

Human beings seem to have a fascination with what happens to a person after death. I remember watching a Kevin Costner movie, years ago, called *Dragonfly*, where his wife died in a bus accident, but tried to communicate with him that their baby was still alive. Or if you have ever watched Sci-fi on cable TV, you constantly have movies set before you with people who have died from some dreaded disease, and now have come back as flesh eating zombies. Not a very positive portrayal of what lies beyond the grave for those who die.

Tonight, we actually have a text in the Bible, that could really fascinate us, and make us wonder if this will be a script for a future sci-fi thriller. Many ministers have never preached on this text and tend to shy away from it. But we are not going to shy away from it tonight, but by God the Holy Spirit's leading, we will discover, what God is trying to teach us by it. Let's study, "The Miraculous Raising of Christians from Death."

Out of all the miracles associated with Christ's Passion, probably none truly fits the "miraculous" bill better than tonight's miracle—the miracle of the resurrection of some believing people at the moment of Jesus' death. Even when held up against the Easter Sunday resurrection of Christ Himself, this particular Good Friday miracle seems a little more "miraculous." After all, Jesus is almighty God. Of course the grave can't hold Him. By faith, we expect that. But ordinary, everyday believers rising from the dead, that's something!

Now as truly miraculous as this occurrence is, you would think that Scripture would have a lot to say about this. Surprisingly, though, there's not a lot said on this event. In fact, Matthew is the only one in all of Scripture who mentions this Good Friday miracle, and even he is short on explanation. His account covers a whopping two verses and reads almost like an "oh, by the way...."

As you can well imagine, this lack of detailed explanation has led to a lot of questions. What did the people look like? Did they look like zombies? Did they look like they did when they were first alive, or were they resurrected into their new and glorious heavenly bodies? If they were resurrected on Good Friday, why did they wait until Sunday to go into town? How long did the people live after this miraculous resurrection? Did they die fairly soon after, or did they go on and live for many years? Did they even die a second death at all? Could they have been taken up into heaven, body and soul complete, never having to experience death a second time? It wouldn't be the first time God took people home to heaven that way. Remember Enoch and Elijah, both Old Testament figures, were taken out of this world by God Himself without ever having to taste physical death. If only we had more Scriptural insight into all these vexing questions! If only Scripture wasn't so silent on this matter!

Well...guess what? Scripture's not silent on this. Not at all. Remember what the purpose of a miracle is: To manifest and make known the glory of almighty God. Miracles happen because God wants to get our attention and tell us something. Believe it or not, this miracle is attested to throughout Scripture. The hang-up here is not with Scripture's perceived silence, but with our sinful ignorance and selfish desire to have all the wrong questions answered.

Let's start by looking at what the Old Testament has to say about the resurrection and the Messiah. You see, there was a very common belief among the Jews (except for the Sadducees) that with the coming of the Messiah the dead would be resurrected. The bodily resurrections of these people would have been a powerful witness that Christ was

indeed the Messiah. This belief is grounded in Old Testament Scripture. In Ezekiel we get a glimpse of God giving life to a whole valley of dry bones. How does life and breath enter into these dead, dry bones? Through the Word of the almighty Lord God. "Then you shall know that I am the Lord!" Long before that faithful men like Job confessed, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold, and not another." Daniel also prophesies about the reality that will face every single person when Christ comes in all His glory on that final day of judgment: "And the many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Clearly, the Old Testament is not short on faithful witness pertaining to the resurrection of the body in the presence of the glory of the Lord. Yet, despite all that witness and confession, the people of Jesus' day didn't get it. That's not to say that they didn't believe in or understand what was meant by "resurrection;" rather, they didn't understand that Christ Jesus was the resurrection and the life that the Old Testament was pointing to all along.

Because of this lack of understanding, it should come as no surprise that Jesus Himself raised up three different people from the dead during His earthly ministry [Jairus' daughter, the widow's son, and Lazarus]. Think about that for a moment. The Scriptures stated that two or three witnesses were required for valid and truthful testimony. Many people didn't believe that Jesus was who He said He was—their almighty God and Redeemer in the flesh. So what does Jesus do? He raises up three witnesses from the dead to testify. Can you think of any better witnesses to validate the Scripture's divine testimony concerning Christ?

Here's the problem: You would think that even one person being raised from the dead would be enough to convince everyone of who Jesus was. Yet Jesus raises three different people from the dead and people still don't believe that this man is their almighty God, Messiah, and Redeemer in the flesh. Folks: That's what this miracle is really all about! God is telling us exactly what we need to know about Jesus. In the words of the Roman soldier standing at the foot of the cross, "truly this was the Son of God!" Notice: God doesn't tell us all that we want to know, but He does tell us, in no uncertain terms, everything we need to know regarding His Gospel promise made flesh and hung on the cross to pay for the sins of the entire world.

Contextually, Matthew was written primarily as a catechism for the Jews. Matthew was written in order to instruct the Jews that God did keep His promise and that Jesus of Nazareth is the One they have been hoping and waiting for all along. That's why Matthew is filled with statements like, "and this was done to fulfill what the Law and the prophets said." That's why Matthew is purposely short with these two Passion verses. He doesn't need to elaborate. The entire Old Testament has already spoken at-length on this very issue. In the presence of the glory of almighty God, the dead will be and are resurrected. This Good Friday miracle is the first-fruit sign of what's still to come.

Jesus' words to Martha must have really hit home with her when she saw or heard about the resurrection of those saints in Jerusalem: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die John 11:25-26).** The resurrection of believers is absolutely tied to Jesus' payment on the cross and this miracle shows that. Without his perfect death, there

is no payment for sin, and without payment for sin, there is no resurrection to eternal life.

One final Q&A before we close: Why did the people resurrect on Friday but not go into town until Sunday? Folks: The answer to that question has everything to do with humble faith. Christ's death is so cosmically powerful and redeeming that nature can't help but immediately react. The bonds of death are immediately broken for all time. "It is finished" means just that. However, those faithful ones who were resurrected that first Good Friday would not ever go where their Lord would not first lead them. They don't go into town to pick up and resume their old selfish, sinful ways. Now they faithfully and obediently wait for their Lord and Savior to lead the way. They go where He goes. They follow. Theirs is to point to Christ and give Him all the glory.

How ironic that at the moment of Christ's death, death loses its sting and is swallowed up in victory." These resurrections point to the sufficiency of Christ's work, and his that his life, given up to pay for sin, was accepted by the God the Father! These resurrections look forward to the resurrection of all believers. Matthew's mention of this event, was not intended to satisfy our curiosity about the details of what this event might have entailed on a personal level, but to impress on all readers that Christ is the Victor over death and that his resurrection guarantees our own.

Who were those saints? How many were there? Were they truly glorified and then taken up to heaven once their appearances in the holy city on Easter Sunday were done and had accomplished God's purpose? We don't have definite answers to many of our questions, but this Miracle of Lent does bring us the reminder that Jesus' death opened the way to eternal life, and we too have the promise of a resurrection to life in heaven with our God. May we be reminded of these blessed gifts of God whenever we hear about **THE MIRACULOUS RAISING OF THE SAINTS FROM DEATH** on that Good Friday. And may we think of these words from the Apostle Paul as he encouraged early Christians about their resurrection to life:

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."