

“The God of New Creation” (part 2)

Introduction: Last week, as I was running out on you to catch a plane to Chicago, you might remember that I tossed “point one” at you from this morning’s text. So just to take us back for a moment, we’re noticing that Jesus did not immediately head back “home” to heaven after the resurrection, but that he hung around for forty days, so that, as Luke reveals in Acts, he could continue teaching about his favorite subject, the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), and presumably, what the resurrection had to do with the kingdom having come “near,” as Jesus put it. Speaking of one point sermons, that’s really all Jesus had! “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Ma. 4:17) were his recorded first public words, and he never really ventured from this big idea. Everything else he taught and did was a way to reveal the inauguration and presence of God’s reign.

In particular, we’re noticing that, as we said on Easter Sunday, the resurrection was not just to be a privatized spiritual experience for the followers of Jesus but was to usher in a whole new way of being and thinking and doing. Last week we considered the peace, or pardon that Jesus brings which begins in us a whole new way of being, living from God’s love instead of for it. Today, as we move on in our text from Luke, we want to see the new creation perspective that Jesus reveals, as well as the new creation program he has given his followers to carry out. All of this helps us to think about what it means to follow Jesus and live in the wake of the fact that, as we have been declaring to open our worship in this Easter season: “The Lord is risen and reigns over all!”

I. New Creation Perspective: “Look...touch...”

A. So Jesus, remember, had appeared to his followers in a room in Jerusalem after having coming alongside a couple of them as they were on the road back to their home in Emmaus. Running back to Jerusalem, the two reported on their experience to the others. While they were doing this, suddenly, Jesus was right there in the midst of them all. They were startled at his appearance, including the fact that somehow, he looked a bit different to them. In fact, as Luke describes it, they thought they were seeing a ghost (or “spirit”).

B. Jesus responded by showing them his body. “Look at my hands and my feet...Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have.” As we observe his post-resurrection appearances, it is evident that this wasn’t the only time his followers had difficulty recognizing him. The main reason seems to be that Jesus was like, yet somehow unlike, the way he was before. On the one hand, Jesus could appear and disappear at will, even entering rooms where the door was locked, and then disappearing from sight. On the other hand, he still had a physical body, one that was even hungry for fresh seafood!

C. So what does all this reveal? The perspective this resurrection appearance brings is two-fold.

1. First, in some way, in the resurrection of Jesus, God’s new creation has begun. Jesus is the first of a great harvest to come, the “firstborn from among the dead” as the NT writers declare (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). There is certainly a whole lot more newness to come, but in the risen Jesus, God’s new creation has begun.

2. This means, secondly, that our life in God’s new creation will not consist of a disembodied state where we simply float around forever as saved souls. True, when we die we will certainly

exist for a time as a disembodied soul, as we leave our bodies in the ground to decay. That is life after death. But that disembodied state will not last forever. As we see in Jesus, there is a physical existence that awaits us. Resurrection means a new embodied life! It is “life after life after death,” as N.T. Wright is fond of saying. We will receive a resurrection body for this life after life after death, for the new creation that God will bring into existence.

D. What will this body be like? If Jesus is our model, it will be somewhat like our old body but (thankfully!) very unlike it as well. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, in words I always read while standing with folks at a gravesite, it will be a body that is imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual, meaning one that is well-suited to live and work in God’s new creation. To think of it another way, if, as Revelation 21 pictures, God’s new creation, the “new heaven and new earth” will involve the new Jerusalem coming from heaven to join in with the earth, then what we will experience in the new creation will be the heavenly and earthly dimensions of reality being fused together in the ultimate answer to the prayer, “thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” So, as the beginning of that new creation, it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus’ resurrection body seemed to his followers to be something like the old but something quite unlike it as well, at “home” in both dimensions..

E. All of this should greatly impact our thinking today.

1. For one, it means that to God, the physical is important. In Jesus, God chose to walk among us in a body and to be resurrected in a body. Therefore, how we treat and care for the physical, from the gift of the earth to our own bodies, matters because the physical matters to God. What we do that is of the kingdom of God, in the present, in the body, here in this earthly realm, by the power of the Spirit, will not be wasted but will be completed when and as God’s new creation is completed.

2. For another, it shows that the God of new creation does not plan to abandon the world, or that on its own, the world will simply evolve one day into something better. Instead, the resurrection of the body reveals through Jesus, God has entered into our earthly realm to redeem and renew the world that he created. So, our call is not to escape from the world as quickly as possible, but to minister to it, to join in with God’s redemption and renewal program. This new creation program is what Jesus goes on to speak about next.

II. New Creation Program: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached. . .”

A. He puts it like this: “The Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . .” In a nutshell, this is an outline of the mission of the church. It is both a this-worldly, and an other-worldly agenda. It might help as we think about this to begin with the understanding that repentance is not a negative word. Too often, perhaps, we think of it as a threat, and a command to shape up! But actually, is it an invitation and a call to change course. It is an invitation to an interactive and intimate life with God. The word repent means “to turn” and what Jesus has in mind is when we turn from going our own way to going God’s way, we enter into the saving embrace of God’s love and into the real life of kingdom living. Remember Jesus’ favorite one-point sermon. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Ma. 4:17). It means, “change the way you have been living and enter into what God is doing.”

B. Such recognition of where we have gotten off track – confession of our sin – and an accompanying willingness to change – to repent – leads to forgiveness, and a new start. As Paul put it to the Colossians, “You were dead because of your sins . . . Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins” (Col. 2:13, NLT). Such forgiveness leads us into the eternal

resurrection life that we have been talking about. In that sense, repentance and forgiveness are other-worldly. But, repentance and forgiveness also bring us within the realm of what God, in Christ, in the budding of the new creation, is doing, right here and right now. So, they also have a significant this-worldly aspect.

C. Just a cursory glance at the news is enough to reveal how significant this could be. Our world is full of disputes, large and small, from the Middle East to Africa to Washington D.C. to the homes in which we live. From nation states, to political parties, to tribal alliances, to marriages and families, everyone in some way is vying for recognition or supremacy, and each one can tell a story of how they have been wronged by another and have some sort of redress or revenge coming to them. But if we're honest, anyone who has looked closely at the complicated history and workings of the peoples in the Middle East, or the tribes in Africa, or the politicians in D.C., or the families on Boston's North Shore, has to admit that it is nearly impossible to give an account of a conflict in which one side is responsible for all the wrong while the other side is completely in the right. The only way to really go forward with any hope of progress and newness of life can be summed up in two words: repentance and forgiveness.

D. Perhaps this sounds impractical! But imagine the conflicts that would be healed if each party could admit where it had been wrong, and at the same time, release its perceived right to revenge. There could be no greater commission, no higher calling, than to proclaim in both word and deed this reality. There could be no harder commission or calling as well, and so Jesus adds one more very significant promise: "See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Jesus is speaking of the gift and person of the Holy Spirit, who we'll talk more about on the day of Pentecost. For now, we just always need to remember that what Jesus calls us to do he also empowers us to do. A God-sized vision comes with a God-sized power.

The resurrection brings us a new way of being – living from God's love instead of for it. It brings us a new way of thinking – the perspective of being a part of God's new creation. And it brings us a new way of doing – proclaiming and living out repentance and forgiveness in the power of the Spirit.