

Column –

Easter Day is past for another year. The instinct of many is to move on to the next holiday, whether that be Mother's Day or the Fourth of July. But if we really understand what happened on that day, we know that the resurrection of Jesus is an exciting and on-going reality.

God the Father raising Jesus marks nothing short of new creation. The sabbath rest spoken of in Genesis 2:2 is ended. That is why Christians gather on the first day rather than the seventh. We are living in God's new week.

The resurrection of Jesus has important implications in our personal lives. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, "If anyone be in Christ . . . new creation," meaning, among other things, that the life of the resurrected Jesus now belongs to Jesus' people. Because He was raised, they will be raised. Death for them is no longer a period or question mark, but an exclamation point.

This knowledge has many outworkings, including that the despot's most cherished weapon – death – has been snatched from him. “The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,” says Martin Luther's hymn “A mighty fortress is our God.” This new reality brought about by the resurrection enabled Stephen, the first Christian martyr, not to flinch before his accusers and boldly make the claim that Jesus was the promised Messiah. His faithful proclamation had consequences; indeed, it cost him his life.

Hopefully, you and I will not have to face what Stephen had to face; even so, he reminds us to not bow before the prevailing culture, but to be witnesses, bold and articulate ones.

Following Stephen's lead is especially needed in our own day where the trajectory is downward for Christian faith and practice. According to one recent study, three in 10 Americans are “nones”. In 2007, 16 percent of the population said they had no religious faith; today that number has risen to 29 percent.

A 2019 Lifeway study reported that in that year 4800 churches closed. The same organization reported that the median Sunday attendance had dropped from 137 in 2019 to 65 in 2021.

The picture may appear bleak until we remember the situation Stephen and others in the early church faced. They found themselves outnumbered and facing fierce opposition, but what happened? They were faithful. They announced Jesus, crucified and risen, and many found themselves believing their message and being changed by it. The Gospel proved powerful and eventually culture itself was changed. Gladiator fights ended; the status of women rose, and the practiced of abandoning unwanted children at garbage sites ceased.

People still long for meaning and purpose in life. They hunger for answers about life's ultimate mystery, death. Only the gospel, centered in the resurrection of Jesus, is able provide those answers. It remains powerful and has been handed to us to pass on.

The “nones” represent a new mission field. The Easter faith sends us out with courage and confidence.

*O GOD, who for our redemption didst give thine only-begotten Son to the death of the Cross, and by his glorious resurrection hast delivered us from the power of our enemy; Grant us so to die daily from sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through the same Christ our Lord. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)*

*The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.*