

Introduction

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I don't know about you, but I am fascinated with the "what ifs" of history. How might history (and our lives today) be different if certain events had turned out differently, as they so easily could have? Here are just a few examples I found when I did a search on "Turning Points of History"

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- The battle of Tours in 732 between European forces under Charles Martel, against an army of the Umayyad Caliphate led by 'Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, ended in the defeat of the Caliphate. This victory preserved Christianity as the religion of Europe; one historian called it "the turning point of one of the most important epochs in the history of the world."

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- The Battle of Hastings in England 1066, when the Normans under William the Conqueror defeated the English under King Harold. It was a major turning point for English history - the battle was a close run thing and could have gone either way - the way all of the events of 1066 played out leaves plenty of room for alternative scenarios in History.

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- Ogedei Khan (son of Ghengis Khan) died unexpectedly in 1241. The Mongols at this time were well into Eastern Europe and poised to invade the West. Mongol law required that they return to Mongolia to elect a new Khan. By the time all of the politics had been taken care of, the Mongols had lost their momentum.

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- The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked the end of the Byzantine empire and new Ottoman advances into Europe.

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- Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses, October 31, 1517, on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, according to university custom, and in doing so he started the Reformation.

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- The battle of Vienna in 1683, where a combined Austrian-Polish army under Jan III Sobieski. King of Poland, defeated the army of the Ottoman Empire commanded by Grand Vizier Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha. This battle marked the turning point in the 300-year struggle between the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

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- The Battles of Saratoga (September 19 and October 7, 1777) conclusively decided the fate of British General John Burgoyne's army in the American War of Independence and are generally regarded as a turning point in the war of independence.

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- The battle of Trafalgar in 1805, which defeated Napoleon Bonaparte's plans to invade Britain.

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- Winston Churchill was hit by a car while visiting New York in 1931 and spent a week in hospital as a result. What if he had been killed? He would not have become Prime Minister during WWII, and Britain would most probably have caved in to Hitler.

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- D-day Tuesday, 6 June 1944, a turning point in WWII which could so easily have been a disaster.

But interestingly none of these opinions on the turning points of history mention what is without any doubt the most significant event in history since the creation of the world; the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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It was the resurrection of Jesus that turned a bunch of scared disciples into bold missionaries; it was the resurrection that established Jesus' claim to be the Son of God; it was the resurrection that marked the

beginning of a new era. So this morning I want to share with you some thoughts on the resurrection of Jesus and what it means.

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1. Why is the resurrection the turning point of history?

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Very simply, because it demonstrates beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Listen to the apostle Paul as he introduces himself in the letter to the Romans:

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Rom 1:1-4

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus worked many miracles during his time on earth; he healed the sick, he made water into wine, he walked on water, he stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee, he raised the dead. All of these pointed to the fact that he was a unique prophet, but other prophets had also performed miracles: Elisha had raised the dead and had told Naaman how to be healed, for example. But no one had been raised from the dead without any human involvement, and certainly no one had been raised from the dead who had suffered as much as Jesus had on the cross on Good Friday. So when God raised Jesus from the dead, he was making a statement for all the world to see: “this is my unique, my one and only Son. I am declaring him with power to be the Son of God.”

And the resurrection is not a subject on which you can be neutral on; either Jesus did rise from the dead or he did not; there is no such thing as a “partial resurrection.” And so this makes the resurrection supremely important; it is a dividing line between those who believe and those who do not. As Timothy Keller writes:

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“If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.”

— Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*

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2. What is the relevance of the resurrection to us?

a. It is key to our past.

Listen to the apostle Paul as he speaks about the resurrection to the Christians in Corinth:

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1 Cor 15:14,17-21

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

Let me rephrase what he is saying in positive terms

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Since Christ has been raised, our preaching is of super importance and so is your faith.

Since Christ has been raised, your faith is crucial; your sins have been forgiven.

The resurrection is God's stamp of approval on Jesus' sacrifice for sin on the cross. So the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ enables all of us who have committed ourselves to him to be able to say “Hallelujah! My sins are forgiven! I can look back on my past failures and the things I am ashamed of and I can know that they are not only forgiven but that God has forgotten them.

As the choir sang:

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This joyful Eastertide,

away with sin and sorrow!
My Love, the Crucified,
hath sprung to life this morrow.

Had Christ, that once was slain,
ne'er burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain;
but now is Christ arisen,
arisen, arisen, arisen.

And as we sang together:

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See, what a morning, gloriously bright,
With the dawning of hope in Jerusalem;
Folded the grave-clothes, tomb filled with light,
As the angels announce, "Christ is risen!"
*See God's salvation plan,
Wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
Fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!*

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b. It is key to our present

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Heb 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our great high priest who has gone through the heavens, (that is, he is resurrected and ascended), and that we can come confidently to Him to find the help we need to live for him and his kingdom. Because he has lived on earth he understands us; he has been through all the temptations and all the trials that we have (and many more), so he can sympathize with our weakness. But he is now risen and ascended, so he is able to help us.

So the resurrection of Jesus assures us that we have a friend in high places. The second stanza of our theme song speaks of the hope and peace Jesus brings

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See Mary weeping, "Where is He laid?"
As in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb;
Hears a voice speaking, calling her name;
It's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
Speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us,
Will sound till He appears,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

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c. It is key to our future

Listen again to the apostle Paul as he speaks about the resurrection to the Corinthians:

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1 Cor 15:17-21

And if Christ has not been raised... Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Let me rephrase what he is saying in positive terms:

Since Christ has been raised

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are gloriously saved.

Since there is a life to come and we have hope in Christ we are to be envied more than all men.

Two days ago, on the afternoon of Good Friday, I was privileged to assist in the funeral of a 103-year old man, Van Franklin.

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He was a retired Pentecostal Holiness pastor whom my wife and I met while visiting the Kroontje Center. He was a wonderful man of God, showing his love of the Lord in many ways. He knew Scripture really well; he had read the Bible through at least 40 times. And you know what? His funeral service was a time of celebration; celebration of his life, and celebration of the fact that he was now home where he belonged; home with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Yes there was sadness, of course, but it was sadness for those of us left behind, for his children and grandchildren and great grandchildren who miss him; it was not a sadness for him. Like Paul, he could have said

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2 Tim 4:7

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

It was a joy to participate in such an uplifting and joyful funeral service!

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In contrast, some years ago I was asked to lead a service of remembrance for a chemistry graduate student who had committed suicide. He was not a Christian, and it was a very difficult service to lead. I could not offer any confident assurances; I could only say that God was a righteous and just God who would act justly with the student's soul. I was relieved when the service was over.

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One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
Through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty.
Honor and blessing, glory and praise
To the King crowned with pow'r and authority!
And we are raised with Him,
Death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;
And we shall reign with Him,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

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3. What is the evidence for the resurrection?

There may be some here who are saying to themselves "well, that's all very well and good, but I am not sure I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. After all, how can a dead person come alive? It's just not scientific!" This is not the place to go into an extensive discussion of the evidence for the resurrection, but let me give a brief summary of four of the many pieces of evidence for the fact of the resurrection:

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- a. The accounts are reliable. Why do I say this? Because all four gospel accounts tell us that women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb and that one woman, Mary, was the first to see the risen Christ. In NT times women were considered unreliable witnesses, and were not allowed to testify in law courts, so anyone who wanted to invent a resurrection story would have used men as the first witnesses.

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- b. The tomb was empty. This is a fact agreed on by almost all scholars, even those who do not believe in the resurrection. If it had not been empty, why would the Jewish priests spread the false story that Jesus'

disciples has stolen the body? Why did they not march the guards who reported to them back to the tomb, show them the body, and then execute them for negligence?

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c. Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death. Jesus appeared to the disciples on several occasions, with a human and yet not human body – something the plain ordinary fishermen and tax-collecting disciples would not have invented.

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d. The disciples believed in the resurrection. The disciples, originally a fearful group of men, became fearless preachers of the word after Pentecost, boldly proclaiming the risen Christ. As a result they faced persecution and death, problems they could have avoided by withdrawing their claims that Jesus rose from the dead. Chuck Colson, one of the original Watergate figures, writes

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“I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.”

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4. What comes next?

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a. Jesus Christ is exalted!

Phil 2:5-11

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

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b. Jesus Christ is coming back!

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1 Cor 15:51-57

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

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"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.

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My flesh in hope shall rest,
and for a season slumber,
till trump from east to west
shall wake the dead in number.

Had Christ, that once was slain,
ne'er burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain;

but now is Christ arisen,
arisen, arisen, arisen.

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5. Where does that leave us?

For those of us who are Christians, the Christian leader Charles Swindoll puts it like this:

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"The benefits [of the resurrection] are innumerable. To list a few:

Our illnesses don't seem nearly so final;

Our fears fade and lose their grip;

Our grief over those who have gone on is diminished;

Our desires to press on in spite of the obstacles are rejuvenated...

Our identity as Christians is strengthened as we stand in the lengthening shadows of saints

down through the centuries, who have always answered back in antiphonal voice: 'He is risen, indeed!'"

[Charles Swindoll]

And for those of you who have not yet come to faith in Jesus, let me ask this question:

So what sort of funeral do you want to have? Because unless the Lord returns first we will all end up dying; as someone has observed, the statistics of death are rather impressive: 100% minus one of all people who have been born have died or will die. Some of us will need longer caskets than others, but we will all end this life by going through the door marked Death. And at the end of your life, will your family and friends rejoice that you have gone to be with the Lord, or will your Christian friends grieve that you did not listen to God calling you, and that you have passed from this world into the outer darkness spoken of by Jesus? Let author Lee Strobel have the last word

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In short, I didn't become a Christian because God promised I would have an even happier life than I had as an atheist. He never promised any such thing. Indeed, following him would inevitably bring divine demotions in the eyes of the world. Rather, I became a Christian because the evidence was so compelling that Jesus really is the one-and-only Son of God who proved his divinity by rising from the dead. That meant following him was the most rational and logical step I could possibly take.

Author: Lee Strobel

Will you take this rational and logical step today? If you are willing to do this, please speak to me after the service, or to the friend you came with, and ask them to explain how you too can know the joy of Easter. Amen