

The Resurrection Handshake

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Christ is risen! We're gathered to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus: the source of our **life**, the source of our **hope**, the source of our **joy** as believers. It's why we gather, week after week—to *remember* and *re-encounter* this event that reshaped history, and redefines the story of our lives.

The resurrection, I'll admit, is also a holy **puzzle**. Some of you've traveled to Jerusalem. You've been to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of Jesus' burial and arising. And if you've been there, you've experienced what a puzzle that place is. It's an architectural conundrum. A maze of chapels and hallways, domed spaces and hidden balconies. When I visited it, three years ago, I was bewildered by its architectural mishmash. And then I had an *aha!* experience: as a building, it beautifully mirrors the bewildering variety of the Bible's resurrection texts themselves.



It is no mean feat to try to make sense of the four gospel resurrection texts, put side by side. They seem to each go in their own direction. Yet they are all built around the same, unique event. All structured around that same historical singularity that is larger than history itself. The *power* of Jesus' resurrection unleashes a new experience of God's presence and welcome: a door is opened. The *puzzle* of the resurrection outlines how elusive Jesus can be. He appears, disappears, reappears—mighty as a lion, yet ephemeral as a firefly.

The gospels agree that the risen Jesus is elusive. Even so, his brief, occasional appearances were enough to change the hearts of his followers, and enough to get the stories flowing. The disciples tell different stories – stories of fishing; stories of a gardener; stories of a remote hill-top gathering. Each of these offer a different glimpse into this glorious truth: *Christ is risen!* Some speak of forgiveness and reconciliation; some speak of trust beyond sight; some speak of Jesus' continuing Kingdom mission.

This morning, I want to direct our gaze toward another story of the resurrection. Like Jesus himself, this story is elusive. Like Jesus himself, this story only shows up in brief cameos, barely glimpsed as we walk (figuratively speaking) those crooked, crowded, confusing Middle Eastern pathways of words that make up our gospel texts. This story that I want to tell, however, became one of the most important stories of the early church, and I believe it has truth for us today, as we ponder the divine criminal, crucified and risen.

1. Matthew 27: resurrection before the Resurrection?

The first glimpse of this story comes during the crucifixion itself. Matthew, and only Matthew, mentions some remarkable events in his description of Jesus' death: earthquakes, rocks split, tombs opened, saints raised, and strolling the streets of Jerusalem. What are we to make of this? The text isn't difficult—but its interpretation sure is. Some say it's just a naïve legend. (I disagree.) Some may say this is poetic justice, or a prophetic vision. What is remarkable about this description is that it blurs the lines between the death moment and the resurrection moment. Listen again to the central phrase: "*many bodies of the... saints were raised, and after the resurrection they left their tombs and entered into the Holy City*" (27.50).

If we want to ask, in our typical Western scientific mindset—"so what exactly happened here, and in what order?" we will be confounded. And I'm good with that. I think we need a bit more confounding. For what we've got, in the resurrection of Christ, is a new divine dimension of life exploding in on us. It's something larger than history, something larger than the cosmos itself, shoe-horned into one specific, focused moment of life in first century Palestine. Of course it *should* shatter all categories. Of course it *will* confound our minds.

What Matthew is telling us—and this becomes the first clue to the story we're chasing—is that the lines between Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection are *blurred*. Something's going on behind the scenes.

We can be skeptics if we like—but let's at least acknowledge that we're being skeptics, that we are being dutiful disciples of rationalism, of empiricism, of the scientific method. So I want to be skeptical of my skepticism, and listen with open ears and open heart to what Matthew is saying to his ancient audience. Something major is going on behind the scenes, while Jesus hangs dead on the cross, and then buried in the tomb. To all appearances, *Easter is happening even on Good Friday*.

This is the beginning of this other Easter story we're tracking: Something "Eastery" is happening, behind the scenes. It involves the dead—the "saints," they're called, and it's good news for them as much as the Sunday morning surprise at the tomb is good news for the living. And the message I hear from the Word is this: *The resurrection of Jesus is earth-shaking, even world-changing*. Even today, it opens doors that seem impossibly barred. It is stronger than our greatest fears—stronger even than death. *Life is everywhere*.

2. Ephesians 4: journey to "the lower parts"

The next clue that points towards this story is found in Ephesians. Paul is talking about the church, and the way Jesus gives gifts to the church for our mission. And he draws on an ancient biblical song, Psalm 68, about the triumphant **warrior king**.

"Each one of us has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given. As the Scripture says: when he went up on high, he led a host of captives; he gave gifts to people."

Which is a stunning contrast to the image of Jesus as a convicted criminal, a "royal pretender." Paul portrays Jesus as the true King, victorious and generous, returning to his throne in a scene of ascendant triumph. The message of the text is clear: the resurrection provides God's people with the gifts they need to fulfill our divine mission. And then Paul throws in a little aside... about as confounding as Matthew's statement:

“Now, what does “he went up” mean? It must mean that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth. So the one who descended is the One who ascended above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with his presence.” (Eph 4.9-10)

The confounding phrase is “the lower parts of the earth.” Interpretations vary—but most early church readers understood this as something other than “low elevations” (like the Dead Sea, at 1200 ft below sea level).

No, they took it as the *lowest regions of human existence*—the realm of the dead. And this is how this phrase was understood early on. In fact, the Greek term from Ephesians was taken into the Apostles’ Creed: “He descended into the lower regions.” This got translated into Latin, and then into the unfortunate English version: “He descended into hell.” This has often been a troubling statement, a theological stumbling block—some churches have wanted to remove that line from the Apostles’ Creed. People hear the word “hell”, and they generally think “incinerator of the damned.”—*not* what the Apostles’ Creed is meaning to say.

It refers to the “underworld” as the OT regularly describes it: *Sheol*, a place of gloom, a place of waiting. It’s the darkness of death for its denizens; but “even the darkness is not dark for you, O God, and the night is as bright as the day” (Ps 139). The Apostles’ Creed really means (and is now often translated): “he was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended *to the dead*. On the third day he rose again...”

So what does this say to us? That Jesus entered fully into every nook and cranny of human existence. Not just the beautiful parts, the mountain-top experiences, the spiritual highs, the pristine moments of worship. Jesus entered the *depths*, the dank basements of our lives. Those places full of secrets, full of stuff we’d rather ignore, full of pain, full of death. Even today, Jesus is ready and willing to clean out the deepest basement, the darkest closet of our lives. And as he comes back up, he brings out *gifts*, and transforms the world into a place of generosity and treasure. *Grace is everywhere.*

3. 1Peter: preaching in prison

To summarize the first two cameo appearances of this story: We discover Jesus doing something “Easterly” even before his own resurrection. And we discover Jesus descending to the world’s basement. A third elusive hint arises in a statement from 1Peter. In chapter 3, we read:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit, in which he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah... (1Pet 3.18-20a)

I will not pretend that this is an easy text for any interpreter. At one level it doesn’t even jive with Mt’s statements: these are “disobedient spirits,” while Matthew talks about the “saints.” But it probably makes more sense to those who think like the Old Testament, than it does for us. And it *is* certainly part of the Easter story. What this verse said to the early Church builds on the other statements: that Jesus was up to something while he was dead and buried; that Jesus descended to the world’s lowest parts. This verse of Peter’s adds two elements: first,

it **intensifies the image** of the underworld as a prison, and second, it **outlines the activity** of Jesus in this dungeon.

As we saw on Good Friday: Jesus makes the prison a key venue of his ministry: he starts his ministry with the statement “The Spirit has anointed me...to proclaim liberty to the captive.” Jesus makes the prison a key venue for his ministry, because prison is a hopeless place. From an OT perspective, prison is a fitting image for the underworld, the grave: without hope, without a future, with no ability to open the door from the inside.

Jesus speaks good news to the spirits in prison, news of hope, words of new life. Do they “deserve” it? No—of course not; otherwise it’s not grace. It’s *good* news—unexpected, undeserved, and all the more life-giving because of it. This verse says the Easter message is good news that goes everywhere—even to the dankest hellhole of the cosmos.

4. *Telling the story*

To recap... these are the gospel truths we are discovering this Easter morning:

- ✘ From Matthew: Christ is risen with earth-shattering power—nothing that he wants open will remain closed. *Life is everywhere.*
- ✘ From Ephesians: Christ is risen with a mission to clean out the darkest basement of our lives. *Grace is everywhere.*
- ✘ From 1Peter: Christ is risen to bring good news to the captives. *Rescue is everywhere.*

These verses, and many others, inspired the first generations of Christians, to ponder the deeper implications of the resurrection. Our elders in Christ, the early Church—they took these truths, and fashioned it into a story. Here’s an example of what it sounded like a few centuries later. We might call it “devotional fiction,” but it spread widely as an integral part of the gospel.

In one 3rd century version, Joseph of Arimathea is speaking, post resurrection, with the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. Joseph is debating the marvels of Jesus’ rising, including this event of the opening of the tombs of the saints. He calls attention to two tombs in particular, the two sons of old Simeon, that elder saint who had blessed the infant Jesus. Simeon and his two sons have long died. But the two sons were raised from the dead—they are back in Arimathea, “dwelling together in prayer, yet they speak with no man, but are silent as dead men.” And while they don’t speak, they *are* persuaded to write of their experiences.

They write of sitting in darkness, with all their ancestors in the gloomy realm of the dead. “A light began to shine afar off” they said, “and our father Simeon spoke again his prophecy: *‘Now my eyes have seen their salvation... a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel.’*” And then John the Baptist shows up, the Forerunner of the Messiah, to announce the approach of the victorious King. Meanwhile, Satan and Hades (Death personified) start to talk, and to argue and bicker. Satan is salivating, he’s so excited—he’s about to swallow his enemy whole! Hades is not so sure about this—this is the same Man that stole from him already, raising Lazarus and several others from the power of Hades.

As they are arguing, “suddenly there came a voice as of thunder” from outside the fortress of Hades: *“Open your gates, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of Glory*

will come in!” The Lord himself breaks down the doors, and enters in to rescue the captives. “Then the King of Glory trampled upon death, bound Satan and delivered him to the power of Hades, and shining gloriously, drew Adam to himself.” He extends his hand, reaching down first to Adam and then to Eve, the parents of our race, and in the brightness of his resurrection glory, Jesus draws them up and leads them out of captivity. After them follows an unnumbered host of the righteous, the prophets and patriarchs, the fathers and mothers of the faith following in triumph. As they parade out through the broken down gates of Hades, David picks up his harp and begins to sing:

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand, his holy arm, has achieved the victory.*

There’s one final scene in the story: triumphant Jesus leads the host of captives out through the gates of Hades and on to Paradise, to the verdant fields of the Garden of Eden, which has been hidden in the spirit-realm, waiting to be revealed in the last days. Jesus leads them past the angel who has barred the way since our parents were first expelled. The host arrives, and discovers two men there, waiting for them: Enoch, and Elijah. And there is a third, standing with them: who looks much rougher, “vile” even, and he has the marks of a cross on his shoulders... It is, of course, the repentant thief, Dysmas, “Mr Sunset,” ready to welcome all the rest into a new and eternal Day.

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This is the Easter story as it took root in the ancient church. In the Middle Ages, it was called “the harrowing of Hell” – the plundering of the underworldly prison, the overturning of the realm of the dead, the rescue of the captives. This is the story of the conquering King who leaves no stone unturned to redeem his Beloved, no hellhole unexplored to rescue his Creation. Every time this Easter story is told, every time this Easter image is painted in sacred art, we see the **resurrection handshake**—the rescuing hand of Jesus, reaching out to Adam and Eve, pulling them from their tombs, leading them back into Paradise, opening up the way for all. For *Christ is risen*, and in his hour of triumph he extends to each and every one of us his resurrection handshake.

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Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, took this story and wrote his own version as a personal testimony. It's among my most favourite of hymn verses. In these lyrics, I hear the words of Lazarus, I hear the words of Matthew's risen saints, I see the powerful image of the Harrowing of Hell:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin, and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!

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Jesus *came*, and Jesus *comes*, to set the prisoners free. In his death, he joins the criminals of the world, to experience the worst our world could throw at him. He **bore our sins** in his body on the cross—sins of **commission**, sins of **omission**. And today, on this holy day of celebration, we see that he indeed *opens prison doors and sets the captives free*. This is the day of the *resurrection handshake*.

There's only one thing left. We've been given this gift of welcome so that we can pass it on. That is how we live in the glorious light of resurrection. By extending the same life-giving *hope*, the same offer of *welcome*, the same transforming *fellowship* of Christ to others. This is our *mission*, this is our *spiritual lifeblood*: to pass on the resurrection gifts that we have received.

As you do this, here in Edmonton and wherever your path takes you, I would invite you, please don't forget those who are literally the prisoners of our land. There's a great need for resurrection handshakes in our courts and youth justice centres, in our prisons and remand centres, in the dark and oppressive basements of our national house.

Jesus came to set the prisoners free. May we always follow close in his footsteps!