

Introduction

I'd like to begin by showing you something that's offensive but instructive as well. It's a swastika. Consider two questions. First, what do you think of when you see a swastika? I think of Nazism with its doctrines of Aryan superiority, living space, and nihilism. Second, what do you feel when you see it? I feel dread.

Symbols

The swastika is what is called a symbol. A symbol is an object, image, or action that stands for something else. Many things, pursuant to that definition, can be symbols. Hairstyles, kinds of music, bodily gestures, logos, actions like burning bras or flags, and clothing styles are examples of what I mean. The guitar and organ, for instance, have become symbols in the church – standing for contrasting worship styles.

Those examples teach us something about symbols. They have a strong emotional linkage to ideas. They mediate the power of ideas into the activities and places of our everyday lives. They're heavily laden with feeling in doing so and thus, stir us in the very core of our being.

With what I've said about symbols in mind, I'd like you to identify something, what is clearly the focal point of our sanctuary, the object to which our attention is most drawn. What is that? It's the cross on the front wall behind me. There's a reason it's the focal point. It's because the cross is, beyond any doubt, the central symbol of Christianity today.

But why is that? Think about it. On the one hand, we love Jesus. On the other, He was brutally tortured and killed on a cross. So why in the world do we display crosses everywhere to remind us that He was?

A skeptic once argued to me that we shouldn't and drew an analogy to make his point. A mother's son, whom she deeply loves, hangs himself. She then displays a hangman's noose in the middle of her living room as a vivid reminder that he did. Christians displaying crosses, he contended, is as morbid and detestable as that would be.

But it isn't. Remember what I said about symbols. They mediate ideas to us, which is precisely why the cross is a valid symbol of Christianity. It's because of the ideas it mediates to us.

The Cross as Symbol

Paul identifies one of those in verse 3. It's the substitution of Jesus. Notice how he describes what happened on the cross. Jesus died **"for our sins."** That phrase reveals the utterly unique nature of His death. It was substitutionary. That simply means that He stood in for us on the cross. He took all of our sins into Himself and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid so that we wouldn't have to.

That necessarily means that between the time of His arrest and death, Father God viewed Him as the most evil person who ever lived. There was an exhibit in Niagara Falls that featured the most evil people in history and narrated their lives. It included the Roman emperor Caligula, Attila the Hun, Genghis Kan, Joseph Stalin, and Adolph Hitler among them. But Jesus was all of those individuals rolled into one. Father God viewed Him as more evil than all of them combined because all of their sins, and the sins of everyone else, were upon Him.

That's the substitution of Jesus and verse 2 declares its practical consequence. We're **"saved."** To be saved means two things, one of which is the forgiveness of our sins. The Bible uses different imagery to explain that. My personal favorite is found in Psalm 51:7 and Isaiah 1:18. We're made **"white as snow."** The ancient world didn't have Clorox Bleach that makes things **"whiter than white,"** as its jingle says. The whitest thing the psalmist and Isaiah could think of was snow and that's what happens to us metaphorically when God forgives our sins. We're made whiter than snow or whiter than white. That means He views us as if we hadn't committed those sins, as if we're sinless.

A pastor tells about a woman who had a long succession of unhappy sexual relationships with different men, which weighed her down with a load of painful memories and guilt. But then she got saved and began

experiencing God's forgiveness and grace. One day, she came to her pastor and with a beaming face declared: **"I just discovered something wonderful about myself. I just realized that today, in God's sight, I am a virgin."** How right she was. God viewed her as if she hadn't had even one illicit relationship, as if she were a virgin. She was whiter than snow, whiter than white.

Those then are the ideas the cross as symbol mediates. It's the substitution of Jesus and its consequence, the forgiveness of our sins.

The Empty Tomb as Symbol

But what would you think if I said the cross shouldn't be the central symbol of Christianity? Not that it shouldn't be *a* symbol, but that it shouldn't be *the central* symbol.

Ponder an enlightening fact. The cross wasn't the central symbol of early Christianity. In his television series and book titled *Civilization*, Kenneth Clark points out that the cross didn't emerge as a significant Christian symbol until the 5th century AD. Before that, Christian religion, art, and culture, was **"concerned with miracles, healings, and with hopeful aspects of faith like the Ascension and Resurrection."**

His contention is consistent with a New Testament exam I took in seminary. One of its 100 questions was this, **"What was the central message of the first century church?"** I answered, **"the death of Jesus on the cross,"** and got it wrong. I debated the professor about it but he wouldn't budge. The right answer, he insisted, is **"the resurrection of Jesus."** And I know now it is.

We see that in our text today. After declaring that Jesus died for our sins in verse 3, Paul declares in verse 4 that He **"was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."** He knew that because all the people in verses 5-8 and he saw Him alive after He was dead. Those then are two historical facts, the death and resurrection of Jesus. And notice which of those two Paul goes on to thoroughly examine in the rest of Chapter 15, verses 9-58. It's the resurrection. His theme, stated in

verse 14, is, **“if Christ has not been raised, you faith is vain.”**

I say all of that to say this. The cross is a meaningful symbol and we should cherish it. But it shouldn't be the only or even the primary symbol of Christianity. The empty tomb should be. It mediates to us an idea that was the central message of the early church – the resurrection of Jesus. He **“was buried,”** that is, really and truly dead (verse 4). But in time and space, in history, He rose from the dead and is alive today.

That's the resurrection of Jesus and verse 2 reveals its practical consequence. We're saved. Remember what I said. To be saved means two things. I explained one of those, which is the result of Jesus' crucifixion. It's forgiveness of sins. But there's another, which is the result of His resurrection. It's newness of life. Most people inside and outside the church today, including preachers, equate being saved almost exclusively with forgiveness of sins, but they shouldn't. The truth is that the saved aren't just forgiven. They're given newness of life as well.

Jesus Himself preached and, for 33 years, exemplified this life. His resurrection then validated the truth and indestructibility of it and made it available to the saved. The resurrected Jesus, in other words, creates newness of life in the saved. He gives them *a new overall quality of human existence* with corresponding *new powers*. He progressively shapes and enhances their thoughts, feelings, will, and actions. They, as a result, increasingly think, feel, will, and act as all sane human beings want to think, feel, will, and act.

Author Rebecca Pippert writes about a course she took at Harvard called *Systems of Counseling*. One day, the professor discussed a case study. In it, the therapist helped his patient uncover a hidden hostility toward his mother. Identifying the problem helped the patient. He felt as if a great load had been lifted off his shoulders. The professor was about to go to the next case study when Rebecca raised her hand. She asked him what the therapist would do if the patient returned a few weeks later and said: **“I'm so relieved to understand what was bothering me . . . but now I'd like to get beyond my anger. I'd**

like to be able to love and forgive her. How do I do that?" The professor paused for a few moments after her question and then replied, **"I think the therapist would say, 'Lots of luck.'"**

But suppose that patient gets saved and Jesus creates newness of life in him. Suppose He gives the patient *a new overall quality of human existence* with corresponding *new powers*. The problem with his mother will eventually be solved if he does. He won't feel anger and resent her. He'll feel love and forgive her instead.

That illustrates newness of life but it's just the tip of the iceberg. The Bible pictures it, in detail, this way. We love and generously bless those who insult and humiliate us. We eagerly pull for the success of someone who is competing with us for favor, position, or financial gain. We care about the welfare of those who sue us. We neither desire nor seek the praise of others for our good deeds. We enjoy simple things more than others enjoy luxurious things. We aren't offended by slights. We receive the trials of life with confidence, patience, and joy. We're relaxed when forced to wait. We're utterly at ease in the face of death, and on it goes. That's the newness of life that the resurrected Jesus creates in us.

You can see why I said what I said. The empty tomb should be a symbol of Christianity as much or even more so than the cross is. It mediates two ideas that were the central message of the early church – the resurrection of Jesus and the newness of life it brings.

Get Saved

Let me ask you a question now in light of those two symbols, the cross and the empty tomb. Do you want the forgiveness of sins and the newness of life that they represent. If so, you can have it and Paul tells you how in verses 1-2. You must **"stand in"** or **"hold fast to"** what he calls the **"gospel"** or the **"word"** about Jesus. Those two actions, **"standing in"** and **"holding fast to"** suggest making something fundamental. In this case, that something is actually a someone, Jesus.

You make Him not you fundamental.

To make Him fundamental means two things. First, you make Him the primary object of your thought. When your mind isn't necessarily occupied, you place it on Him more than anyone or anything else. And second, you make Him the primary object of your concern. You direct your attention and intention first and foremost to two things, Him being exalted and Him having His way in all things. Or to say it another way, you arrange your daily affairs around being with Him and learning and doing all that He says. He, not you, **"runs the show"** so to speak.

When you do that, you live interactively with Jesus and His kingdom at hand. Doing so in turn infuses His resurrection power into you, which creates the newness of life I just explained.

Conclusion

I close with four symbols and two questions. The symbols are a cross, empty tomb, Nike check, and crescent moon. Now the questions. First, which of those is the most powerful symbol in the world today? It's the cross. Second, which should also be? It's the empty tomb. The Easter seasons calls us to live consistently with the ideas that those two symbols mediate. It calls us to make Jesus fundamental. We'll have forgiveness of sins and newness of life if we do.