



Resurrection Courage

Christopher B. Harbin

Acts 23:6-15

Today is Resurrection Sunday. We gather to tell the story of Jesus coming out of the tomb, walking among the disciples and sharing the news that death had no hold upon him. Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! That is good news! It is reason for celebration! It is reason for joy and praise. Aside from being a good story, however, a happy ending, what is the point? What difference does it make in our daily living? What difference did it make for the disciples and the early church?

There is no one single answer to those questions. For the early church, the resurrection was proof positive that Jesus was indeed God incarnate. The resurrection meant that Jesus' words were true, that we have the option of spending eternity in God's presence beyond the limits of earthly living. It meant that God was in the business of creating life in the midst of death and hopelessness. It meant that as Jesus had turned down political power, his reign would not be limited to the realm of politics, violence, or death. This new reign would reach beyond death, into the life beyond.

The resurrection was also about transformation—our transformation. It would transform our ideas of religion, of faith, of eternity, of immortality, of death, and of life with God. It would transform the disciples from a timid band of Jesus' followers into courageous leaders ready to challenge the Jewish power structures and religious traditions. The resurrection would transform through the creation of a quality of courage and trust in God's care and provision.

The resurrection granted hope. That was what Paul reflected in his confrontation with Pharisees and Sadducees when apprehended on his return to Jerusalem. "I stand before you," he said, "because of my hope in the resurrection!" That hope gave him courage. It gave him a message to share. It gave him the strength to stand before opposition and declare the message of Jesus' resurrection and its implications for his life even beyond death.

At this moment, Paul was not able to continue his testimony. There was too much disagreement on the issue of life after death. It was a hot topic of debate between Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees accepted teaching regarding a spiritual world with angels and life beyond death, while the Sadducees kept to an older tradition. They looked to the Torah as the center of their teaching and disregarded the newer texts of the prophetic and wisdom literature. They were the more conservative and traditional element within Judaism. Jesus' teachings on life beyond the grave and the implications of his resurrection went too far for them to consider.

Paul would likely have continued with his explanation. He would have gone on to say that it was in Jesus' resurrection that he had confidence in his own eventual resurrection. He would have continued to proclaim that God called us to life in fellowship with God in the immediate context of this world, yet also in that reality we have yet to experience. He would have continued, for his faith in the risen Jesus granted him courage to speak boldly while facing threats of various kinds.

Paul's current difficulties were nothing new. They were but one more chapter in a transformed life. Paul had sat where his audience sat in years gone by. He had looked upon believers in Jesus Christ with the same critical mindset. He had participated in seeking the death of those who stepped beyond the comfortable parameters of Jewish religious practice, claiming a relationship with God apart from obedience to a legal code and its traditional interpretation. Then he had been transformed by Christ.

On that other side of living, he had been trapped by what he thought granted him freedom and confidence. The resurrected Christ had given him a new confidence. He had set aside his dependence upon force, tradition, coercion, politics, domination, and legalism. He had accepted in their place a new life of confident submission to God. He had learned dependence. He had learned a new humility. He had been shaped by God into a wholly new manner of living.

Paul had been part of the power structure in Israel. He had been a Pharisee, following in his own father's footsteps. He still agreed with them regarding the reality of a resurrection. Yet now his life no longer stood within parameters they could accept. They wanted to kill him, to silence him. He wanted them to hear the message of hope and grace he carried. They sought violence. He had the courage to seek life and peace in his response. Paul had been changed, transformed, granted a new life with a new basis for confidence and security.

Luke records God speaking to Paul in the night after his defense. This was the reason Paul had been called by the risen Christ. He had been given a new lease on life and a new reason to live. He had been granted the charge to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ throughout the known world.

There was a plot to kill him. There had been a group who wanted his death. They had been the ones to begin the turmoil in Jerusalem on seeing Paul returned and entering the Temple. This was the group to which Paul had belonged. He had once been on their side, using force, violence, and fear as weapons to keep people in line. They wanted all to conform to the standard Jewish legalistic response to God. It was their way to ensure security. It was a way to keep fear and uncertainty at bay. It was a way to maintain control in society and be assured of God's favor.

The resurrection shattered that security. It was a threat to a structured, delimited society focused on keeping life and death in neat categories. It was a danger to those whose peace and security depended on maintaining neatly defined parameters for living, as though by our actions we might control not only our future, but wield some power or influence over God. The resurrection changed that perspective.

The resurrection cried out that God need not play by our rules. Death is no longer the endpoint or antithesis of life. Even the Pharisees who claimed a belief in resurrection had not understood its true significance. They looked to living once again here on earth at the coming of Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus, however, was a wholly different category. It was a call to hope that might begin here and now. It was a call to service, to courage, to sharing good news that not even death could control or confine.

The Jews were still working with a limited perspective. They were convinced that threat of death could keep others in line. They were convinced that fear of violence was an adequate weapon to force others to live according to an established set of rules and interpretations. They believed that they were in charge of forcing conformity through violence, force, power, and coercion. Whatever the means, they would control the outcome to provide for their own security.

The gospel of the resurrection gave Paul a wholly different basis for confident security. Fear and intimidation were not needed to develop God's mission and purposes. God called rather for courage in the face of threat, confidence in the hope of Christ Jesus' resurrection to face our fears and uncertainties. It is a courage that is not based on our own merits, attributes, power, or influence. Rather, it is based solely upon God's character and purpose. The resurrection proclaims a wholly new landscape for living. It calls us to confidence in God beyond any and all threats. Are we ready to join Paul in living a life dominated by this resurrection courage? That courage is worth celebrating!

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