profession of Christianity”? That’s the question that George Weigel asked in the Wall Street Journal article that came out on Easter weekend. Legal sanctions on Christianity were ended in the year of our Lord 313. It wasn’t too long after that (*Anno Domini* 380) that Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

But what answer does Weigel give to his question? It’s the resurrection of Jesus and what he calls “the Easter Effect.” Today’s text from Luke deals with just that: both the “what” and the “what for” of the resurrection.

The “what” of the resurrection in our text begins with Luke’s telling of the evening of the third day, that first day of the week. That morning had begun with the women at the tomb being told, “*you seek the living among the dead ... He is not here, but has risen*” (Lk 24:5-6) and with Peter running to the tomb to peer inside, finding it just as the women reported. The afternoon found an unrecognized Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus with two of his disciples discussing the events just past and marveling at the women’s reports — confirmed by other disciples that the tomb was empty!

Luke’s retelling of Jesus’ appearance on that evening of the first day of the week mirrors John’s that we heard last Sunday, yet each evangelist has details the other leaves out. Luke adds these: 1) that Jesus came and stood among the disciples as the two Emmaus disciples were telling their account of Jesus’ appearance to them; 2) that the disciples thought that they were seeing a ghost, not the risen Christ; 3) that to correct their faulty thinking and their defective memory, Jesus not only showed them His hands and feet, but also ate before them, showing the disciples that His was a resurrection of the body, for “*a spirit does not have flesh and bones*” as they could see Jesus had, and ghosts surely cannot eat solid food.

The “what” of the resurrection, therefore, is what St. Paul told us on Easter morning: that Jesus rose bodily from the grave on the third day in accordance with the Scripture — or as Peter preached, according to what “*God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets.*”

But the “what for” of the resurrection is not quite as simple. When it comes to Christ’s suffering and death, there are various theories of what it all means. There’s the vicarious satisfaction theory—Francis Pieper says that this one is the only valid one. It’s probably best not to call it a theory, but the teaching of Scripture. It teaches that Christ, coming as true man in the flesh, took on our sin and was punished for it in our stead. His righteousness is then credited to us — we are justified by faith. That the vicarious satisfaction is taught in Scripture can be established with a few verses: “*he*

*was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Is. 53:5); “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6). “Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses” (Rom. 4:24-5); “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18).*

Other theories of the atonement include the *Christus Victor* theory and the moral example theory. I’ll not deal with them today. But they lead me to the question what is Jesus’ resurrection for—the “what for” of the resurrection? The synodical explanation of the catechism says, Christ’s resurrection proves that A) Christ is the Son of God, that B) His doctrine is true, that C) the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice, and that D) Christians, too, will rise to eternal life. There are some good “what for’s”. On Easter I quoted one of our Lutheran theologians who said that Jesus’ “resurrection places the cross in power” (quoted by Voelz—see unpublished manuscript on Mark 16:1-8), and another Lutheran theologian who writes, “as a result of the resurrection of Jesus” “the cross and all that has been accomplished through it” “is endowed with divine authority” (same unpublished manuscript). I liked those, too.

But today, we see another “what for” of the resurrection: to open up the Scriptures. The resurrected Jesus opens up the Scriptures. He did it for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and their hearts burned as He taught them; He did it for the disciples on the evening of His resurrection; He does it for us still. That is, in the light of the resurrection, Scripture now makes sense. The seed of woman and of Abraham, the sacrifice of Isaac, the salvation of Jacob, the scepter in Judah, the deliverance through the Red Sea, the cloud, the tabernacle, the water from the Rock, the bread from heaven—Christ is at the center of all those, and that’s just from the Law of Moses. The prophets and psalms, too, are about Jesus.

Consider for a moment the sacrifice of Isaac. We struggle with that...how could Abraham do that? Of course, it was his faith that steeled him to do it, but faith in what? The writer to the Hebrews tells us: Abraham believed in the resurrection—*“He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb. 11:19).*

And not only the Old Testament Scriptures, but the disciples and we also come to know Jesus’ own words by the resurrection. You remember how Jesus, at the beginning of His ministry, told of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple. It was an accusation brought against Jesus: *“This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days’” (Matt. 26:61).* It was said in mockery at the cross, *“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40).*

The disciples had heard Jesus teach this at the beginning of His ministry, but they thought little more about it, and they certainly didn’t understand it—that is, until the resurrection. And, John records, after Jesus *“was raised from the dead,”* then they

remembered, then they understood, and then “*they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*” (Jn. 2:22).

For the resurrection made all the difference. Because of the resurrection, the cross was no longer just a scandalous instrument of torture and death, its preaching no longer folly. It became the “*power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1 Cor. 1:24). The resurrection proclaims God’s victory in the face of doubt and denial and derision. It assures us that our faith is not in vain—nor this message.

The resurrection is what emboldened cowering disciples to venture forth from their locked room and preach at great peril: “*you denied the Holy and Righteous One, ... you killed the Author of life,*” but “*God raised [Him] from the dead.*” The resurrection emboldened the disciples to endure hardship as they preached as Jesus instructed: “*Repent ... and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out*” — in Jesus’ name. Christ crucified; Christ risen from the dead; repent; I forgive your sins ... starting in Jerusalem but to the end of the earth.

This foolish proclamation also emboldened those who heard it and had come to believe it. The resurrection made all the difference. Weigel wrote in his article: “the early Christians came to understand that the cataclysmic, world-redeeming act that God had promised had taken place at Easter.” The people “had become convinced that they were witnesses to something inexplicable but nonetheless true. Something that gave a superabundance of meaning to life and that erased the fear of death. Something that had to be shared. Something with which to change the world.”

Weigel calls it “the Easter Effect.” The resurrection made all the difference. Persecuted Christians met their death with courage. The resurrection made all the difference. Christians had a story. It may sound “ridiculous, but it’s what happened.” The resurrection made all the difference. It changed the way people lived, the way they acted—toward women, the sick, the needy, the stranger, the imprisoned, the cast out. They even changed their religious ritual, the day they worshiped, calling it not the Sabbath, but the Lord’s Day.

The resurrection made all the difference. It filled the people with joy in this life and hope for eternity. Dear friends, we resurrection people. That joy is ours—not just the “what” but the “what for” of the resurrection. The resurrected Jesus has opened up the Scriptures to us, shown us the Gospel, given us something to share, lighted a path for us to walk. We’re living in a time not unlike those first centuries of the church. Friendship with the world will not make a difference. The resurrection did. Dare to be resurrection people. God grant that this Gospel of the resurrection may so change us that we, like the early Christians, may express our joy and hope as change agents in world.

For Christ is risen! Alleluia!