

Where Do We Go After Easter? Christ and Us Colossians 1:15-23

Where do we go after Easter? After the eggs have all been collected and the candy has all been eaten (or thrown out) and the vacation is over? Where do we go after we've celebrated the birth of Christ from the dead and that even no longer seems significant? Every Easter—every holiday—we go through the same scenario: the after-effects, the seeming let-down. But Easter's effects don't evaporate once the holiday itself is over. In fact, it wasn't until after Easter was complete that the world and human destiny was transformed forever. I want to look at a passage that has really caught my attention over the past few weeks. As a matter of fact, in my morning devotions, I've found myself going back to this chapter in the Bible over and over again rather than going on to the next chapter. Let's look together at Colossians 1, beginning in verse 15.

Have you ever looked at a picture and, at first glance it looks like one thing, but then as you study it closer, you realize that the picture actually depicts something entirely different? This is the effect that I think Col. 1:15-23 may have on us this morning. It's a passage that brings a new perspective on reality to us, one which conflicts with our commonly perceived view of life, our world, and our state in relation to God. As we read it, pay close attention to the references to God, to Christ, and to us--people.

First, Christ is described as the very embodiment of God's being. We've just celebrated Easter--the resurrection of Christ from the dead. That day manifested who Christ truly was. And this passage expresses truly the reality of Christ's person. Not just a great teacher, not a miracle worker, not even a holy person with some traces of divinity in him--like a mythical Hercules or super-hero. He is God in human form, the very embodiment of the one true, all-powerful God.

I want you to pay real close attention to this passage, and I want you to consider Christ as a man as you do. We're all used to hearing passages regarding the greatness of people in different fields, whether in business, politics, military, education, or entertainment. A certain person's accomplishments are touted as being especially noteworthy and the person is hailed as someone to be admired. I don't care who else you're talking about, no one else can touch the biography of Jesus Christ. This passage portrays the most remarkable figure in human history.

This passage also details the intersection of deity and humanity, the crossroads between God and humankind. It shows to us how important it is that we preach Christ as the only way to know God. New York City might constantly exist as a place whether I go there or not. But if a plane were landing in Long Beach or John Wayne airport this afternoon that would be heading for New York, if I failed to get on that plane, I wouldn't be going to New York City. The city would continue to exist whether I got there or not, but I would miss my chance to see it. We can talk about God in general terms all we like, and the world is often very comfortable speaking about God in these very generic, vague terms, in a way which is comfortable to all and offensive to no one. But God has chosen to reveal himself ultimately—to invade our world—in the person of Jesus of

Nazareth. You can deny that he is a man that is anything more remarkable than just a respectable teacher of morality and a doer of good deeds. But in doing so, you will be denying the fullest revelation that God has offered of himself, and thus be rejecting God himself.

It's so ironic that Christ, in his human person, chose to live in such a humble fashion. He was far from the kind of person that people would naturally admire; his occupation and station in life were not the type that would demand respect. In human terms, there would have been no reason for people to have been drawn to him as anyone special.

Yet can you imagine a more exalted way to describe who Christ is and what he has done? Through him and for him are created all things. He is the cause and the pinnacle of all existence. He IS reality itself. All things hinge upon his will. Without him things are not. He defines the functioning of the universe. This isn't exaggerated language; this is the best way that Paul could think of to describe the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, although it's far short of truly describing his full majesty.

Think of the common conception of Jesus of Nazareth by most people today. It probably isn't that far off from the typical view of Jesus in the days when he walked the world. Most people think of him as a meek and benign do-gooder, a simple if not a silly teacher of good things. Have you ever had the experience of being around someone who appeared as someone ordinary, someone insignificant, only to learn later that person was actually a well-known celebrity or a powerful political figure? That experience is like what Jesus' ministry was like in miniature form: he was God in disguise. And everything that God is, Jesus is. Rather than being an irrelevant do-gooder, he was the most relevant person who ever lived. Rather than being unimportant, he was the most important person who ever lived. Rather than being an outsider to the world, he was the reason the world exists.

Next we come to us. Think of the common conceptions we have of ourselves: we're basically good people who just face unfortunate circumstances, or who suffer injustices and God is to blame for our problems, while we're the innocent bystanders of the evil in the world. The Bible has none of this! The Bible's rendition of the problems of people is that we are the cause rather than the victims of the world's evil because we've declared war on God.

Think of the man who alienates himself from his family and friends and society through his crimes and lifestyle. From that position of alienation he feels estranged and lonely, yet what has to haunt him the most is the knowledge that he himself put himself there; he is the cause rather than the victim. On a hot summer day in August of 2003, UCI professor Mark Warschauer left his 10-month old son in a hot car unattended for more than three hours, causing the death of the infant. The grieving father was shown weeks later clutching the picture of his beloved son manifesting excruciating sorrow as he suffered the loss for his son—a loss which he had himself caused.

That's the position that we have in respect to Jesus Christ. He's the one who has

ultimate power and who has ultimately done right. And we are the ones who were wallowing in the filth of our own self-centered lifestyle. The expectation is that he would finally lash out on us all of his anger. Yet the reason that he came was to make us better, to make us clean, to make us whole.

But here's the good news and the irony of the whole situation. Rather than awaiting the final day of vindication against the wretched rebels, the rejected King of creation actually intended to bring them back in reconciliation. Where do we stand after Easter? After we've condemned the Prince of the cosmos, the Ruler of the created world, after the world that we represent rejected God's ultimate offer of reconciliation and left him to die on a tree? We're left on the other side of the cross. Peace has been made, and rather than the king demanding that we pay the terms, he's made the payment and we receive the prize.

Here's how this transaction looks in daily life. A few weeks ago I met with a man who is living in an openly gay relationship, and who's dying of Aids. As I sat down to talk with this man, the first words out of his mouth were (and I quote), "Well, I'm scared that I'm going to hell because I'm gay." I have to tell you that I don't eagerly jump into conversations like that because that's my favorite topic. But as I went on to talk with this man, I was very intentional about stressing Jesus Christ to this man, and not the lifestyle of his sin. I hinted that there are things that we do that are displeasing to God, but that Jesus Christ is able to reconcile us completely to God because of what he has done for us on the cross. Was this man's lifestyle offensive to God? Yes. Is my sin offensive to God? Yes, without question. But if I'm willing to believe that Jesus Christ, after he had brought forth the created order by his expressed will, was able to stoop down and become a cockroach—the closest comparison for what he did become from his position—then I must be willing to believe that no sin, no lifestyle will prevent any person from transitioning from war with his Creator to full fellowship with his Savior.

Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the supreme Monarch of the created order, the perfectly defined image of the invisible God showed up in our world—not to show off, to flex his muscles, or to intimidate us—but to save sinners. If that is what his mission was, then I had better get out of his way when he wants to draw someone to himself. If he is able to reach across heaven and earth to get ahold of me, then he's definitely able to reach across my cultural or language or lifestyle barrier to reach someone that I don't deem is very lovable. Does a change in lifestyle need to occur? Probably. But I don't need to make that a precondition. If the incarnation can occur, then a change in lifestyle by someone who has lived a pretty heinous life should be no problem.

And how much greater the assurance that I can be called a child of God, no matter what I've done or who I am. What was my state before coming to the knowledge of God? Where would I be if Christ had not invaded my world? Look at v. 21. I was alienated, estranged, at war with God.

I think that's why the most glorious thing to behold is to watch someone transformed radically as the result of God's work, to witness someone develop from a disgusting

sinner into a radiant witness for God's love and holiness. It manifests Colossians 1:15-22 beautifully as it contrasts human sinfulness and divine holiness and love in a marvelous way. Jesus Christ, the God-Man, came into the world not to show off his muscles (that's one reason why it's so ridiculous when we try and show off the little talents that we have: if there was anyone who had a right to brag about his resume, it was Jesus, and he did the opposite), but to save sinners—those who were estranged from everything right, and who were willing to acknowledge their unrightness.

The one imperative that is given to us—the one small participation that we have in this deal in which Christ has basically done everything—is to remain in the faith that allows us to enter into covenant with the Lord. Trust Christ, that's it. No other savior, no other hope, no other Lord, no other way. As I sit and talk with people about their lives as they contemplate the thought of their lives coming to an end, and facing death, mortality, and judgment, it saddens me to hear people so often express that their primary concern is that they have lived a good life. In other words, the focus is upon them, their goodness, their rightness, their character. If anything, Colossians 1:1-23 should turn that kind of an attitude out the window. It isn't about us at all. We're the enemies, the rebels. Do we want to brag about that? Jesus Christ died to suffer my penalty and rose again to conquer death and alienation from God. That's the only hope you and I need to hold onto after Easter. Jesus Christ is the hero. My works, my accomplishments equal exactly zero. I had a professor in college who taught theology classes. He used to say, "God did his part in salvation and I did my part: I did the sinning; God did the saving."

I close with this comment. This last week we attended a gathering of pastors and missionaries called the District Council of the Assemblies of God. I spoke with missionaries Sopheak and Amy, missionaries to Cambodia. I could have asked them what sets Christianity apart from the other religions native to Cambodia. What sets me apart from my coworkers, from the guy who cuts me off on the freeway? Is it that I'm more noble than they are? No, some days I don't feel so noble (ask my family). The only hope I have is that I have a Savior who entered my world as God in-flesh-enated, who revealed God perfectly, who died the death of my filth, who rose again to conquer death completely. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground—especially my supposed righteousness—is sinking sand.