

Easter 2023

Victory Life Church — Sunday, April 9, 2023

Introduction

Matthew 28:1-6a (NLT) Early on Sunday morning, **as the new day was dawning**, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. Then the angel spoke to the women. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn’t here! **He is risen from the dead**, just as he said would happen...

Today, we celebrate the most significant event in all of human history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who have believed in Him and chosen to follow Him have gathered on the first day of the week, Sunday, every week since that first Easter. Easter Sunday marked a “new day” dawning for humanity and the world. Where the world had lived in darkness, a new light has shined. Jesus has been raised from the dead, ascended to the throne in heaven, defeating death and the devil, and in so doing, is now King of the world and calls us to believe in Him and follow Him in order to receive all that he has done for us and walk in all he has for us.

But if you are unfamiliar with the story, or if these events do not seem to make much of a connection with you, or if what I am saying you have heard before and sound like pious speech with no real relevance to your everyday life, let me explain how important this is to us right now in this moment and for each of our lives.

Framing

The Pieta¹ (1498–1499) — Michelangelo Buonarroti

“La Pieta” was carved from a single block of Carrara marble, which he claimed was the most perfect block of marble he had ever worked with. He also claimed that he could “see” the sculpture within the marble itself and that it was his job to merely remove the excess in order to free the image inside, and



is located in [Saint Peter's Basilica](#) in the [Vatican City](#). Michelangelo's Pieta sculpture is unique in the fact that it is the only one of his works that he ever signed. His signature is carved as *MICHAELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTIN[US] FACIEBA[T]* “Michelangelo Buonarroti the Florentine did it.” The most substantial damage occurred on May 21, 1972 (Pentecost Sunday), when a mentally disturbed geologist, the Hungarian-born Australian [Laszlo Toth](#), walked into the chapel and attacked the sculpture with a [geologist's hammer](#) while shouting, “I

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieta> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieta_\(Michelangelo\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieta_(Michelangelo))

am Jesus Christ; I have risen from the dead!” With 15 blows he removed Mary's arm at the elbow, knocked off a chunk of her nose, and chipped one of her eyelids. A 10-month restoration was done to successfully repair the damage done by. This involved carefully replacing each marble fragment to its rightful place.

It took careful attention and patience, and master restoration artists to carefully restore the Pieta to its original beauty and magnificence Michelangelo had made it to be. But not all attempts at restoring works of art go so well.

The *Ecce Homo*² (Latin: "*Behold the Man*") in the Sanctuary of Mercy church in Borja, Spain, is a fresco painted circa 1930 by the Spanish painter Elías García Martínez depicting Jesus crowned with thorns. In 2012, the artwork, which was painted directly on the wall, had cracked and faded. A well-meaning elderly lady in the local community desired to restore the painting,³ but despite the good intentions, the attempt at restoration didn't just fail, it turned into a viral internet meme sensation.⁴



I use this as an analogy to show how our attempts at doing or being “good” result in being anywhere from cringy, like this failed art restoration, to total failure and destruction. Evil and injustice are the most apparent evidence of our failures. But there isn't just evil “out there,” but also “in here” as well.

Connection

Humans are God's magnificent and beautiful works of art, the pinnacle of His creation, creatively designed and called to be “image-bearers,” or mirrors, of His goodness and glory. We were made to reflect His creative beauty into all of creation. We would do this through being in relationship with Him, and trusting His wisdom and guidance for how we are to live. Originally, this set-up was sweet.

But humanity was lured by deception into seizing control of life and destiny for themselves, defining good and evil on their own terms, and the Scriptures call this “sin.”⁵ Sin, in its most basic form, simply means to “miss the mark” or “fall short of a goal.” If that is the case, what's the goal? Again, every human is an image of God, God's work of art, a sacred being who represents the Creator and is worthy of respect. If we see the world and other humans through this lens of Scripture, sin is a failure to love God and others by not treating them with the honor they deserve.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecce_Homo_\(Martínez_and_Giménez\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecce_Homo_(Martínez_and_Giménez))

³ <https://www.nytimes.com>

⁴ <https://www.bu.edu/sequitur/2016/04/29/handler-ecce/>

⁵ Other terms used are “iniquity” which means “crooked”, and “transgression” which is to “break trust.”

But these two are not isolated or separated, they are deeply connected. Failing to honor a human made in God's image is a failure to love God, it is a failure, or missing the mark, of being truly human, God's image-bearer, reflecting His goodness and glory to other humans and the world. But here is what is important about this, most of the time when humans are "sinning," missing the mark or failing to reach the goal of being God's image-bearers, they don't even know they are doing it. So sin is about more than doing bad things. It describes how easily we deceive ourselves and spin illusions to redefine our bad decisions as good ones.⁶

One of the earliest stories of the Bible is the story of two brothers, Cain & Abel. This is where "sin" is first mentioned in Scripture. Cain becomes angry that God has shown favor to his younger brother, and God warns him, "If you don't choose what is good, sin is crouching at the door. It wants you, but you can rule over it."⁷ In this story, sin is depicted as a wild, hungry animal that wants to consume humans.

So sin, our self-deception of defining good and evil on our own terms, is rooted deep in our desires and selfish urges that drive us to act for our own benefit at the expense of others. The Apostle Paul would later reflect on "sin" as a force that rules over us, and that we are slaves to it.⁸ This sin has infected all humans, and what's more, it's not *only* human sin in the world, there is a real spiritual enemy lurking in the shadows perpetuating the evil, enslaving and deceiving humans to our sin.

Human sin and evil, as well as spiritual enemies, have wreaked havoc on humanity, distorting God's image in us, vandalizing His beautiful work of art. Like the deranged geologist striking blow after blow to the Pieta, our deep selfish impulse that drives much of our behavior strikes blow after blow to God's image in us and others. God's beautiful image in humans is horribly distorted and broken by our failure to be humans who fully love God and others.

And because of inability to judge between what is good or evil, most of our attempts at restoration have only made it worse. Our anger rarely solves any problem long-term. Our sexual immorality, regardless of cultural approval, never gives us the pleasure we seek; instead it destroys our identities, relationships, and families. Our greed drives us to an idolatry of status and possessions, making us abuse ourselves or others to get what we want, or spend a significant portion of our lives climbing a status ladder only to find out it isn't worth it. Our facades of comfort mask internal struggles of depression and hopelessness and anxiety. Our unforgiveness corrupts our hearts, and harbors hatred and malice. Our fears make us act in all sorts of ways that hurt ourselves and others. The examples are endless as to how our sin makes our lives, other people's lives, and the world broken and corrupted.

Our tendency toward self-deception makes us turn a blind eye to what's wrong in us. And the constant news cycle of bad story after negative news is a constant reminder that we are

⁶ A couple Biblical examples are like when Pharaoh wants to build Egypt's economy and protect national security. In his mind, this justifies enslaving the Israelites. He thinks it's good, and he's totally unaware how evil it is. (Ex. 5:16) Or when King Saul is chasing David around the wilderness trying to kill him, he thought he was bringing a criminal to justice, until he realizes he's the corrupt one. He says, "I have sinned. I am the failure." (1 Sam. 26:21)

⁷ Genesis 4:7

⁸ Romans 5:21 and 6:6

broken and deeply flawed, God's work of art has suffered countless blows and no longer reveals beauty and goodness, only ugly expressions of evil.

Gospel of Jesus

We needed more than good advice, more than new self-help tactics, more than new cultural trends, more than new laws and policies. We needed help, we need a Savior. And this is the good news of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection has made available to us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus is the answer to the problem with what has gone wrong in the world and ourselves through sin. His resurrection from the dead, of all that it means (and it means a lot), signifies that His life, His message, and His death must be taken seriously. And the message of His life and death is that He is here to solve what has gone wrong.

Acts 10:36-43 (NLT) “This is **the message of Good News** for the people of Israel—that there is **peace with God** through Jesus Christ, who is **Lord of all**. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus **went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil**, for God was with him. And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but **God raised him to life on the third day**. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that **Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all**—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that **everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.**”

Peter, a close friend of Jesus, is making specific claims about Jesus, which He refers to as Good News. He says Jesus is Lord of all, He is in charge. And being in charge, he went around doing “good,” and a part of doing good was “healing all who were oppressed by the devil,” the dark spiritual being luring humanity into brokenness and rebellion. He was crucified, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. And because He is raised from the dead, the devil has been defeated, and our sin has been dealt with. And those who put their trust in Jesus can receive the forgiveness of their sins. Or as he puts it in another letter he wrote:

1 Peter 2:22a, 24-25 (NLT) He never **sinned**, ... **He personally carried our sins** in his body on the cross so that **we can be dead to sin and live for what is right**. By his wounds you are **healed**. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls.

Our lives can be “healed”, restored by what Jesus has done for us on the cross and in his resurrection. He has done for us what we could not do for ourselves, bring healing and restoration. But it isn't that he is just Savior, but he is also Lord and Master, or as Peter says, our Shepherd, the Guardian of our souls. Jesus is our master in the way that he is the master restoration artist who heals all the brokenness our sin has done to distort God's image in us. As the Apostle Paul puts it...

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NLT) God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For **we are God's masterpiece**. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Conclusion

The resurrection vindicated Jesus as God's chosen vessel to restore the world, defeating death, and sin and the devil with it. The vandal has been defeated and disarmed. The damage we have done to ourselves and the world can be healed, and you can be restored.

The transformation and restoration is not a new rule book, new set or required behaviors, a new program, but a real and deep transformation of the center of who you are. The New Testament calls it being born again, a new start.

Being restored enables us to participate in God's big project of restoring His world.

Colossians 1:20 (MSG) ...all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.