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Y O U N G   A D U L T S   W E E K   O F   P R A Y E R :   D A Y   S I X

# AGENTS *of* **JUSTICE** *and* **BEAUTY**

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**T**he resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It is the core fact—the central event—of Christianity and, as such, sometimes kind of merely assumed rather than truly remembered and celebrated. But we cannot overestimate the significance of what happened that Sunday morning after Jesus was crucified, and we should take every opportunity to remind ourselves of this astounding reality and its implications for everything—all our lives, all our dreams, all our hopes.

So much of what we take for granted about life and death—what is important and meaningful—comes to us from the culture in which we are born, educated, and live. We simply breathe in so much of our worldviews from what others around us take for granted—which is another reason that remembering the Resurrection is so valuable; it is a story powerful enough to jolt our worldviews and taken-for-granted, opening us to not just a new way of looking at life but a new kind of life, with different ways of telling our stories, different values, and different priorities.

Perhaps the Resurrection has its most profound effect on how we measure our lives and our attitude to winning and losing. Christian writer Ron Sider puts it like this: "Those who understand the empty tomb can afford to lose now" (I am Not a Social Activist). Because of the sacrifice—the loss—of Jesus and His resurrection victory, faithfulness is always more important than success, no matter how we measure that success. Not only is what Jesus did the foundation for this reassessment of our lives, it is also the model: "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

When "we understand the empty tomb" we can confront our inevitable disappointments and losses in a different way. No longer do we have to win, guard, and maintain our image or be a "success" to justify our place in the world or our sense of worth. No longer does our opinion have to win every argument or have the last word. The last word—or

the Word that will be the last word—has already been spoken.

Of course, it is precisely this assurance that means we do not have to be so uptight about winning and losing today. So often contrary to the values assumed and imposed upon us in almost everything we are told and taught, the eternal realities of the Resurrection—life free us from the need for immediate results and instant wins. "Our response to the hope we have for eternity is to commit ourselves to working for God in the here and now, knowing that what we do has eternal significance" (Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*).

The Resurrection must change everything. In the Resurrection, Jesus turned the tide of history. It is a guarantee of new life and a new world to come but also the beginning of a new kind of life that has now broken into our world. The kingdom of God is already with us, even if not yet complete. With this realization, we begin to see this as a reality in which we can

participate and even contribute to today, perhaps particularly as agents of justice and beauty in a world that desperately needs more of both.

## Justice

We believe God is going to judge the world and to return to set right the wrongs that are done in the world, so we should embrace the Bible's call for justice and begin to live in ways that are consistent with how the world will be. In working and serving, we partner with God in how He serves the world today and in building toward His coming kingdom. As Creator but also as Someone who hears the cries of the poor, God is working to serve and care for us all, even those we might sometimes overlook: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and

sustains the fatherless and the widow” (Psalm 146:7-9).

While we might feel overwhelmed by the needs we see around us and, at times, in our own lives, it’s God who does it—He gives, frees, upholds, watches over, and serves. Remarkably, one of the ways He does that is through His people—us. Again, we are invited to join in His mission to our world with what He is already doing—continuing what Jesus did and serving Him by serving others.

While we appreciate acts of kindness and goodness, acts of service and justice have a broader impact, announcing that the hurt and brokenness we are seeking to address are not the way God desires them to be. When people ask how God could allow suffering, we seek to work with God to change it. We might not be able to fix lives in our communities but, working with God in this way, we can change them.

In the power of the Resurrection and the humility of Jesus, serving others and

seeking their good is one way we can show what God is really like, when He can be obscured by the wrong we see around us: “Search heaven and earth, and there is no truth revealed more powerful than that which is made manifest in works of mercy to those who need our sympathy and aid. This is the truth as it is in Jesus” (Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*).

## Beauty

We believe God created and is going to recreate our world in perfection and beauty, so we should practice our God-given role as stewards of creation and co-creators of beauty, and again begin to live in ways that are consistent with how the world will be.

In *Breath*, a story by Australian writer Tim Winton, one of his characters describes his first glimpse of surfing: “I couldn’t have put words to it as a boy, but later I understood what seized my imagination that day. How strange it was to see

men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared. . . . We never spoke about the business of beauty . . . but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do.”

But in describing surfing as “pointless and beautiful,” perhaps Winton misses the point of beauty—that in a world created and loved by God, beauty is never pointless. Beginning with a creation that was “very good” (Genesis 1:31) to the Old Testament poetry that exults in the wonders of the Creator to Jesus’ pointing to the flowers on the hillside (see Matthew 6:28-30), beauty is always a glimpse of the power, goodness, and love of God, and an awakened appreciation of beauty is a step toward connecting with that reality.

The pointedness of beauty is why theologian N T Wright insists on beauty as a key component of what the

church should be pursuing in the world today: “The church should reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level. This is essential and urgent. It is essential to Christian living that we should celebrate the goodness of creation, ponder its present brokenness, and, insofar as we can, celebrate in advance the healing of the world, the new creation itself” (Simply Christian).

As a first step, we need to find ways to encourage art in its many forms in our churches and communities. Our church foyers or halls can be exhibition spaces; our worship can be more than just singing and speaking. Our artists need our prayers and practical support; our engagement with the community can include shared projects of creativity and beautification. We need to make space for our painters and photographers, sculptors and poets, writers and filmmakers, musicians and storytellers, dancers and actors, scrap-bookers and knitters, designers and animators.

In turn, our artists must be serious and joyous, honest but redemptive and hopeful.

But our understanding of beauty also needs to expand beyond the arts to encompass so many other things we easily take for granted. Beauty is also created by our gardeners and cooks, our builders and homemakers, our tree-planters and professionals, our carers and counsellors, our surfers and explorers, our mothers and friends.

And we are all part of it: there is engagement with beauty—and a contribution to it—in any moment of recognizing and appreciating something beautiful. Then, in pointing out or sharing beauty with another, we become evangelists of beauty and thus agents of the kingdom of God.

As human beings, we create in these and so many other ways because God created, continues to create, and will recreate a world in which beauty is never pointless: “He has surrounded you with beauty to teach you that you

are not placed on earth merely to delve for self, to dig and build, to toil and spin, but to make life bright and joyous and beautiful with the love of Christ—like the flowers, to gladden other lives by the ministry of love” (Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*).

This includes the creation or appreciation of beauty that we might otherwise be tempted to consider pointless. Amid the pain, fears, and sorrows of life, perhaps dancing on water—or whatever is your creative gift or passion—is among the best and bravest things a Christian can do.

## Sharing the invitation

And it is in the context of serving God and serving others by seeking justice and beauty that our mission becomes something different. N T Wright puts it like this: “If we are engaging in the work of new creation, in seeking to bring advance signs of God’s eventual new world into being in the present, in justice and

beauty and a million other ways, then at the centre of the picture stands the personal call of the gospel of Jesus to every child, woman and man” (Surprised by Hope). It is a different way of understanding our mission. What if we understood evangelism as a gracious invitation to join in with the kind of life Jesus had and that focuses on working for, creating, and celebrating justice and beauty in our world today and in the world God has promised to recreate?

Of course, resurrection and the ultimate redemption of creation is the work of God, but the mission of the church is about participation in that life now, between ourselves as a community of faith and as the family of God, and in the various roles we play in our church community. And from this community this kind of life and hope should spill into our wider communities, families, workplaces, and all our relationships and interactions.

It is not necessarily easy, but Paul assures us that

somehow acts of goodness, justice, beauty, and evangelism done in this life matter and even somehow contribute to building God’s kingdom in our world now and in God’s future.

Almost paradoxically, our understanding of the Resurrection—meaning we can afford to lose—also means we can’t lose. 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the most profound New Testament chapters on the meaning of the Resurrection and the hope it offers us. It is a grand and sometimes lofty philosophical discourse, but Paul ends on a remarkably practical note: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Living as part of the kingdom of God puts us out of step with the world around—in good ways. But it can also be difficult. When we serve others, we risk ourselves and we risk being disappointed. We can be

frustrated in working for justice. Our attempts at creativity and beauty might not seem to amount to much, but when we work in harmony with the kingdom of God, in the power of the Resurrection, nothing we do is in vain.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think that Christians have sometimes overlooked the Bible’s calls to seek and create justice and beauty in the world?**
- 2. What activities, projects, or ministries are you already involved with that contribute to justice and/or beauty in large or small ways, even if you have not thought of them in that way before?**
- 3. What more could you do to create justice and beauty in your church and your community?**