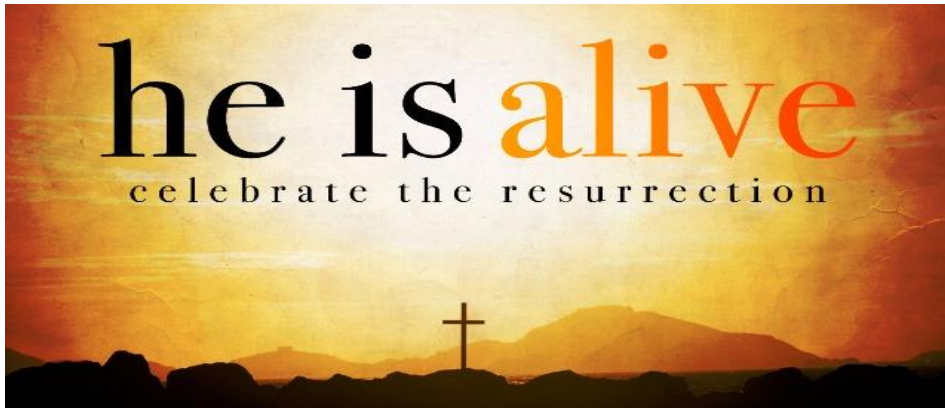


Food for Thought:

The Atonement and the Resurrection Do So Much More Than We Realize



What He did worked...in REALITY...not just a formula!

I used to experience a vague confused feeling at Easter that was difficult to explain. I knew that Jesus's death on the cross paid for my sins, but some part of my brain wondered why God didn't just forgive us, without Jesus having to die on the cross. And the resurrection seemed to be proof that Jesus was God, but I still felt I was missing something important about it—probably several important things.

One day it occurred to me to wonder what things would have been like if Jesus had not died on the cross. What if there had been no atonement? What would things be like? I would pay the price for my sins myself, I thought. Then what? What would my punishment accomplish? Would it fix things? My punishment might be fair and just, but would it change anything? Could it make things right? Would it clean up the ugliness or damage brought about by even just one sin of mine? Every sin of mine distorts me and usually damages others too. I finally came to see--once I thought about what sin actually does--that sin had to be atoned for, not because God randomly wanted it that way or because a formula had to be followed, but because sin changes things for the worse and it does so in a way which only God could undo.

When I consider how much one sin on the part of Adam and Eve changed our world, it gives me pause. Sin transformed our world from one of perfection and beauty to one where death and destruction abound—because sin changes things. In ways large or small, sin always brings about some sort of distortion, destruction, or theft. It cannot be otherwise. Eden was ruined, and earth became a place where tigers rip apart lambs, a place where some animals eat their own young, a place where people make car bombs and rape children. This transformation did not occur because God demanded it; it is simply what sin does. It is the way sin changes things. I realized that if God punished me for my sins, my punishment would be deserved and would be just. But my punishment could not accomplish anything beyond that. My punishment could never fix what my sins have marred. It would take something on a cosmic level to do that. Only Jesus could do that.

Not only is the guilt of our sins washed away by Jesus in a way which our own punishment could never accomplish, but because He is the one who paid for our sins, one day we will also see the injury sin has caused be erased, undone, reversed, healed. It is because of His sacrifice that one day our world will be cleaned up and recreated as a "new earth," one in which there is no more disease or death, an earth where lambs and wolves will sleep together, where sorrow and sighing will have fled away, and where we will sing new songs. It is because of what Jesus accomplished on a cosmic level that Jesus will be able to fulfill His promise to wipe away every tear. Our death, our eternal punishment, could never have accomplished this. His was the only punishment that could accomplish it all. And He did it. He chose to.

And when we remember that, in his death, he was both the sacrifice and the priest, his resurrection takes on new meaning as well. If, in the Mosaic sacrificial system, the priest made the yearly sacrifice for Israel and then came out of the Holy of Holies alive, then it meant his sacrifice had been accepted. If something went wrong with the sacrifice, then the priest would die, and his body would have to be pulled out by a cord tied to his leg. But Jesus, our priest, offered Himself and then three days later came out of the tomb alive as the Priest

whose sacrifice was accepted! So when we celebrate and remember the resurrection, we can celebrate that not only is the resurrection a reminder that Jesus is divine and not only a reminder that there is life after death, but that it is also proof to us that His sacrifice worked. It did not merely fulfill the requirements of some dry, abstract formula; it was effectual in reality! It worked! The priest came out alive!

--*Sally Stuart McKenney Mahoney* with help from and thanks to C.S. Lewis and Michael Card