

CIC 4/27/25

We just celebrated holy week and Easter. And Easter acts in many ways as a climatic event in the Christian calendar, and rightly so. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the cornerstone, the lynchpin of our faith. These events should act as top billing. There's a reason that John 3:16 is probably the most famous bible verse. **16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. There's a reason that people that normally would never go to church come back for Holy Week.

But Holy Week and Easter are not the end of the story regarding God and humanity. Even regarding Jesus as a figure in Scripture. There's more. And it's really important that we know what happens afterwards.

Acts 1:1-9

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

This is the day known as the Ascension. When Jesus ascended into heaven after resurrecting from the dead on Easter. According to Luke's narrative in both the Gospel of Luke and its sequel the book of Acts, this is Jesus' parting conversation with his followers as a group before He leaves the physical Earth.

I want to focus in on verse 6

Acts 1:6

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

You can see at this point that the disciples are concerned about the fate of Israel as a national, political entity, they have this image of Jesus as a Messiah that will bring about geopolitical change in Israel's favor. Specifically restore Israel's independence and bring it back to the golden age of kings David and Solomon a millennia ago. From their perspective, they've witnessed clear irrefutable evidence of Jesus' divinity and his authority over heaven and earth in the resurrection. They know He is the Messiah, but they haven't seen the Messiah do what they've expected yet. So they're asking, what's next?

The topic of Jesus as Messiah, the prophesied savior King of Israel, is a topic you see discussed by Jesus and his followers multiple times in the gospels, especially in Mark's gospel.

Mark 8:27-30

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

We already know that he is the Messiah, Peter and the disciples were right.

So it might seem curious that Jesus does not want to be known as who he actually is. The Messiah, the savior King of Israel. Why would Jesus want that information to be kept a secret.

Here’s another scripture that can help explain why.

Mark 10:35-37

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

36 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

37 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

Mark 10:41-45

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. **42** Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The disciples keep imagining how Jesus as Messiah, the prophesied savior king is going to favor them individually. How he is going to reward them for their service to Him.

They have this image of Jesus in their head that doesn't line up with what the real Jesus is actually saying.

When the disciples know that they've realized the truth about Jesus' identity, that he isn't just a rabbi or miraculous healer, but the Messianic savior king they've heard about for generations, they imagine Jesus the way they typically imagine a king. They imagine him as someone who crushes enemies, who rewards followers with wealth, power, titles. Which makes sense, because the Israelites have been living with this prophecy of a savior king since the time of Isaiah, the exile, and the prophets, hundreds of years earlier. Isaiah's book was written approximately 7 centuries before Jesus' life and ministry. That's like going back from now to the 1300's, so it's a long time, a very long time to be imagining someone you haven't seen yet.

And during those 7 centuries, the Israelites were oppressed and conquered multiple times by foreign pagan empires, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian Empire, then the southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered and its people exiled by the Babylonian Empire. Then Persia conquered Babylon, so there was a new empire in charge, and compared to the other empires, Persia favored the Israelites, Persia helped the Israelites return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem, but the Israelites were ultimately still living at the whim of a foreign, pagan occupier. Then the Persians were conquered by the Greeks, who desecrated the temple and humiliated the Israelites, then the Romans rose up and become the new global superpower, and became the new occupier and oppressor of the Jewish homeland. So when the Israelites think of the Messiah, their savior king, it's a term that has been in their imagination for a long time, and their political, socio economic, cultural context has shaped it into their own ideal image of what a Israelite savior king would be to them. If you've been oppressed for generations, if you've seen the fortunes of your family lost, if you've heard stories of how things used to be great but they haven't felt that way for a long time, then it makes sense that your image of a savior king

would be someone that defeats your enemies, that materially rewards his supporters, that rebuilds what was lost, that makes you a winner instead of a loser.

Even those closest to Jesus found it hard to understand Jesus as he stood in front of them. Because he's the Messiah, and that's a term that they, their families, their culture have already defined for a very long time now, they don't understand what he's telling them. When Jesus says, “, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all, **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” that statement doesn't really register with them. The notion that Jesus came to serve, not to be served, and he wants those that follow him to do the same runs entirely counter to their expectations. This is why Jesus told the disciples to not share the realization that he was the Messiah when they made the connection, because he knew people would see the signs of who he was and misunderstand.

They saw Jesus as the Messiah they imagined, not the Messiah He really is.

In multiple ways we can do the same thing today

We can reduce Jesus to the Messiah we imagine, instead of the Messiah he really is. We turn him into the deity that makes us successful, the deity that helps us get the job we want, the grades we want, the house we want, the car we want, the girl or the guy we want, the kids we want, the health we want. He becomes the fighter of our political candidates, the guy orchestrating a win for the party we like, and defeat for the people we disagree with. And **Jesus is our Messiah, but He is not *just* the Messiah we want.**

And **when we limit Jesus to just being the Messiah we want, we miss out on the big picture**, and therefore our image of Jesus becomes a false image. Like the disciples angling for positions, we can end up worshipping Jesus to have the life we want here and now. Like the followers

asking about the Kingdom of Israel, we can politicize the Messiah, we can confuse his kingship with that of a typical earthly king, the guy who champions our cause and defeats our political enemies. Which truth be told is the same things that pagans have always done with their gods. More or less, the pagan mentality goes sounds this: if I treat you well god, if I'm on your side, if I go through the ceremonies and give the right offerings then you'll give me what I want, you'll make my life great, you'll make my nation great, you'll defeat the people I don't like.

So going back to Acts, when those around Jesus ask about restoring the Kingdom to Israel, their imagined outcome, here is His response.

Acts 1:7-8

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Translation: What's going to happen next is *not* going to be what you expect. But here's what I *do* want you to expect: you will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria (ie the places you know, are familiar with), but not just there, the whole world. The vision Jesus presents and asks his followers to anticipate is a lot bigger than their preconceived notions of the Messiah and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. It's not the doling out of titles or favors as rewards to supporters, it's not the restoration of a political or ethnically Jewish Kingdom, it's not the military or political triumph of the Israelites over the Romans or their other pagan enemies. The vision Jesus presents is of a world reconciled with God.

It's a vision you see other Scripture writers agree with.

We can see it in the very end of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus communicates the great commission to his followers

Matthew 28:16-20

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

How many nations are included in this commission? All. All nations.

And in John’s vision in Revelation, the vision for God’s future work, includes this scene

Revelation 7:9-10

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. **10** And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

Which nations, which tribes, which people, which languages are included? Every nation, every tribe, every people, every language.

This is a big vision. Far bigger than just Jesus’ followers’ contemporary understanding of the Kingdom of Israel.

And it's a vision that includes us

In Matthew, it is his followers that Jesus tells to go and make disciples of all nations, in Acts, it's his followers that Jesus tells to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

And in Paul's writings you see this involvement of Jesus' followers in this global work as well.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Who was God reconciling to himself in Christ? The world, not just Israel, not just the Jewish people, but the world. And in this work of reconciliation with God, we've been committed as co-laborers. We are Christ's ambassadors, for God to use to make His appeal to the world. representatives of his kingdom, working to reconcile others to him.

So the big picture of Jesus is not just Him as our personal Messiah, or our nation's Messiah, but the world's Messiah. And his kingship isn't about just living a good life here and now, or our nation being successful here and now, but is about the whole world being reconciled to himself. **Jesus isn't just our savior or America's savior, He is the world's savior.** And he invites, commissions us to make disciples of Jesus alongside Him, to be His witnesses, to be His ambassadors. When we follow Jesus, when we accept him as the resurrected, suffering Messianic, savior King, we get to be a part of saving the world alongside Him. That is an honor, a privilege, far greater than personal or political success for here and now. It's not the job,

or house, or car, or perfect spouse that we imagine, it's not the election victory we hope for. It's much better, much bigger than all that

Today, I want to challenge us to reflect on how we might make Jesus the Messiah we imagine instead of the Messiah he is, how we might miss the big picture of Christ of Messianic King of the World. How our hopes and dreams about Jesus and his kingship over our lives and our world might be too materialistic or political. I want us to receive that big picture vision of being a disciple, a witness, an ambassador of Jesus Christ.

In the short term, Maybe receiving that big picture looks like talking to your neighbors, both the ones you like and the ones you don't, maybe that means sharing your faith with your friend, asking a co-worker if it's ok if you pray for them. Perhaps it means not just focusing on your issues, however legitimate those are, but remembering those that are also in pain or distress and checking in with them, encouraging them. Making sure they know they aren't alone and they aren't forgotten. Maybe receiving that picture in the short-term means sacrificing time and money going on a mission trip for the first time ever, or supporting missionaries financially.

Long term, maybe receiving the big picture looks like changing your mindset about where you live. Compared to the rest of the US, New England is a secular place, which can be easy as a Christian to think of as a negative, barrier or a hardship, a reason to be defensive and isolated, but what if that fact about our region was a positive instead, a reason to look around and see opportunity instead of scarcity. To see people that aren't Christian not as rivals or buzzkills but as neighbors to love. As lost sheep that you can help reconcile to the good shepherd. Perhaps you've been planted here not to survive as a lonely tree, but as a means by which God can change the whole ecosystem and plant a garden that bears fruit for generations.

Long-Term perhaps receiving the big picture could mean moving to a place even more in need of Christ's witness than here, not to make more money

or be more comfortable, but to be an ambassador. Perhaps it could even look like becoming a missionary yourself.

I want us to dream God sized dreams. I want us to pray God sized prayers. I want us to ask God: God give us your vision for the world and my life in it.

Let us not just see our lives and the world through the lens of what we want God to do for us, but what is God inviting us to do with Him?