

Sermon Manuscript: Romans 4:25
God's Easter Sunday Declaration About You
Easter Sunday (Festival Service) – April 17, 2022

He . . . was raised to life for our justification. (Romans 4:25)

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 Romans 4:25, “He was delivered over to death for our sins.” Sunday school kids understand what happened during those crucial hours of Good Friday and what it means for them.

While most Sunday school kids would talk about what happened on Good Friday when asked what Jesus has done for them, few would mention what occurred on Easter Sunday. For that matter, 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 something like “On the third day he rose again from the dead.” We didn’t greet one another this morning by warbling, “Oh, what a beautiful morning!” and expecting to hear the sung reply, “Oh, what a beautiful day!” No, we said, “Christ is risen!” and others responded with “He is risen indeed!” That’s what happened on Easter Sunday—and it’s a pretty big deal!

What makes it such a big deal? A resurrection clearly reveals something about—and is a clear statement by—the one who performs it. For example, 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, and what was he saying by performing it? According to Paul in the second half of Romans 4:25, “[Jesus] was raised to life.” “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. I understand why we think that way. The Apostles’ Creed says, “The third day he rose again from the dead.” In the gospel of John, Jesus referred to his body and said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). 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.

But 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, “God raised him from the dead” (Acts 2:24)? 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 have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:15). What does this raising from the dead say about God? And what statement is God making by raising Jesus from the dead?

In Romans 4:25, Paul says, “He . . . was raised to life for our justification.”

There are a lot of terms in the Bible. They’re all important, because they’re 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 it confused with how the world often defines that term. It’s good to know the meaning of terms like *prophet* and *priest* and *king*—especially since they refer to Jesus and describe his work. It’s good to know the meaning of terms like *righteousness* and *holiness* and what their meanings say about God—and us. It’s good to know the meaning of the term *sanctification*, which sounds similar to *justification*, is connected to it and yet must clearly be differentiated from justification.

But of all the terms in the Bible, justification may very well be the most important, the most crucial, for us to understand. While you may not hear that term very often on Easter Sunday, it is most definitely—in fact, it is first and foremost!—an Easter term.

Justify (or *justification*) is really a courtroom term. It pictures a judge rendering a verdict of not guilty. So to justify is to declare not guilty. It’s a familiar word—justify. We often talk about people justifying their actions. When they do that, they’re really justifying themselves. They’re essentially saying, “I understand that at first glance, it looks like I did something wrong. And I’ll admit that, under normal circumstances, what I did would have been wrong. But these were not normal circumstances. When I explain my actions in light of the situation and my intent, you’ll see why I have a clear conscience. You’ll see that I’m not guilty, that I’m justified in my actions.”

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’re not guilty” from *themselves*. What they really want is to hear it from *others*.

Sometimes it’s a particular other whose judgment matters to us, whose “not guilty” we crave above all others. If that person declares us not guilty, a thousand guilty verdicts from others can’t dampen our joy one bit. If that person doesn’t declare us

not guilty, hearing “not guilty” from a thousand others doesn’t matter. Maybe that person is one of our parents. Maybe it’s our spouse.

Sometimes it’s an actual judge. If you’re on trial for a capital crime, you may plead your case to your friends, and they may be a very sympathetic audience—maybe even sympathetic to the point of ignoring facts. You may plead your case to your attorneys, and they may say that they believe you to be innocent. As you testify concerning your innocence and why what you did was justifiable, you may have every single person in the audience nodding along with you and murmuring audibly, “Mm-hmm!” But none of it means anything unless the judge declares you not guilty.

The one we need to justify us—to declare us not guilty—is God, because you and I have committed crimes against him, and I’m 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’ve committed aren’t really deserving of the eternal death penalty from God. You might be able to convince them that what you’ve done isn’t even wrong. They may 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.

But what you can get others to say about 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, making us guilty before him and deserving of the 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.”

On the other hand, there’s Jesus. We’ve looked at Jesus’ life in the gospels and judged it for ourselves to be a perfect life. We’ve 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 Jesus died on the cross, he 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 still pretty surprising, it should be utterly 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, for my sins, for the sins of the

world. Therefore, 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, and it 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.

But when he raised Jesus to life on Easter Sunday, it was a clear declaration that Jesus was not guilty. It was as though he was saying, “I agree with my 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, whom he was really justifying. While the passage in Romans chapter 4 states quite clearly that God raised Jesus to life, it doesn’t say that he did so primarily to make a statement about *Jesus’* justification. If that was all that happened that first Easter morning, we’d be here this morning doing nothing more than celebrating that things turned out well for Jesus. We’d be nothing more than death row inmates hearing the news that an innocent man had been declared not guilty. “Nice for that person,” we’d say, “but it doesn’t do *us* any good.”

Listen closely to what Paul says, because there’s one word that makes all the difference: “He was raised to life for *our* justification.” 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’ll hear people say that Easter isn’t about bunnies or candy. They’re right. Like at Christmas, we might say: “Jesus is the reason for the season.” All of that is true.

But Easter isn’t only about Jesus. In fact, it’s really about you. It’s about you being freed from the prison of sin and the fear of death. It’s about you being declared not guilty by the one whose judgment matters above all else. It’s about you being justified by God. Happy Easter! Amen.