

“Do the Sacraments Prove that Easter is True?”

“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20b, ESV)

Josh McDowell, an apologist (defender) of the Christian faith, was the first person I discovered who put forth the idea that the Sacraments are evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. I’m fairly certain that McDowell was not the first person to make this connection, and to my knowledge he doesn’t claim that this idea originated with him. McDowell, though, is the first person that I ever heard put forth the use of the Sacraments in the early church as evidence that the earliest Christians believed that Jesus rose again from the dead. I don’t agree theologically with Josh McDowell on all points of Biblical teaching, but I do respect much of what he has written in the field of apologetics.

As we celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord this month, let’s examine this claim made by John McDowell about Easter and the Sacraments. Referencing Colossians 2:12 and Romans 6:1-6, McDowell writes the following in a chapter entitled *“Support of Deity: The Resurrection – Hoax or History?”*: **“Paul explains that in baptism a believer is united to Christ in His death and resurrection. When he enters the water he dies to his old sin nature, and he rises out of the water to share a new resurrected life of Christ. There is nothing in Christianity older than the sacraments, and yet they are directly linked to the death and resurrection of Christ. How is one to account for the meaning of Christian baptism if the resurrection never took place?”** (*The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*,” Josh D. McDowell, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville; Copyright 1999, p. 257).

McDowell raises an important question indeed – one that I would call a rhetorical question, with the answer being that it’s not possible to account for the New Testament teaching about Holy Baptism had Jesus remained in His grave. Even St. Peter himself made this connection to Jesus’ resurrection when he wrote that this Sacrament ***“now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”*** (1 Peter 3:21, ESV). It’s quite clear, isn’t it, that both the doctrine and practice of Holy Baptism in the New Testament confess a risen Savior. But what about the Holy Supper?

Well, speaking about the Sacrament of the Altar, McDowell quotes Michael Green in his book *Man Alive* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois; Copyright 1968): **“They met Him in this sacrament. He was not dead and gone, but risen and alive. And they would celebrate this death of His, in the consciousness of His risen presence, until His longed for return at the end of history (1 Corinthians 11:26). We possess a short eucharistic prayer from the earliest Christian community, from the original Aramaic-speaking church (1 Corinthians 16:22 and *Didache*, 10). Here it is. *Maranatha!* It means, “Our Lord, come!” How that could have been the attitude of the early Christians as they met to celebrate the Lord’s Supper among themselves is quite inexplicable, unless He did indeed rise from the dead on the third day. (Green, MA, 53)”** (*The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*,” Josh D. McDowell, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville; Copyright 1999, pp. 256-257).

A very early Christian teacher also confirms what Green wrote above. For a man name Justin Martyr, who lived during the early and mid-second century AD (mere decades following the time of the apostles) and was killed for being faithful to Christ, wrote the following about Holy

Communion: **“This food is called with us the *eucharist*, of which none can partake, but the believing and baptized, who live according to the commands of Christ. For we use these not as common bread and common drink; but like as Jesus Christ our Redeemer was made flesh through the word of God, and took upon him flesh and blood for our redemption; so we are taught, that the nourishment blessed by the word of prayer... is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus”** (*History of the Christian Church, Volume 2*, Philip Schaff, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, Second Printing, January, 2002, pp. 235-236; Originally published 1858; this printing, fifth edition).

See, as Justin Martyr indicated, the early church believed in the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. In fact, this was pretty much the uncontested teaching of the church for the first 1500 years until the radical reformers denied that Christ is present with His body and blood in the Holy Supper. And Justin Martyr and the early church believed that Christ was present with His body and blood because He bodily rose again. And like the early church, we also confess that the risen Lord is present in the bread and the wine with His very body and blood. For as it says in *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 10 (Line 57)*: **“In the Lord’s Supper, Christ’s body and blood are truly and actually present. They are truly administered with those things that are seen, bread and wine. And we speak of the presence of the living Christ, for we know that ‘death no longer has dominion over Him’ (Romans 6:9)”** (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, Second Edition*; Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis; Copyright 2006, p. 155).

So, do the Sacraments prove that Easter is true – that Jesus bodily rose from the dead? Well, in the New Testament and the early church the Sacraments certainly bore witness to Jesus’ resurrection - as they do today as well. Again quoting McDowell: **“The institution of the church, then, is a historical phenomenon explained only by Jesus’ resurrection. Those sacraments that Christianity observes serve also as a continual evidence of the church’s origin”** (*The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict,*” Josh D. McDowell, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville; Copyright 1999, p. 257).

And while the Sacraments provide historical evidence that the early Christians truly confessed that Jesus rose again (i.e. that the reports of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances of Jesus weren’t some fabricated legends that developed many years after Jesus died), yet *proving* scientifically that Jesus rose again from the dead is virtually impossible. Why? It isn’t because Jesus’ resurrection isn’t literally true, but because the method for reaching such scientific proof when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection is beyond the reach of science. In fact, being able to *prove* that Jesus Christ rose to eternal life is also beyond the limit of our human reason. Nevertheless, Jesus’ resurrection can be (and is) true even though human beings are unable to fully understand or explain it using logic or the scientific method.

See, even though the Sacraments bear strong witness that the church from her earliest days has understood that the risen Messiah is alive and is with her, yet it truly does take faith to trust that Jesus rose again. And thankfully the Sacraments provide you and I with the unshakeable confidence to boldly confess that Easter is true – that Jesus rose again the third day. For the Sacraments give and sustain saving faith. **“Disciples”** are only **“[made]”** (**Matthew 28:19, ESV**) through the Means of Grace offered by the risen One who said **“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

My fellow believers, our crucified and risen God & Savior is present in His Word and Sacraments. And through these Means of Grace He gives us the deliverance, remission of sins, and everlasting life that He earned for us. And through these same Means of Grace He creates (and sustains) the faith within us to receive His saving gifts. So yes, the Sacraments do provide us with the witness that Jesus rose again, but much more importantly, the Sacraments give us the faith to trust that Easter is true. For through His Sacraments, God creates His church, and preserves her until the day when her risen Lord and Redeemer visibly returns.

Dear Christians, God has given us, His church, the Means of Grace to *“make disciples of all nations”* (Matthew 28:19, ESV). And our use of His Means of Grace is not only a confession that we believe that our God and Savior has risen, conquered death, and shall live forever, but His Word and Sacraments also offer what we (and every person) needs – namely, reconciliation with the Creator of the world, and the sure and certain hope of life everlasting with Him in the resurrection that He has prepared for us by His own victory over sin, the devil, and the grave.

Shay and I wish each and every one of you a most blessed Easter,
Pastor

Psalm Readings for April

WEEK ONE: Sunday, April 02; PSALM 92; Monday, April 03; PSALM 93; Tuesday, April 04; PSALM 94; Wednesday, April 05; PSALM 95; Thursday, April 06; PSALM 96; Friday, April 07; PSALM 97; Saturday, April 08; PSALM 98

WEEK TWO: Sunday, April 09; PSALM 99; Monday, April 10; PSALM 100; Tuesday, April 11; PSALM 101; Wednesday, April 12; PSALM 102; Thursday, April 13; PSALM 103; Friday, April 14; PSALM 104:1-23; Saturday, April 15, PSALM 104:24-35

WEEK THREE: Sunday, April 16; PSALM 105:1-22; Monday, April 17; PSALM 105:23-45; Tuesday, April 18; PSALM 106:1-27; Wednesday, April 19; PSALM 106:28-48; Thursday, April 20; PSALM 107:1-22; Friday, April 21; PSALM 107:23-43; Saturday, April 22; PSALM 108

WEEK FOUR: Sunday, April 23; PSALM 109:1-20; Monday, April 24; PSALM 109:21-31; Tuesday, April 25; PSALM 110; Wednesday, April 26; PSALM 111; Thursday, April 27; PSALM 112; Friday, April 28; PSALM 113; Saturday, April 29; PSALM 114

WEEK FIVE: Sunday, April 30; PSALM 115; Monday, May 01; PSALM 116; Tuesday, May 02; PSALM 117; Wednesday, May 03; PSALM 118:1-14; Thursday, May 04; PSALM 118:15-29; Friday, May 05; PSALM 119:1-8; Saturday, May 06; PSALM 119:9-16

