

NO ZOMBIE JESUS

I have been doing youth ministry since my sophomore year of college, and around this time of year, undoubtedly and unsurprisingly, I will hear about Zombie Jesus. Through Lent and Easter and this season after Easter, we rejoice in the truth of scripture that Jesus died and came back to life. He is risen; he is alive. But that's such a hard concept for young minds who are not ready to think abstractly, so they go to something familiar: zombies. Zombies die and come back to life, and so obviously Jesus is a zombie now. In my first confirmation class, thanks to 2012 and the Mayan Calendar, we had a serious conversation about if there was a biblical basis for believing in a zombie apocalypse (there isn't) and almost any time we talk about Jesus rising from the dead during Worship Wednesday, I have to remind our group of wonderfully creative and imaginative young people that there's a difference between Zombies and Jesus. There's a difference between the un-dead and the Resurrected.

But I don't blame the kids, the parents, or even my seminary training. I understand where this comes from and why this conversation happens. We have a cultural obsession with zombies, and we have for a while... The movie that started it all was the 1968 cult classic, *Night of the Living Dead*. And our interest in the un-dead hasn't faded. I did a quick Google search this week and found a list of the zombie movies that are coming out even this summer (And I'm not immune from this; *Zombieland 2* is coming out this summer, and I'm actively excited by the prospect). But it's more than just Xboxes and Box Offices where zombies are the top ticket. Many cities, including some in South Dakota, host a Zombie Walk around Halloween where people dress up, get made up and act like zombies and then walk around town, often with prizes for who has the best costume/get up and usually for a charitable cause of some kind.

But, take heart, my friends. Jesus is not a zombie roaming earth searching to feast on the brains of those of us who are unaffected. Jesus isn't magic; the resurrection was no slight-of-hand trick. He isn't the un-dead ambling down some sidewalk of a town near you to raise money. Jesus' death and resurrection do not play into our cultural fascination with zombies.

But I don't like defining things and people by what they're not. So, let's talk about who Jesus is and what it means that he's risen and why I brought up the zombies in the first place. In our scripture today, John's not talking zombies; there is no Zombie Jesus. He's talking resurrection, which is something very different. The promise of Jesus's resurrection is that, one day, the dead will do more than merely shuffle, zombie-like, across a barren landscape. The promise of Easter is a new, perfected and eternal life. And who is it who works this wonder? It is Jesus, of course.

In our scripture today, John uses four titles to help shed some light on the man who revealed himself to John and granted John this glimpse into eternity. First, John calls Jesus *Christ*, a word that, as you may know, means Messiah. To the faithful who understand the centuries-old yearning of the Hebrew people for a Messiah, John is saying all such prophecies are now fulfilled. John goes on to call Jesus, "the faithful witness." This was a favorite phrase in the Gospel of John (though this John and that John might be different Johns) and it basically means what it says it means: Jesus was a faithful witness; Jesus is a first-hand witness to the goodness and majesty of God and one who knows what life looks like on "the other side." And it's a message John's readers, in those seven hard-pressed churches of Asia Minor, were hungry to hear. In 2:10, John addresses their specific situation: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer.

Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” John, through his Revelation, knows that the suffering we face on earth is nothing compared to the joy of worship around the heavenly throne that we’d hear about if we read Revelation 4.

Let's jump over the third title John uses, for now, and go, instead, directly to the fourth. John calls Jesus “ruler of the kings of the earth.” It's an audacious phrase, considering what happened to Jesus at the hands of the Romans. They brutalized him: stripped him, beat him, threw a kingly cloak around his shoulders and jammed a crown of thorns down upon his brow. Then came the mockery. Soldiers derided him, bowing down before him and crying, “Hail, O King!” How can John refer to one such as him -- this weak and tortured man who, assailed by the world-consuming power of Rome, appears to be anything but kingly -- as “ruler of the kings of the earth?” He's able to do so because of the power of the resurrection. In returning from the dead in full strength, Jesus has done something no earthly king has ever done. In the Bible Study we did during the season of Lent called *Who is This Man?* we were asked to consider the odds of the disciples surviving up against the Holy Roman Empire. After Jesus died, conventional wisdom would suggest that the disciples would scatter, return to their previous lives as fishermen, laborers, and tax-collecting and the Roman Empire would continue to enjoy its unprecedented peace, safety, and success. But the Church of Jesus Christ has continued after the Roman Empire fell and indeed exists to this very day. Why? Because our King, our savior, our messiah, is the king of kings.

And now we return to the one we skipped, the third title John uses to describe Jesus and the basis for all the Zombie Jesus conversations I've had over the years: Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. In the Biblical narrative, the title of *firstborn* carries significance: the firstborn son was the one who inherited the lion's share of the estate, received the best of everything. It was the firstborn who was seen as the one who had power and honor, the one who occupies the first spot. When John calls Jesus the firstborn of the dead, he wasn't envisioning a zombie walk where Jesus is the guest of honor. William Barclay puts it this way: "Jesus is the Lord of the dead just as he is the Lord of the living. There is no part of the universe, in this world or the in the world to come, and nothing in life and death in which Jesus Christ is not Lord."

This is the ongoing work of Jesus' resurrection. Because Jesus is the firstborn of the dead; because Jesus was raised from the dead, and I mean resurrected not made undead (still no Zombie Jesus) there is no place in our lives where he doesn't want to be Lord. There's nothing in life we can face that Jesus doesn't want to help us bear. There's no where we can go to escape his presence. We are Easter people. We don't walk around like zombies (even though if you really want to be a part of a Zombie Walk, I get it.) We walk around at work, at home, at play, and even here as people who strive to reflect Jesus' promise, power, and hope. No Zombie Jesus; No Zombie Disciples. Amen.