

# A RESURRECTION THAT MATTERS

**Our salvation before God stands on the Cross, yes. But it is also founded on something more.**

**O**ne of the hallmarks of evangelical faith is that we are cruci-centric, or “Cross-centered.” And that’s not a bad thing. Rather than focusing the Christian life on merely the example of Jesus’ life and earthly ministry, evangelicals look to his death as the *sine qua non* of our salvation. Without Jesus’ death, there is no access to heaven for sinners and no hope for lasting moral improvement. Author J. R. Daniel Kirk, in “A Resurrection That Matters,” was a leader at his InterVarsity group in college and had much the same Cross-centered outlook. Yet one Easter he came to realize that his theology was missing something very important—the Resurrection. “One day as I was walking back to my dorm,” Kirk says, “it dawned on me that the gospel as I understood it had no need for Jesus to be raised from the dead.” Does your gospel have room for the Resurrection? This study will help show you why it should.



**Scripture:** Acts 2:14–36; Romans 8:18–25; 1 Corinthians 15:12–28; Colossians 3:1–11

**Based on:** “A Resurrection That Matters,” by J. R. Daniel Kirk, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, April 2010



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY



**This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.**

- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them instead.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.



# Christianity Today Bible Study

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Leader's Guide

### Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

*Note to leader: Provide each person with "A Resurrection That Matters" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.*

Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter with joy. But, truth be told, we're more into the former than the latter—and it isn't just because of the presents. The message of Christmas—"God with us"—though deep, is clear. The message of Easter—"He is risen"—though equally deep, is less clear. That's partly because Christ's resurrection is always paired with his death and rarely is considered on its own. We know the significance of his advent and his death, but Jesus' resurrection seems like an add-on—a happy circumstance, no doubt, but of limited value to us today. After all, Christians don't commonly rise from the dead, even though they are reborn spiritually. As Kirk asks, "What is so important about Easter?"

#### Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What's your favorite holiday on the Christian calendar? Why?
- [Q] In a nutshell, why did Jesus rise from the dead?
- [Q] As you consider the theological significance of the Resurrection, how would you differentiate it from the death of Christ on the cross?
- [Q] What difference would you say the Resurrection has made in your life?

### Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

#### Teaching Point One: The Resurrection enthroned Jesus as the Messiah.

At Christmas we celebrate the enfleshment of the eternal Son of God. We see his Incarnation as the only change in status of the Second Person of the Trinity. But the apostle Peter's first sermon in the Book of Acts points out that the first Easter carried with it a change in status for Jesus: enthronement. "To be God's anointed, the Christ, is to be at least in part the human descendant of David," Kirk notes. "And so we find Peter, in the first sermon preached after Jesus' resurrection, insisting on three things: (1) During his life on earth, Jesus was a man to whom God testified through wonders and miracles; (2) King David prophesied that the Messiah would be enthroned when God raised him from the dead; and (3) God has, in fact, *made* Jesus both Lord and Messiah by raising him and thereby enthroning him."



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This sermon, preached before an international throng of Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem, exalted the risen Lord and laid the foundation for the infant church's growth. Read about it in Acts 2:14–36.

**[Q]** Responding to the jibe that the divinely inspired disciples are drunk (v. 13), Peter speaks up, saying that the manifestations of the Spirit are confirmed in the prophecy of Joel (vv. 14–21). List the spiritual signs, the heavenly signs, and the prediction. Why is the Old Testament an important witness to the events in this chapter?

**[Q]** Having just described the what and the why, Peter moves on to the who (vv. 22–24). What signs attesting to who Jesus was would the hearers have been aware of?

**[Q]** In verse 23, who had a hand in the death of Christ, and why is each important?

**[Q]** Peter returns to Scripture, moving to David, from whom the Messiah would come (vv. 25–28). Is this section prophesying about Christ's death or resurrection?

- What reasons are given for David's expressions of joy?

**[Q]** Then Peter moves from David to Jesus, again using Scripture to prove his point (vv. 29–36). It's clear this Scripture does not ultimately refer to David (v. 29). What are the reasons it does refer to Jesus (vv. 30–35)?

**Optional Activity:** *The focus of Peter's sermon was explaining who Christ is by talking about the Resurrection. Ask the group how they have shared the gospel with someone. What methods have they used? What worked and what didn't? How might they use the Resurrection to share Christ? Role play such a situation.*

### Teaching Point Two: Jesus' resurrection guarantees ours.

In George Frederic Handel's magnificent Messiah symphony (played during Christmas and Easter), the great composer quotes from 1 Corinthians 15, the great New Testament chapter on the Resurrection. "Now is Christ risen from the dead," sings the choir, "... the firstfruits of them that [sleep]." By "firstfruits" Paul means that Jesus is "the first of many others who would be raised from the dead."<sup>1</sup>

Kirk explains the connection this way: "God has promised future embodied life on a new earth. The only way to take hold of this promise is to be joined to the resurrected Lord. Christian hope is more than wishful thinking, because the future on which we have set our hearts has already begun with Jesus' resurrection. He is now what we shall be."

<sup>1</sup> ESV Study Bible, note on 15:20, p. 2214.



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Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–28.

In the fractious church at Corinth, some were claiming that there is no bodily resurrection for followers of Christ (v. 12). Paul carefully shows the Corinthians, and us, that just as Christ was raised physically, so we too will be raised physically. It's a package deal. Instead of arguing philosophically, however, that we will be raised, Paul points to the empty tomb. How, he asks, can we think our future state will be any different from what happened to Jesus?

**[Q]** Why is our future state linked to Jesus' resurrection (vv. 12–13)?

**[Q]** What are the consequences for us if Christ has not been raised (vv. 14–18)?

**[Q]** Verse 20 calls Christ the “firstfruits.” Explain what the following passages tell you about what this means: Exodus 23:19; Leviticus 23:10; Deuteronomy 18:4; and Nehemiah 10:35.

**[Q]** In vv. 21–22, the contrast is between the effect of Adam's choice (death) and the effect of Christ's, which undoes the curse (life). It is a fresh start. How does this perspective help you as you contemplate your own death or that of a loved one?

**[Q]** Next Paul sketches out the order of this fresh start for believers (vv. 23–28): Christ rises, Christ rules, Christ comes and raises his people, Christ destroys all false powers (including death), Christ delivers the kingdom to the Father. How does this narrative place the Resurrection in context? What is the ultimate goal?

### **Teaching Point Three: The resurrection will encompass Creation in the future, allowing us to bear up under suffering now.**

As implied above, God's fresh start is not some ethereal, disembodied Platonic existence. It includes the world around us. “The future for which we long and hope is the moment when God recreates this world and populates it with renewed, embodied people,” Kirk writes. “Resurrection tells us that a new creation is coming. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that this new creation has already begun.” How does this perspective of the future change the way we live now, especially with regard to the persistent suffering we face in our fallen world?

Read Romans 8:18–25.

**[Q]** Paul says the sufferings of the present are not worth comparing with the coming glory (v. 18). Describe a time when you trained hard and won an athletic competition, or studied hard and aced a test or won an award. Was all the sweat worth it? What made the effort bearable?



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**[Q]** We often hear the world around us called “nature” or “the environment.” Paul, however, calls it “creation,” emphasizing its relation to the Creator and his purposes (v. 19). What does this passage tell us about creation and our relationship with it?

**[Q]** Why was creation subjected to futility? What does this encompass, and who did it (vv. 20–21)?

**[Q]** Where is creation headed? How does this knowledge of the future inform our care for the world around us today?

**[Q]** Paul uses a vivid picture to describe the current time of waiting (vv. 22–23): groaning with the pains of childbirth. If you’ve experienced childbirth, how did pain and pleasure go together?

- How might that relate to our future bodily resurrection and the restoration of creation?

**[Q]** How do hope and patience work together in these in-between times (vv. 24–25).

### Teaching Point Four: Our resurrection begins today.

Yet the story for Christians is not all about waiting. In some sense the resurrection has already started to break in. “In 2 Corinthians 5,” Kirk says, “Paul places followers of Jesus within a new creation that has already begun: ‘. . . the old has gone, the new has come!’ This is the reality brought about by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The old powers have been defeated, the old self has been crucified, and the futility of creation is being undone. A new king is lord, the new self has been raised, and the creation is catching a glimpse of an eternity with hope.” Read Colossians 3:1–11, in which Paul teases out the implications of this already-but-not-yet paradox.

**[Q]** According to verses 1–4, what are we told to seek? Why are we told to do it? What is our ultimate reward?

**[Q]** Make a list of the various commands (vv. 5, 8–10). Which are negative, and which are positive?

**[Q]** What are the reasons given for this new focus (vv. 6–7, 11)? How many involve God, and how many involve us?



## Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

The resurrection is no mere add-on to our faith as followers of Christ. The resurrection, already experienced by Jesus and promised to his people, is central. Without it, we have no hope for the future. With it, our current lives can be transformed. So the resurrection happens then, now, and later; yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Though Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, he was enthroned as the messianic Lord and King by virtue of his resurrection, confirming the Bible's ancient witness. The resurrection of Jesus also guarantees our eventual resurrection because we are united to him as the second Adam. And this resurrection has global reach, pointing us to the ultimate transformation of creation while encouraging us to stand firm amid suffering. Finally, because our resurrection is a settled (but not yet realized) fact, we can begin to live as if we are already raised, saying no to sin and yes to God.

The resurrected Jesus provides us with our marching orders. Kirk says, "Only after being raised from the dead can Jesus say, 'All authority has been given to me; *therefore*, go!' From his first appearance to Mary in the garden to his last appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus, when the resurrected Jesus appears, he almost always sends. The vocation and mission of the church as a sent people depends on the resurrected Jesus as our sender." Jesus has raised us; are we ready?

**Action Point:** *List all the miracles of Jesus you can think of that attest to who he is. In an extended time of prayer, praise him as Lord and Christ for each one.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of* Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century *and of the forthcoming* All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us *(Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for* [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) *and blogs at* [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).

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Leader's Guide

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


#### [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

- For more studies on the Resurrection, go to [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com):  
<http://bit.ly/aH04tN>.

 **Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church**, N. T. Wright (HarperOne, 2008). Wright convincingly argues that what we believe about life after death directly affects what we believe about life before death. For if God intends to renew the whole creation—and if this has already begun in Jesus' resurrection—the church cannot stop at “saving souls” but must anticipate the eventual renewal by working for God's kingdom in the wider world, bringing healing and hope in the present life.

 **Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God**, by J. R. Daniel Kirk (Eerdmans, 2008). Kirk describes resurrection as central to the theology of Paul and to the pivotal book of Romans.

 **Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends in the 21st Century**, by Stan Guthrie (Paternoster, 2nd edition 2005). Facts and analysis to help you become a faithful, informed, and effective advocate for God's global mission.

 Go to [www.leestrobels.com/videoserver/video.php?clip=strobelt1141](http://www.leestrobels.com/videoserver/video.php?clip=strobelt1141) for the online video, “Why Does the Resurrection Make a Difference?” The video features a discussion between Lee Strobel and Jerry Johnston.





{ THEOLOGY }

# A Resurrection That Matters

If we are completely saved from our sins through the Cross, what's the point of the empty tomb? By J. R. Daniel Kirk

I

N THE SPRING of my senior year in college, I was deeply immersed in the rhythms of Christian life. I was a leader in InterVarsity, participated regularly in a Bible study with other seminary-bound friends, set my Sundays aside for worship and rest, and read more than my fair share of extracurricular Christian books. As Easter approached, I began rehearsing the importance of Jesus' resurrection. I knew that for Paul and the other New Testament writers, there could be no Christianity without it. Yet one day as I was walking back to my dorm, it dawned on me that the gospel as I understood it had no need for Jesus to be raised from the dead.

The story of salvation as I had learned it was, in its entirety, about the Cross. I would teach other students about the Romans Road to salvation and the Romans 6:23 bridge diagram. What each of these captured beautifully was that we had a sin problem that God overcame with the cross of Christ. But each presentation also omitted the Resurrection entirely. And why not? Once our debt has been paid, what else could we possibly need?

What is so important about Easter?

## **JESUS HOLDS HUMAN DESTINY**

The most important thing to say is somewhat shocking at first blush. At his resurrection, Jesus becomes something that he was not before. Jesus becomes the enthroned king of the world—the Messiah. But isn't the Jesus we meet on the pages of the Gospels also the Messiah? Yes and no.

Jesus in the Gospels is like David in the Book

Illustration by Nicholas Wilton

of 1 Samuel. He has received God's anointing as the chosen king, but another king is currently on the throne. The story of the Gospels is one in which Jesus inaugurates a new reign of God and deals a deathblow to the imposter king through his death on the cross. If the Cross is the defeat of the old king, the Resurrection is the enthronement of the new. Jesus now literally sits in the space that the kings of Israel had figuratively occupied before him: at the right hand of God. Though the preexistent Christ has always been God's agent in the creation and rule of the world, the human Jesus is now joined to that role as Lord and king over all.

This is the logic behind Jesus' claim in the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18–20). At the Resurrection, Jesus has become the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed ruler of the earth.

To be God's anointed, the Christ, is to be at least in part the human descendant of David. And so we find Peter, in the first sermon preached after Jesus' resurrection, insisting on three things: (1) During his life on earth, Jesus was a man to whom God testified through

Why is it that we Christians can confidently affirm our identity as God's children, members of his family? The short answer is that we have received the Spirit of sonship (Rom. 8:15). But if we continue to probe, we discover that this Spirit is none other than the Spirit who sets Jesus apart as God's Son by raising him from the dead. Jesus' resurrection by the Spirit begins the re-creation of God's family. When we receive the Spirit of sonship, we are receiving the Spirit of Jesus, the resurrected Son of God.

The idea that we are God's children draws us back to Genesis 1. When God creates humans to rule, he creates them to reign in his stead as his beloved children. This is the significance of the language of "image and likeness." So when Jesus reclaims the mantle of lordship over the world, he simultaneously reopens the door into God's family. As we are renewed after the image of the resurrected Son, we are drawn into God's family as God's children and Jesus' sisters and brothers (Rom. 8:29).

As God's children, we are also called to be imitators of our heavenly Father. One of the richest explanations of resurrection that we find in

## ***The fact that Jesus' resurrection guarantees our future resurrection means that our present lives already bear signs of the future.***

wonders and miracles; (2) King David prophesied that the Messiah would be enthroned when God raised him from the dead; and (3) God has, in fact, *made* Jesus both Lord and Messiah by raising him and thereby enthroning him.

Having vanquished the Enemy, who had usurped authority over all the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:5–8), Jesus reclaims for humanity its original purpose: to rule the world on God's behalf (Gen. 1:26–28). This is one reason why we find Paul referring to the resurrected Jesus as the second and last Adam. But as the last Adam, Jesus also holds humanity's destiny in his hands.

### **INTRUDING ON THE PRESENT**

When we speak of human destiny, we are of course speaking of the future. The New Testament is clear that God has a future for this world, and that the transformation of humans is a crucial component of what lies in store.

What are the implications of Jesus being our forerunner in resurrection life? The New Testament leads us to understand that the hopes and expectations of God's people are now hidden in Christ. In other words, the only way to take hold of God's promises for the future is to take hold of the resurrected Jesus in the present.

So, for example, God has promised future embodied life on a new earth. The only way to take hold of this promise is to be joined to the resurrected Lord. Christian hope is more than wishful thinking, because the future on which we have set our hearts has already begun with Jesus' resurrection. He is now what we shall be.

But our present life is also determined by Jesus' resurrection. When we claim that we are even now God's children, that God is growing us up into obedience, and that we are already justified, what we are saying in part is that the future laid up for us in the resurrected Christ is intruding on the present.

Scripture is the promise that our future resurrection life bears fruit in the present. Jesus' resurrection leads Paul to use turns of phrase such as "walk in newness of life," and "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead." In the mystery of God's economy, the fact that Jesus' resurrection guarantees our future resurrection means that our present lives already bear signs of the future. God renews us in obedience and sanctification now, but both are foretastes of the life we will know only when we are raised from the dead. That future has begun in the obedience that the Spirit of the resurrected Christ works in us today.

### **JUSTIFICATION AND THE EMPTY TOMB**

Somewhat closer to the heart of the gospel, justification is also a function of Jesus' resurrection.

In order to get at this, we need to hold two things together. First, justification is a way of talking about our standing before God's judgment seat. Those who have been justified are those who have been vindicated or acquitted in the judgment. Then we need to see that resurrection was often understood as a gift God would give to those whom he justified. Resurrection is God's reward to the faithful, particularly those who had been faithful to the point of death.

In such a scenario, Jesus' resurrection functions as his justification in the courtroom of God. Jesus was mocked as a would-be king and sentenced to death for claiming to be the man at God's right hand. God vindicates Jesus' claims, judging him to be faithful and true, by enthroning him at his right hand. Thus, as 1 Timothy 3:16 puts it, Jesus was "vindicated by the Spirit."

So when we proclaim that by faith in Christ we have been justified, we are saying two things about ourselves: (1) God's future word of judgment has been pronounced in the present; and (2) this judgment is a foretaste of our resurrection that we receive now because we

participate in Jesus' resurrection.

These are a few examples that could be multiplied several times over. When we speak of Jesus' resurrection, we are not talking only about Jesus' present but also about our future and the ways that our future is breaking into the world in which we now live. In between Jesus' present and our future are the lives that play out the drama we will perform with full truth and beauty only when our bodies are raised from death.

### CREATION WITH A FUTURE

At a couple of points, we have turned to the creation stories in order to make sense of Jesus' resurrection. This is not a coincidence. Resurrection and new creation are inseparable. The future for which we long and hope is the moment when God recreates this world and populates it with renewed, embodied people. Resurrection tells us that a new creation is coming. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that this new creation has already begun.

We most clearly see the connection between Jesus' resurrection and the coming new creation in Romans 8. There Paul depicts the created order as an active participant in the drama that moves from suffering to resurrection life. Creation groans, says Paul. But these are not the pangs of death, but rather the pangs of new life. Creation groans as it awaits a new birth and the resurrection of God's children.

The idea of groaning connects creation to God's people and the Spirit. Paul says that we ourselves groan while we await our adoption as God's children, which is our resurrection. He then goes on to say that the Spirit groans in prayer. These prayers are uttered in accordance with God's desire that we be conformed to the image of his resurrected Son.

Creation's part in the symphony of groaning tells us that the created order has a future in the coming resurrection. But if this creation is groaning for redemption as we ourselves are, then we discover, to the surprise of many, that the fate of this world is not destruction but redemption.

The implications of this are vast. For one, if creation is to be redeemed, then we are not free to view any of our work in this world as just a lot of brass polishing on the *Titanic*. Because Jesus is the last Adam, he and those who are his siblings assume the vocation of the first Adam to rule, subdue, and fill the entire created order. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that God has given up on neither humanity nor the creation we were created to rule on God's behalf. In the mysterious economy of God, what we do here on earth is of eternal consequence.

This plea to work in the present as though it mattered for the future is nothing less than the call to take hold of creation's destiny and bring it to bear on the present. What is true of us is also true of the wider order: the future is already dawning.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul places followers of Jesus within a new

creation that has already begun: "... the old has gone, the new has come!" This is the reality brought about by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The old powers have been defeated, the old self has been crucified, and the futility of creation is being undone. A new king is lord, the new self has been raised, and the creation is catching a glimpse of an eternity with hope.

### SENT PEOPLE

There is one more way in which the resurrection of Jesus transforms our understanding of what God has called us to. The resurrected Jesus is the one who has the authority to send us out to the ends of the earth with the assurance that we will not labor in vain.

Matthew is representative of the other Gospels. Only after being raised from the dead can Jesus say, "All authority has been given to me; therefore, go!" From his first appearance to Mary in the garden to his last appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus, when the resurrected Jesus appears, he almost always sends. The vocation and mission of the church as a sent people depends on the resurrected Jesus as our sender.

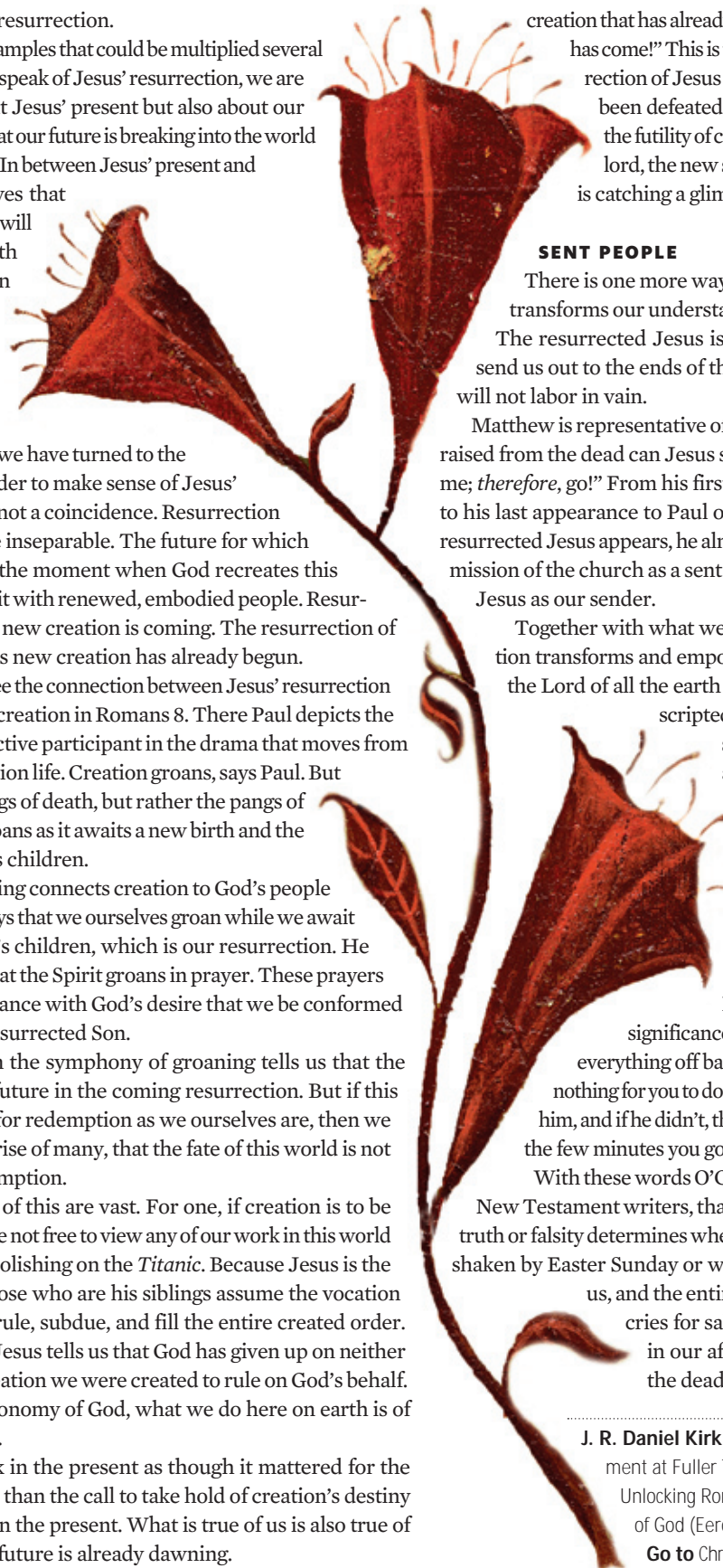
Together with what we have already seen above, resurrection transforms and empowers Christian mission because (1) the Lord of all the earth is the one who sends us; (2) we are scripted into this Lord's resurrection story such that our own lives and futures are mirrors of his; and (3) the breadth of this mission must encompass the entirety of the created order. This is the Good News: not only a story of forgiveness but also a story of power, of transformation, and of hope.

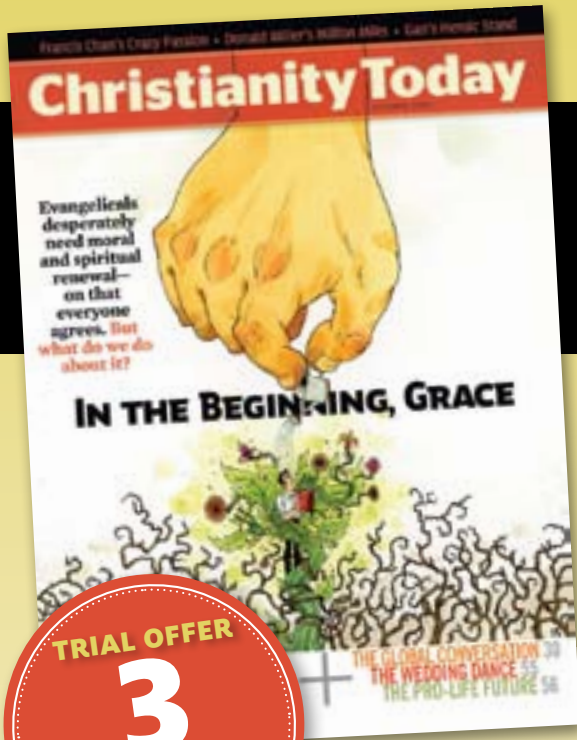
In Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the Misfit explains the world-shattering significance of Jesus' resurrection: "He thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if he didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can."

With these words O'Connor declared, in concert with the New Testament writers, that the Resurrection is everything. Its truth or falsity determines whether the world has been irrevocably shaken by Easter Sunday or whether, instead, God has left Jesus, us, and the entire created order unanswered in our cries for salvation. No less than this is at stake in our affirmation that Jesus is raised from the dead. ✚

J. R. Daniel Kirk is associate professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God* (Eerdmans).

Go to [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com) for "A Resurrection that Matters," a Bible study based on this article.





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