

New Lord

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- [0 : 00] Well now if you've joined us for this fall term, welcome, it's great to have you. Next week we'll get the service times right on the board outside.
- There was a group of people who came at 10 o'clock and they were very embarrassed, so we feel sad about that. So 11 o'clock is the service time. Now if you've joined us, we're going to begin a series in the book called The Acts of the Apostles and you may find it helpful if you open your Bible to page 112 in the back.
- We spent almost a year in the Gospel of Luke and if Luke was big, this volume 2 that Luke wrote is bigger.
- And Luke, because he's the author, is able to wave his hand and summarize the whole of his Gospel in the first sentence. So I read these words.
- In the first book of Theophilus, I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up after he had given commandment through his Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.
- [1 : 19] What that means is that now as we start in the book of Acts, this is not something completely different. It's not a new and separate story. It is a continuation of the same story.
- When Jesus rose from the dead, it was not the end. It was not even the beginning. Hang on. Yes, it was the beginning of the end.
- It wasn't the end. Let me put it this way. What I'm trying to say is, it's not that the Gospel is about Jesus and the Acts is about us.
- Both books, the focus and the center and the hero and the main actor is Jesus. It's very important, you see, because Christianity is entirely different from every other kind of faith or belief or religion.
- Buddha does not save by what he does. He saves by his teaching. Muhammad saves by what he teaches.
- [2 : 17] But if Jesus has been raised from the dead, if Jesus continues to act and teach, salvation is not by what we do, but salvation is by what he does, by him.
- So if the first book is about what Jesus began to do, this book is about what Jesus continues to do. Bill Reimer recommended a book to me, a wonderful book by Rodney Stark, who is the professor of sociology and comparative religion.
- It's called The Rise of Christianity. It's a wonderful book. And the first paragraph says this. Finally, it's a book that starts with finally, all questions concerning the rise of Christianity are one.
- How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure movement, messianic movement, from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?
- It's a very interesting question, isn't it? And because he's a sociologist, he's interested in numbers and statistics and movements. But Luke's answer is a little bit different to that question.

[3 : 27] How is it done? The answer is because Jesus Christ is the first and the only human being who has been raised from the dead.

And the resurrection is so vast and so shattering that Luke begins this volume two by going back before the end of volume one to the resurrection because it's far too much for us.

In some ways, the book of Acts is all about the implications of the resurrection. So look at verse three. To them he presented himself alive after his passion, his death, by many proofs, convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking of the kingdom of God.

And I know some of you may be thinking, well, yes, but that was pre-scientific days. We have evolved so far since then. You cannot seriously expect me to believe that someone rose bodily from the dead.

Well, over the summer I read Tom Wright's book on the resurrection. Tom Wright has two books on the resurrection. One is this big and the other has 800 pages. I read the 800 page version, which was a very funny thing to do because you can keep fit while you're reading because it's so heavy, this book.

[4 : 53] What Wright does is exhaustingly demonstrates and conclusively demonstrates that nobody in the first century Greco-Roman world either wanted or thought it was possible for someone to be bodily raised from the dead.

If you were an old Greek believer and you believed in the old Greek gods, you knew that when you died you went down to the underworld. You didn't want to come back into this world. From Homer to the Aeschylus to Sophocles, people knew in those days that when you died you stayed dead and you cannot reverse death and not only is it impossible but we don't want to come back with a physical body.

It's something repugnant. If you were a classical Greek and you believed in Plato, Plato of course believed that the soul is contained in the prison of the body and at death the beautiful soul is liberated from the body, you don't want to come back and become a re-embodied person.

That's the last thing you'd want. If you were an Epicurean, you had a sort of a primitive evolutionary view that life was made of atoms, the gods never intervene, bodily resurrection, ridiculous.

And if you were Jewish, you likely believed that there was going to be a resurrection at the last day of all God's people when God brings the great restoration of the world.

[6 : 21] Unless you were a Sadducee and then you didn't believe much at all really. But the idea that one person should be raised, not the end of the world, but one person should be raised back now in history and particularly a person who'd been crucified under the Romans as a criminal was utterly preposterous.

And this is the point. Neither the disciples nor the Jewish public nor even the Greco-Roman world was hoping or expecting that someone would rise from the dead. So the resurrection of Jesus is so shocking and so stunning and so beyond comprehension.

We go back and we spend 40 days with demonstrable proofs convincing the disciples, here are his followers to believe it. Do you know, when we came to Luke 24, the resurrection passage, a few months ago, I was puzzled with why we didn't get more significance of the resurrection from Luke who wrote it.

And I now realise that Luke was being historically accurate. Don't you think it would have been so tempting to have taken a lot of the significance of the resurrection and written it back into the gospel narrative? Except that the disciples weren't even expecting the resurrection, let alone understanding the implications.

This is why we begin this second book with the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection is the great fountain from which everything else flows. It's like the great central tent peg that the whole tent of Christianity hangs from, all the movement of the spirit.

[7 : 54] The fact that you and I are here this morning comes from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And in these first eight verses, Luke shows us two things that the resurrection means.

And both of them have to do with the great restoration. The resurrection shows us, firstly, the what of the restoration. Now I know that restoration sounds a little bit like something you do to an old sofa.

You know, when it's beaten up and your house is falling down, you build it and you renew it and you restore it. But this is the way, this is Bible language for what God will do when history closes.

Because, of course, the world is not as God made it in the beginning. It's gorgeous, wonderful, particularly in Vancouver at the beginning of September. But we are under the law, the second law of thermodynamics.

And everything slows down and falls down and decays. Our bodies, our systems, our cities, our empires.

[9 : 01] But we have within us this desperate longing for restoration. And in the Bible, God does not throw away what he makes and just start again.

Because of who God is, what he does is he takes what has begun to decay and he promises to restore all things to himself.

The story of the Old Testament is of God promising and revealing the shape of the restoration. And in the resurrection of Jesus, we see the what.

What is that restoration? Here he is, the first fruits of the restoration of the world. This is the future now. It's not a one-off hallucination or a vision.

This is 40 days of regular appearances. Because Jesus is demonstrating what it is to be a fully restored, resurrected human being. He's not a disembodied spirit floating around on clouds.

[10 : 02] He sits down and eats with them. He's more fully alive. Death has been reversed. And it's very interesting. That little eating word is used again in verse 4.

And I think Luke can't help himself. Because when he ever gets close to salvation, he talks about feasting. The point is that Jesus' resurrection is the great power and the pattern for the restoration.

Now why am I saying this? It's very important for us because it means that Christianity is a new way. It is a different way. It's not the way we would build a religion.

It's called the third way. The first way is the way of irreligion. There are people, there always have been people who will say, Ah, religion, it's a bad thing.

It's a superstitious thing. It's not for healthy, self-reliant grown-ups. It's for weak-minded, gullible people who need a crutch. That's the first way, the way of irreligion.

[11 : 03] But there is a second way. It's called the way of religion. Where you look at the world and you see it's got problems. And you look at yourself and you see you've got problems. And so you find a faith that makes sense of life.

And you attach yourself and you try and do the teachings of that faith. And follow the way of that religion. That's the way of religion. But the resurrection of Jesus opens a radically different and new way.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God takes responsibility for our sin, for our suffering, for our death. And in raising Jesus from the dead, God reverses death.

So that Christianity does not say, Run faster, try harder, be better. It says, Trust him, he's done it. Christianity came out of Judaism, but it's not Judaism.

It's the fulfillment of Judaism. It's not Greco-Roman religion. It's not spiritism. It's not philosophy. It's not morality. It is God beginning the work of restoring the world to himself and showing us the what of the restoration in Jesus Christ through that resurrection.

[12 : 13] And what that means is, Christianity is different from every other religion in the world. I hinted at this a moment ago. I mean, in Buddhism and Islam and in the other religions, you're not saved by what Buddha did or what Muhammad did.

It doesn't really matter in that religion that Buddha died. What is important in those religions are the teaching. If you want to become a Buddhist, you attach yourself to Buddhism. You follow the eightfold path.

You live a life that's not harmful. You try and improve yourself. Your salvation depends on what you do. But in Christianity, salvation is the complete opposite. It does not depend on what you do.

It depends on what Jesus has done. Our salvation does not depend on our work. It depends on the fact that Jesus has been risen from the dead. In about a week's time, we will, in Vancouver here, we're going to host the Vancouver Peace Summit.

And Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, and there will be a number of other religious leaders. And the topic of the summit is kindness. I saw an interview yesterday with a Dalai.

[13 : 24] He said, My religion is kindness, and kindness forms the heart of every great religion. In the Vancouver Sun, Douglas Coupland was lamenting the lack of kindness today, and he said this, We need to come up with some sort of self-maintaining system of thought that allows people to be better people to other people.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience of going through a paid toll booth and finding that the person in the car in front of you you've never met before has paid your toll. It's a lovely experience.

Or I was in a store the other day, and I didn't have the right change, and someone gave me their change. It's just a lovely thing. And wouldn't it be great if kindness were to break out in the Middle East?

The trouble is, we find it so hard to be kind. And when push comes to shove, when things get really difficult, I'm always going to choose what's good for me.

And I think the Dalai Lama sees that, and he recognises that the way of kindness is what he calls wise, selfish. Because scientists have shown that humans who engage in acts of kindness get good feelings.

[14 : 42] They get an emotional kickback from it. So he's saying, it's a good thing to be kind, and it's a form of selfishness. One of the amazing things you'll see as you go through the book of Acts is the heart-breaking kindness of the early Christians.

In the book by Rodney Stark, I mentioned earlier, he has a whole chapter on how the early Christians in the first couple hundred years of the church responded to plagues and epidemics.

And he quotes from a Christian leader in the city of Alexandria in the year 260 AD when a terrible plague and epidemic took a massive toll in human life.

When the disease hit the city, most people who could afford so fled. But not the Christians. They stayed and cared for the sick and dying, and many of them perished as a result.

And listen to what he says, and I quote, Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another.

[15 : 50] Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, ministering to them in Christ. And with them departed this life serenely happy.

For they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and caring others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.

The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons and laymen, winning high commendation from non-Christians in the city, so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seemed in every way to be the equal of martyrdom.

What I didn't say was that many of the non-Christians who they cared for had been former persecutors of them. And here is the question, where does the power come from for that sort of kindness?

Where does the power come from for that sort of sacrifice? And the answer in the scriptures is from the resurrection of Jesus. It's the resurrection of Jesus that has the power to transform, to recreate and to restore.

[17 : 14] It's the power of the next world active in our world now and it can be active in our lives now. Transforming kindness from selfishness.

And this is why Luke begins this second volume with the resurrection because he's showing the what of restoration. Secondly and more briefly, he shows us the how.

How does the restoration come to us? If you look down at verse 6, I'll read the next couple of sentences. And when they had come together, the apostles, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

And he said to them, it's not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

I used to think the disciples had asked the wrong question and Jesus says, that's a non-secretary. Here's what really should be going on. And a lot of commentators think that the disciples are still looking for a political solution.

[18 : 27] You know, Israel's superpower, now you're going to do it that you're raised from the dead. I've changed my mind. I now think they're asking the right question but they've got the wrong focus.

I mean, they'd seen Jesus ripped from life through a brutal crucifixion only 40 days before. Now he's raised again with this new body which is able to go through walls but still eat with them.

He's been teaching them the Old Testament scriptures and again and again and again through the Old Testament scriptures God promises that he will restore the fortunes of Zion, that he will restore salvation to us, that he will restore deliverance to us.

Take Micah. They will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation nor will they train for war anymore.

Every man will sit under his vine and his own fig tree and no one will make them afraid. Justice will flow. Warfare will cease when the kingdom is restored.

[19 : 32] No wonder the United Nations took this as their ideal. This is the promise of God for the world, the restoration. And the disciples I think are puzzled. They say, now that you've been raised from the dead, what next?

What's the schedule? And Jesus doesn't dismiss so he doesn't reject their interest in restoration. He says, it's more important to not know when it's going to come but to know how it's going to come.

And it's going to come slowly by the progress of the witness of spirit-filled believers. Now, if you're familiar with Acts, you know that this verse many people take as a kind of a table of contents for the book of Acts.

The gospel goes through Jerusalem for the first eight chapters, then into Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. And I wish we could spend a lot more time on this one verse, but we just have time to say two things about it.

The first thing is this. Acts 1 verse 8 is more about Jesus than it is about us. I mean, the standard sermon I've heard on this text says something like this.

[20 : 42] Jesus is calling on you to be a witness. You ought to get out there and run hard and share your faith a lot because unless you do, nobody's going to become a Christian. But read it carefully.

There's no command to be witnesses. Jesus is simply stating the fact, you shall be my witnesses. And the key for attentive readers is that in verse 8, Jesus quotes three phrases from the prophet Isaiah from a little section which is not a motivational rally, get out there and get more members.

It's from a law court. And in the book of Isaiah, God, the Lord of heaven and earth, calls his people and he announces a lawsuit against all false religion and every other way and idolatry and he says, you, to Israel, you'll be my witnesses.

You shall be my witnesses. I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory I give to no other, he says. I am the first and the last. Besides me, there is no God.

You shall be my witnesses. Here's the thing. Here is the risen Jesus, a man whom they had lived with and knew well, taking the words of God on his lips and he is saying, world, I'm reopening the trial.

[22 : 08] There's a new piece of evidence. It's that I have been raised from the dead. That is going to completely change the verdict. He's saying, I am the first. I am the last.

I am the hope. I am the Lord and the God of Israel and besides me, there is no God. See? He says to his apostles, you shall be my witnesses because you've seen me raised from the dead.

You are witnesses to the resurrection. Witnesses isn't about the great preaching and their cleverness and their abilities. You're just going to be simply called upon to say, did I rise from the dead or not?

And that is how the restoration moves forward. This is the first thing I want you to see about verse 8. This is not a polite invitation to share your faith if you're a gregarious person.

It's a summons from the Lord of all that the world will bow to him. It's more about him than about us. And the second thing to say is this is where the Holy Spirit comes in.

[23 : 10] In the Isaiah passages, the problem with the witnesses in the Old Testament, God says, is they're blind and they're deaf. So you know what God promises to do?

He says, I'll send my spirit. And the spirit opens eyes and then he opens their mouths. I will pour my spirit on your descendants.

Listen, Isaiah 44. This one will say, I am the Lord's. Another will call himself by the name of Jacob and another will write on his hand, the Lord's.

And you are my witnesses. The first thing the Holy Spirit does to us is he gives us a deep and supernatural sense that we belong to God.

The way God gives himself to us is by the Holy Spirit. Do you remember Jesus said in Luke 11, your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to all who ask. The guy who was the best man at my wedding became a Christian after his time at high school.

[24 : 16] We went to a different high school. He was, he went to the rough high school and he got a rough job after high school. And each morning as he went to the rough job, he wanted somehow to remind himself and to remind others that he'd had this life-changing experience happen to him.

So he used to take his pen and he'd write between his thumb and his first finger three letters, H-I-S, his. I'm his. And anyone who asked him about it, he would say, I'm Jesus' person.

That's what the Holy Spirit does. The first thing he does is he comes into us and by God's love shows us that we belong to him. And only when that happens does he give us boldness of speech.

And we're going to look at this over the next weeks and we're going to see that this is the natural, the most natural outflow of the Holy Spirit. Of when you come to be convinced that you belong to him, boldness is the next thing that happens.

It's not a technique. It's not a program. It's about God's restoration of us and of his world one person at a time through the witness of people who are empowered by the Spirit to the resurrection of Jesus.

[25 : 35] And I finish with this. It's not our power. It's his power. Wouldn't it be a terrible thing to turn witness back into a sort of another religious exercise? We have to keep the order of this chapter right.

First resurrection, then Holy Spirit, then witness. If there is no boldness in witness, then there's no sense of belonging to Jesus.

But once the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the risen Jesus and begins the work of restoration in us, we cannot stop ourselves being involved in his restoration of others.

Can I ask you to pray as we begin this term together that no matter what happens, that God, the Holy Spirit will fill our hearts with the risen Jesus Christ, that our faith in him would grow because the only way we're going to be a people who will faithfully represent this God, this God of restoration, the missionary hearted God, is through faith in Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

Let's kneel and pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, hear our prayer. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ raised for us.

[27 : 05] We would pray according to his character and his purposes. Lord, in your mercy. Amen. For the church, we pray. We pray especially today for Felix Orgy's parish, as they await an important legal decision.

We pray for our church school as it begins today. We remember, Lord, that you offered little children the gift of your presence.

And may our ministry to these little ones please you as they learn of your almighty love. May we always approach you indeed as little children ourselves, for you have taught us for you have taught us for you have taught us that to such is your kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. We would pray for the world today. We would pray for peace and a measure of justice to come to our troubled world.

We pray for peace in Afghanistan, in Iraq, throughout the Middle East, for a return to order where conflict makes life for so many intolerable.

[28 : 22] We would pray today, Lord, for the hungry, for the homeless. We pray for refugees and for prisoners. Lord, do show us how to do justice, how to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you always.

Lord, in your mercy. And of course, Lord, we would pray today for the suffering. By name, we remember John today and Harold.

We pray for Rosemary and Dawn. We pray for Gordon. We pray for Marguerite. And in a moment of silence, we pray for those on our hearts today.

Amen. Amen. Lord, for these that we pray for today, do grant them patience in their suffering.

Grant them a renewed faith in you. And in your time, give them healing and give them freedom. Lord, in your mercy.

[29 : 52] Amen. Lord, we thank you for this place of prayer, which is precious to us.

Give us always, in this place of prayer, hearts to pray. And we do pray in the name of the one who has been raised for us and who will return for us.

In his mighty name, we pray. Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer. Here we go.