

Jesus's death on the cross was not the last word on this rabbi from Nazareth. What set all sorts of historic events in motion was his followers' insistence that they had experienced him *after his death*. Their encounters with him led them to believe that something massive had happened that had implications for the entire world.

To understand their claims, it's important to remember that resurrection after death was not a new idea. In the fall in many parts of the world, the leaves drop from the trees and the plants die. They turn brown, wither, and lose their life. They remain this way for the winter—dormant, dead, lifeless. And then spring comes, and they burst into life again. Growing, sprouting, producing new leaves and buds. For there to be spring, there has to be a fall and then a winter. For nature to spring to life, it first has to die. Death, then resurrection. This is true for ecosystems, food chains, the seasons—it's true all across the environment. Death gives way to life.

A seed has to be buried in the ground before it can rise up from out of the earth as new life.

Think of what you've had to eat today.

Dead. All of it. If you ate plants, they were at some point harvested, uprooted, disconnected from a stalk or vine, yanked from the ground so that they could make their

way to your plate, where you ate them so that you can . . . live. The death of one living thing for the life of another.

This death-and-life mystery, this mechanism, this process is built into the very fabric of creation. The cells in our bodies are dying at a rate of millions a second, only to be replaced at a similar rate of millions a second. Our skin is constantly flaking off and our body is continually replacing the skin cells with new ones; we have entirely new skin every week or so.

Death is the engine of life in the relational realm as well. Think about those firefighters who lost their lives on 9/11 rescuing people. Who isn't moved when they hear those stories of selfless heroism? We talk about how inspiring it is when people sacrifice themselves for the well-being of another. To inspire is to give life. Their deaths for others' lives.

So when the writers of the Bible talk about Jesus's resurrection bringing new life to the world, they aren't talking about a new concept. They're talking about something that has always been true. It's how the world works.

Although the cross is often understood as a religious icon, it's a symbol of an elemental reality, one we all experience every time we take a bite of food.

When people use the word "Jesus," then, it's important for us to ask who they're talking about.

Are they referring to a token of tribal membership, a tamed, domesticated Jesus who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to?

Are they referring to the supposed source of the imperial impulse of their group, which wants to conquer other groups "in the name of Jesus"?

Are they referring to the logo or slogan of their political, economic, or military system through which they sanctify their greed and lust for power?

Or are they referring to the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with his love and power and grace and energy?

Jesus is both near and intimate and personal, and big and wide and transcendent.

One of the many things people in a church do, then, is name, honor, and orient themselves around this mystery. A church is a community of people who enact specific rituals and create specific experiences to keep this word alive in their own hearts, a gathering of believers who help provide language and symbols and experiences for this mystery.

When we baptize, we lower people into the water, and then bring them back up out of the water.

The water signifies death;  
being raised up out of it signifies life.

Lowered like Christ in his death,  
raised like Christ in his life.

When we take the Eucharist, or Communion,  
we dip bread into a cup,  
enacting and remembering Jesus's gift of himself.

His body,  
his blood,  
for the life of the world.  
Our bodies, our lives,  
for the life of the world.

These rituals are true for us,  
because they're true for everybody.  
They unite us, because they unite everybody.

These are signs, glimpses, and tastes of what is true  
for all people in all places at all times—we simply name  
the mystery present in all the world, the gospel already  
announced to every creature under heaven.

He holds the entire universe in his embrace.  
He is within and without time.  
He is the flesh-and-blood exposure of an eternal reality.