

Romans 4:25

He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification.

God's Easter Sunday Declaration about You

I.

If you ask Sunday school students: "What did Jesus do for you?" many will say: "He died to pay for my sins." That's a good answer. Paul says pretty much the same thing in the first half of the verse that serves as today's sermon text: "He was handed over to death because of our trespasses" (Romans 4:25, EHV). Sunday school children understand what happened during those crucial hours of Good Friday and what it means for them.

If you ask children what Jesus has done for them, many would mention what happened on Good Friday, but few would talk about what occurred on Easter Sunday. Christian adults often don't specifically mention Jesus' resurrection, either.

It's not that we don't know what happened on this day. We confess it nearly every Sunday in one of our creeds by saying: "On the third day he rose again from the dead." Today is a day when many might give the greeting: "Christ is risen!" and others respond: "He is risen indeed!" What happened on Easter Sunday is a big deal.

Resurrection clearly reveals something about the One who performs it. A short time *before* Easter, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. By doing so, Jesus revealed that he was truly the Son of God. It was a clear statement that he had power—even over death.

Who performed Jesus' resurrection? What was he saying by performing it? In the second half of today's sermon text, Paul says: "[Jesus] was raised to life because of our justification" (Romans 4:25, EHV). "Was raised" is a passive verb, indicating that someone other than Jesus raised him from the dead.

My guess is that many of us don't think of the resurrection that way. Most of us, first and foremost, think of Jesus raising *himself* from the dead. The Apostles' Creed says: "The third day he rose again from the dead." In the gospel of John, Jesus referred to his own body and said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again" (John 2:19, EHV). There is nothing at all wrong with speaking of Jesus raising himself from the dead. That has been the confession of the Christian church through the centuries. Rightly so, because it's the confession of God in the Bible.

So...why does the Bible, as it does here in Romans chapter 4, also speak of Jesus as *having been* raised from the dead? Why does Peter say in his sermon on Pentecost: "[Jesus] is the one God raised up by freeing him from the agony of death" (Acts 2:24, EHV)? Why does Paul, in the chapter of 1 Corinthians dedicated to the resurrection, continually refer to Christ as having "been raised" and then state plainly: "We testified about God that he raised Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:15, EHV). What does this raising from the dead say about God? What statement is God making by raising Jesus from the dead?

II.

Paul says: "He...was raised to life because of our justification" (Romans 4:25, EHV).

There are a lot of terms in the Bible. They are all important. They're all part of God's Word. It's good to know what the Bible means when it uses the word *discipline* so we don't get confused with the way the world defines that term. It's good to know the meaning of terms like *prophet*, *priest*, and *king*—especially since they refer to Jesus and his work. It's

good to know the meaning of terms like *righteousness* and *holiness* and what their meanings say about God and about us. It's good to know the meaning of the term *sanctification*, which sounds similar to *justification*. They sound similar, and are connected, but are clearly different.

Of all the terms of the Bible, *justification* may very well be the most important for us to understand. You may not hear that term all that often on an Easter Sunday, but it is definitely an Easter term.

Justify is a courtroom term. The picture is that of a judge announcing a verdict of not guilty. To justify is to declare not guilty. Justify is a familiar word. We talk about people justifying their actions. When they do that, they're not really justifying themselves. They are essentially saying: "At first glance it may look as though I did something wrong. Under normal circumstances what I did might have been wrong, but these were not normal circumstances. When I explain why I did what I did, you will see that I am justified in my actions—I'm not guilty."

Have you ever noticed that people who have justified themselves seem to spend a lot of time doing so in the presence of others? That's because they aren't primarily interested in hearing: "You are not guilty" from *themselves*. What they want is to hear that from *others*.

Sometimes it is one particular person we want to hear "not guilty" from most of all. If *that* person declares us not guilty, guilty verdicts from many, many others won't matter so much. Maybe that person is a parent; maybe it's a spouse.

Sometimes it's an actual judge. If you are on trial for a capital crime, you may plead your case to your friends. They may be a sympathetic audience—even to the point of ignoring some of the facts in the case. You may plead your case to your attorneys, and they may say they believe you to be innocent. As you testify, there may be a person or two—or more—in the audience nodding in agreement. But none of it means anything unless the judge declares you not guilty.

The One we really need to justify us—to declare us not guilty—is God. You and I have committed crimes against him, and we're not talking about *minor* crimes. There is no such thing as a minor crime against God. Every sin we commit is a capital crime. Every sin makes us worthy of the eternal death penalty. That's what God says.

What others say doesn't matter. You can talk to others and get them to agree with you that the kind of sins you have committed aren't really deserving of the eternal death penalty from God. You might even be able to convince them that what you have done isn't even wrong. They might nod in agreement and declare you not guilty often enough so that you will do the same for them one day in a similar situation.

What you can get others to say about you and your actions doesn't really matter. What matters is what *God* says about them. His Word says that many of our actions, our words, and even our thoughts are sin. All those things make us guilty before him. All those sins deserve the eternal death penalty. No matter how hard you try to justify yourself and your actions, you can't do or say enough to compel God to say to you: "not guilty."

III.

On the other hand—there's Jesus. We have looked at Jesus life in the gospels and judged it for ourselves to be a perfect life. We have declared him not guilty. During the Lenten season we heard both Pontius Pilate and the thief on the cross declare that Jesus had done nothing wrong. Just before he died on the cross, Jesus justified *himself*, declaring: "It is finished." According to *Jesus*, he had done every last thing the Father had sent him to do.

Knowing all that, while a resurrection from the dead is pretty surprising, it should be

completely *unsurprising* to hear that God was making a not guilty declaration through the resurrection. It's only when you grasp what Jesus had come to do that you'll understand what God's justification declaration on Easter Sunday really meant.

Jesus said that he had been sent to this earth by his Father not only to live a perfect life, but also to *give* his life as a payment for your sins and mine and the sins of the whole world. When Jesus said on Good Friday: "It is finished," it meant something *to us* and *for us*. It was wonderful to hear our defense attorney—One who knows God's law perfectly—saying that the work he had been sent to do is finished and we are not guilty.

But there was One who *hadn't* rendered a verdict yet. That was the One whose verdict matters. God the Father Almighty—the judge of all—the One with the power to justify or *not* justify, the One with the power to declare *Jesus* guilty or not guilty, the One with the power to declare *you* guilty or not guilty—we hadn't heard him speak, yet.

When *he* raised Jesus to life on Easter Sunday it was a clear declaration that Jesus was not guilty. It was as though he were saying: "I agree with you, my beloved Son. *It is finished*. Everything I sent you to do has been finished. Therefore I justify you. I declare you not guilty."

Understand that last part well. Understand what God was really saying through that empty tomb. Understand who he was really justifying. While the passage in Romans 4 clearly states that God raised Jesus to life, it doesn't say he did so primarily to make a statement about *Jesus'* justification. If that was all that happened that Easter morning, we would be here this morning with nothing more to do than celebrate that things turned out well for Jesus. We would be nothing more than death row inmates hearing the news that an innocent man had been declared not guilty. "Nice for that person," we would say, "but it doesn't do *us* any good."

There's one word in what Paul says that makes all the difference. "He...was raised to life because of *our* justification" (Romans 4:25, EHV). *Our*. Me. You. *We* were declared not guilty at that empty tomb. When God raised Jesus back to life, he also declared *us* to be innocent—worthy of eternal life in Christ.

Sometimes around Easter you will hear people say that Easter isn't about candy or bunnies. They're right. You could use the same phrase many use at Christmas: "Jesus is the reason for the season."

But Easter isn't *only* about Jesus. In fact, in many ways, it's really about *you*. *You* are free from the prison of sin and the fear of death. *You* have been declared not guilty by the One whose judgment matters above all else. *You* have been justified by God. Happy Easter! Amen.