

Why Did He Do It?

Everybody in the U.S. knows the story we're celebrating today, right? Well, maybe not everybody. Two years ago, the *New York Times* ran an article on Pope Francis I. In the article it stated, "Easter is the celebration of Jesus' resurrection into heaven..." Well, eventually He went to heaven but not on THIS day!

In the same week, CBS News claimed in a story about Mary, the mother of Jesus, that, "John the Baptist stood by Mary's side as Jesus died on the cross." Apparently the layers upon layers of reporters, proofreaders and editors employed by the *New York Times* and CBS really don't know this story all that well. ⁱ

That's why this past week we've had special services on Thursday night and Friday night to remind us all of exactly what happened in this most remarkable story. So, today we're not going to "re-tell" the story but instead answer a slightly different question. The question before us today is "why?" Why did He do it? What was God hoping to accomplish by sending His Son to die on a cross and be resurrected on the third day? The first answer to the question "why" is...

I. He Did It So That We Could Live in Hope Rather Than Despair.

What's your view of the world these days? Are things looking good to you? The stock market is hovering around all-time highs, you've got a job, your health is good, your family's health is good, you've got plenty of food in the pantry and cable TV in three rooms! Life is good! So, you're full of hope for the future, right? Wrong!!

You say, "What do you mean, 'wrong'?" Well, I mean, those things might all be true for you and you might consequently be feeling good, but that's not hope – at least not by the biblical definition of hope. The Bible defines hope in this way:

But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.
(Rom. 8:24, 25)

What this is saying is that your current circumstances do not determine whether or not you have hope, because hope is not tied to your current circumstances but to your future circumstances. So, if you have a job and good health and plenty of food and cable TV, that has no bearing on what you will have in the future. Those things cannot give you hope because we all know that there's no guarantee that you will have that job or good health or a full pantry or cable TV next year or even next month. And so now you're saying, "Well, thank you, pastor, for reminding me of that happy thought on this happy day!?!?!?" You're welcome.

I tell you that truth so that I can point you to another truth, which is this: **what we celebrate today is the only thing that actually CAN guarantee you a happy future.** And what is that truth? Listen to Peter.

In Acts 10, Peter has been called by a man named Cornelius to his home in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, the headquarters of the Roman occupation force in Israel. Cornelius was not Jewish but a commander in the Roman army. Even so, he believed in God and one afternoon while praying, he saw a vision of an angel who told him to

invite Peter to his house to teach him something important about God. So, he did and Peter came. The Scripture read today is what Peter taught Cornelius and all his friends and relatives whom he had invited over to hear the apostle.

Cornelius and presumably some of his friends, already believed in God and they knew about Jesus, but it doesn't appear as if they believed He was the only Son of God because Peter said to them:

You know what has happened throughout Judea... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power...

But then he goes on to say that in Jerusalem...

They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:39, 40, 42, 43)

And what exactly does this have to do with our having hope? Peter explains it in his letter to churches scattered across Asia Minor. He writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you... (1 Pet. 1:3, 4)

Do you see it? This is hope, real hope. It's not based on your current circumstances. It's a rock-solid promise of an "inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." Guaranteed by what? By the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Could you use a guaranteed hope for the future? If your life is perfect these days, then maybe you don't feel the need. But if you have worries, if your health isn't perfect, if all your relationships aren't squeaky clean, if your life isn't a candidate for the cover story of *Glamour* magazine, then maybe you need what this day is really celebrating – a guaranteed future that is truly perfect. In just a moment I'm going to tell you how you can have it, but first I want you to know that this is a package deal, because when Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected three days later, He didn't do it just so we could have hope instead of despair but...

II. He Also Did It So That We Could Have Joy When We're Surrounded by Gloom.

In the earlier example I was speaking to those of you who have a pretty good life – no pain, enough money, satisfying relationships – things are good. Now, let me speak to the rest of us. The rest of us don't have all those things. We might have a few, but not all. Have you noticed though, that your whole body can be perfectly healthy except for one small part, like your big toe; and where is all your attention? All your attention is consumed by the body part that's in pain, right?

So, when one part of your life is struggling or in pain, how are you supposed to have joy? Is joy even possible?

The country of Ukraine has experienced authoritarian rule by other nations going back to the 12th century, except for the past twenty-four years. However, I think we're all aware today of the near civil war that now threatens to destroy the Ukrainians' brief enjoyment of freedom. So, for hundreds and hundreds of years,

these people have lived under the oppression of one despotic ruler after another. I, along with several dozen people from this church, traveled multiple times to Ukraine in the early 90's to visit and work at our sister church in Tonevka. It was like traveling back 150 years in time. Barefoot old women were gathering sticks to use in their thatch-roofed homes to cook a meal. Horse-drawn carts were used to move farm produce rather than trucks. It was depressing just to see it.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a political reporter for the Manchester Guardian newspaper in England more than fifty years ago. He was at the time a devoted Marxist. He traveled to Kiev to do a story on the Communist Party and on the dying of religion in the Soviet Union. He interviewed a number of the party leaders who confirmed and endorsed his own beliefs, but then he made a mistake: he went to a Russian Orthodox Church service on Easter Sunday.

The church in Kiev was packed and there are no pews in those churches. The people stand shoulder to shoulder, as Muggeridge says:

"...squeezed together like sardines! I myself was pressed against a stone pillar, and scarcely able to breathe. ...So many gray, hungry faces, all luminous like an El Greco painting: and all singing. How they sang."

At the end of the Easter service, as is still the tradition today, the priest cried out, "Christ is risen!" And the people responded with one deafening shout, "He is risen indeed!" Muggeridge looked around at this sea of faces, who by all measures should have been depressed and tired and hopeless, but instead were smiling and vibrant and full of joy. And he said it was in that moment that he realized that they were right and Stalin was wrong. He said that's what tipped him over the edge: It was the joy of their faith. It was the reality of it. He said later, after he came to know the Easter story, that at that moment in the Kiev church, he experienced what the disciples who walked with the resurrected Jesus on the Emmaus road experienced. ⁱⁱ They said:

...Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road...? (Luke 24:32)

This is not heartburn. No, this is the burn of deep, lasting satisfaction. This is the burn of intense joy. When's the last time you felt that? Perhaps the first time you saw the love of your life – you know, that stranger "across a crowded room"? You said, "Whoa! Who is that?" Burn!!!

Or maybe, the first time you saw your baby girl or baby boy. Remember that burn? Oh man, you were speechless, right? It's a good burn, isn't it? Where does that come from? What causes that "good burn"?

Peter, again in his first epistle, is writing to people in Asia Minor who are experiencing the same kind of oppression that the Ukrainians have been suffering. He writes: (I Peter 1:6)

...now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Later, in that same letter, he writes:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering... But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ... (I Pet. 4:12-13)

Now, look at this - to these people who are under oppression, he explains how it is possible for them, while they are still under the oppressive circumstances, to experience joy. Look what he says:

These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold... may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (I Peter 1:7)

Now, watch what he says next. This is for you who are surrounded by gloom: **Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (I Peter 1:8, 9)**

The Greek word for “joy” is *chara* – an intensely satisfying, burning joy! Where does it come from? Do you see it? It’s not from our circumstances. These people were oppressed. It’s not from us, our emotions or our effort. NO! Look! “...you believe in him and are filled...” It comes from Him, from Jesus the resurrected One. It is Jesus’ resurrection that creates the joy because it’s His resurrection that guarantees your future, if you “BELIEVE IN HIM.”

What does it mean to “believe in Him”? Peter explained that back in his talk with Cornelius in Caesarea. He finished it with these words:

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:43)

To believe in him means that you realize that, because of your rebellion against the ways of God, you have a very dark, depressing future. But, if you ask Jesus to forgive your rebellion, He will. His death paid for your sin and your confession releases that payment so that in God’s economy, you are debt free. Now, not only do you have a future, you have a future filled with “inexpressible and glorious joy.” If you were guaranteed a future like that, do you think it might have an impact upon your life today?

I’m not going to share any names, but Lois told us a few weeks ago that a mom and her son came in to see her because of some issues the young man was having. To make a long story short, he prayed to receive the forgiveness of his sins and be filled with inexpressible and glorious joy. His mom said later that week, “My son is just a different kid!” Yeah, do you realize that that is literally true? He was under the gloom of the circumstances of his life but, by receiving the forgiveness of God, he immediately had a bright and joyful future which changed his whole view of the present.

So, how about you? How are you doing? You say, “Well, pretty good under the circumstances.” And I say, “What are you doing under there? You gotta get out from under those circumstances!” And there’s only one road out. It’s the triple A approved route. Only these three A’s stand for three words:

- Admit your rebellion
- Ask to be forgiven
- Accept His love and be filled with His joy

Why did He do it? He did it so you could have both hope and joy forever. Let’s secure His guarantee of both of those right now...

ⁱ Preachingtoday, “News that Illustrates: April 15, 2013”

ⁱⁱ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 49