

2020-04-12 Easter: Resurrection, Salvation, and Liberation

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April 12, 2020

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

“Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

These words are from the Apostle Paul, writing to a beloved church in a beloved city, and in this letter, Paul is going to have some hard words for people who had originally accepted the gospel message, but had almost immediately gotten off track, and this is the first thing he says to them to remind them where they need to go to get back on track. “[Jesus Christ] gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age.” It's a reminder for them of what their faith was actually about, and on this Easter Sunday, I wonder if we might benefit from a reminder of what our faith is actually about.

All across the country and around the world right now, pastors are preaching about how the resurrection of Jesus is your source of salvation from your sin. And the fancy religious word for how we're saved from our sins by Jesus's death and resurrection is the word *atonement*—how we are saved from the consequences of our sin, how our sin is atoned for—atonement. And it's certainly not wrong to preach about that on Easter. I have done it. Done it before, probably do it again, I might even do some of it here, today. But here's an interesting fact: I'm not sure that that is exactly a perfect match with the original meaning of Easter, which is to say, how the original Christians must have understood the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus.

I often talk about how the roots of Christianity are in Judaism, and there are so many things about our faith that we will understand better if we look to those roots and study them. And something very interesting about Judaism is that Judaism has a holiday—a holy day—that focuses on atonement. Can you guess what they call that day? It's called the Day of Atonement; it's Yom Kippur; it's a major Jewish holiday. Now, the events of Holy Weekend—of Good Friday and Easter, the crucifixion and the resurrection—all of those events take place around the time

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of a major Jewish holiday, but it's not Yom Kippur, it's not the Day of Atonement. Holy Weekend, Easter, corresponds with Passover.

Now, you heard portions of Exodus 13 read earlier, and you may know the story of how God's people were enslaved in Egypt by the evils of human empire, by power and greed and obscene wealth being used to harm and oppress an entire class of people. And Passover, as a Jewish holiday, as I understand it, celebrates not so much the forgiveness of the community's sins, which is what's focused on in the Day of Atonement, but rather, Passover focuses on the deliverance of the people from Egypt. So, Passover is about liberation. It's about deliverance and redemption; it's about being freed from oppression and freed from captivity.

And so, the culmination of the Gospel story is situated to coincide not with a holiday about sin but with a holiday about liberation and freedom. And I wonder: How might we think of Easter differently if we acknowledge that timing? If we looked, in other words, for a Passover type of meaning at Easter. See, we spend so much time on Easter talking about the forgiveness of sins and I wonder if we should spend more time on Easter talking about liberation and deliverance and redemption, about freedom from captivity.

Now, I recognize that might be a shift in focus from what you are accustomed to thinking about when it comes to the salvation that we receive on Easter. Now, I'm certainly not asking anybody to discard, to throw away their prior understanding of the miracle of Easter, so instead maybe I can suggest that you add on to that understanding a little bit. Maybe I could suggest that you turn that understanding a little bit, the way you might turn a gemstone to catch the light in different ways, so that you can add to and deepen your understanding of what's happening on Easter, so that we can maybe begin to think about Easter as something that's much bigger than ourselves.

So, even just a change in our language might do the trick. Let me tell you what I mean. What if, instead of saying that Jesus "saves us" from our sins, we were to say that Jesus "delivers us" from our sins, or that Jesus "liberates us" from our sins. Now, those words may not seem all that different to you, but I think it really does matter. I really think it might enrich our faith to broaden our vocabulary in that way. So what might that mean?

If we were to think about the idea of Jesus liberating us from sin, if we were to think about Easter in a Passover kind of way, I think we could imagine that in at least two different ways. So, I'll give you first the one that you're probably most familiar with. If Jesus liberates us from sin, the first thing you might think about is Jesus liberating you from your *own* sin. Now, preachers are very fond of saying, "This is unpopular! Nobody wants to be told they're a sinner; nobody wants to hear about the ways that they've done wrong." But I have to say, in my own

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experience, talking about it in this first way is a lot less likely to generate an angry e-mail from somebody than talking about it the next way that I'll get to in a minute, so buckle up.

But, this idea that Jesus saves us—meaning he liberates us, he frees us from our own sin—you don't need some complex biblical definition to understand this. Almost everybody in culture has this kind of vague understanding of “the seven deadly sins,” right? Which of the seven deadly sins could you remember? You probably can't remember all seven, but you might come up with, like, greed, or lust, or gluttony, or laziness, or pride, or envy. And I'm sure that each of you can think of someone else who suffers from those afflictions. Certainly not *you*, but somebody you know, right? And I mean really suffers from it. So, think of someone whose love for money, or their endless desire to own someone else's body, or their hoarding of resources, or their unwillingness to lift a finger—those kinds of sins are destroying people from the inside, which then can't help but seep out, bleed out into the world and start to harm other people, as well.

And we don't need to be coy or cute about it; the someone you know who suffers from those afflictions might just be yourself. It might be you. And when it's you who's being destroyed bit-by-bit by your own individual sin, you can probably really relate to the feeling of being a slave to your own worst tendencies, to being held in captivity by it. Think of the harm that it does to your psyche, to your body, to your spirit. Think of the damage it does to your relationships. And think of the feeling of self-loathing that it creates to be that kind of sinner. And of course that just perpetuates all of the problems.

Jesus died and rose again to liberate you from all of that. You see how the language matters? I didn't say, “save you,” I said, “liberate you.” To *free* you from that, to set you free from the captivity that you find yourself in. And you are liberated because Jesus bears the worst kind of sin on the cross. And his response to that is not punishment and wrath and condemnation, but rather, forgiveness and love. So, when you see that response from Jesus, your self loathing can melt away, because God receives the worst that you have to offer and offers in return divine love, so there's no longer any reason to condemn yourself, and your mind and your spirit begin to heal. And then your relationships, free from the toxic energy that you had brought to them, they can begin to heal, and you can begin to be set free, liberated, delivered from your sin.

So, even talking about the conventional understanding of being saved from sin changes when we begin to change the language to use words like “liberate” or “deliver.” But here's the other way that Jesus liberates us from sin: It's not just from our own sin, but from the sin of the whole world, the sins of communities and societies—Jesus liberates us from systemic sin. See, if I had to offer just one criticism of Americanized Christianity, it's that we make everything about the

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individual. "Jesus is my *personal* savior. I've been saved from *my* sins." When, in fact, so many of our sins are communal, corporate offenses. So much of the greed, or lust, or envy, and so on, that we see in the world is not just held individually and personally, but is transmitted through the fabric of our society. It's amplified and magnified, both in the damage that kind of sin does to the world, and in its tendency to replicate and reproduce itself.

Now, this is true everywhere, this is not unique to America, but the American story is the one that I think you and I are most familiar with, and so we could, and probably should, take a minute to name the community sins that we have built our country on. Sins like the genocide of Native peoples, like the slavery, enslavement of African peoples. Sins like Jim Crow and discriminatory lending. Sins like lynchings, and endless war, and mass incarceration.

You wish I'd go back to the individual sins, don't you? *Why can't he just preach nice? It's Easter.* I'm not gonna preach nice, because we desperately need Jesus to liberate us from these sins, every bit as much as we need him to liberate us from our own personal sins, and probably, in some ways, we need it more. Which is why it's a good thing that Jesus's death and resurrection were a total repudiation of the evil systems and structures of his own day, the systems and structures that condemned him and so many others. Because here's the thing: It's not just that Jesus took on individual sins and loved and forgave the individual sinners, right?

It wasn't just the sin of the Roman citizen or soldier who drove the nails into Jesus's body that needed to be addressed, it was the sin of the Roman Empire that demanded that act of one of its citizens, the sin of oppression, the sin of thirst for total power, the sin of impoverishing and marginalizing entire classes of people and exploiting them, the sin of trying to rule and control the whole world through violence.

It wasn't just the sin of the chief priest who handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities that needed to be addressed, it was the sin of the entire religious system which was preoccupied with behaviors, which was in bed with a corrupt and violent empire, which was unwilling to tolerate dissent, which refused to see God at work outside of the small little boundaries that it imagined. And please understand, none of this is an attack on Judaism as a religion. We Christians have mastered this idea; we have taken it to another level.

But Jesus took on the systemic sins, the sins of the whole world, the very worst that humanity had to offer, and he submitted himself to the death that they caused, in peace and in silence. And when Jesus subjects himself to this humiliating death, without so much as a single word in his own defense; when he goes silently to the cross like a lamb led to slaughter; when he dies a criminal's death, embracing the shame that was reserved for those who rebelled against the principalities and powers of the world; when he refused even to participate in his own trial; and

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when he then rises from the tomb where they laid him, thus empowering all his disciples to continue on in his way, spreading his gospel of peace, of inclusion, of unconditional, non-condemning love; well, then you can see how the salvation that he brings about is not just about the forgiveness of individual sins, but it's also about a revolutionary freedom. It's about a liberation from captivity. It's about a resurrection of God's good design for the world, which had been shattered and torn apart by human sin—not just by the sins of individuals, but by the sins of entire communities.

So, this Easter I do hope that you will embrace and live into the joy that comes from knowing there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I hope that you will accept God's forgiveness of your own sins. But I also hope that you will remember the words of the Apostle Paul in that letter to the Galatians that I quoted at the very beginning: “[Jesus Christ] gave himself for our sins”—*Why?*—“to set us free from the present evil age.” And I hope that you and I, working together, I hope that we, as Artisan Church, and we as the broader Christian church here in Rochester, I hope that all of us as God's people might consider whether we have drifted away from that powerful meaning of Easter, that Christ died and raised from the dead to set us free from the present evil age.

I hope that we will be bold and brave enough to embrace and live into the vision of resurrection that not only brings new life to those who are dying but also one that throws down the pharaohs of our world, that demands that God's people be let go, that leads people out of slavery, out of captivity, and into a land flowing with milk and honey. I hope that this Easter we will open our eyes wide enough to see God at work in our world, offering that kind of salvation, and I hope that we will get on board and join in the work of liberating the entire world from sin. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).