

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Les Cheveldayoff gets crucified six times a week.

It's not that he has a bad job, it's — well, it's that getting crucified is his job. He gets resurrected six times a week, too, so it's all good.

Les Cheveldayoff is Jesus. At least he portrays Jesus at a park in Orlando. Les is a ruggedly handsome guy with long, sandy hair, a full beard, smiling eyes and six-pack abs — the prototype of the popular picture of Jesus (at least in this part of the world).

For eight years, Les has been part of the cast at The Holy Land Experience — an interactive living history park. The management at The Holy Land Experience wants to make it clear that they are not a theme park like the others around them in Orlando. There are no rides, for example. They prefer to refer to the park as a “living biblical museum” where people do indeed encounter the particular spiritual theme that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In other words, this isn't Disney World and Jesus is no Mickey Mouse. The disciples, townsfolk and Roman soldiers at The Holy Land Experience are there to interact with the visitors and mug for all those digital cameras, but they do so as living historians. They act in the first person and must know all the details about life in first-century Israel.

Jesus, on the other hand, retreats behind the scenes after a morning show called “The Ministry of Jesus,” reappearing again only once in the afternoon as he drags the cross down the faux Via Dolorosa while actors portraying Roman soldiers appear to kick and spit on him. Tourists line the streets taking pictures, some licking the “milk and honey” ice-cream cones they bought from a nearby concession stand (I'm not making this up).

The action then moves to the “Calvary’s Garden Tomb” area of the park where Les/Jesus is “nailed” to a large cross that is lifted up by hydraulic motors. Later, he appears from the tomb that sits immediately below Calvary’s hill.

This sort of thing might not be your chalice of wine (or cup of tea), to be sure, because the whole thing may appear from a distance as a cheesy Easter pageant gone Hollywood. But Cheveldayoff sees it differently. Every time he is hoisted up on that cross during that intense 20-minute presentation, he sees the outpouring of emotion among many in the crowd. “I notice it so much that sometimes it throws me off my lines,” he says.

Taking people back to the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection has a visceral impact, even if the rumble in the background is the sound of trucks barreling down I-4 instead of a divinely generated earthquake. People not only want to *read* the story in the Scriptures — they want to *experience* the Cross and the Resurrection for themselves.

On that first Easter morning, Mary moved to embrace the risen Jesus, but he said, “Do not hold on to me” because he had “not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17). It’s not that Jesus had some kind of dangerous spiritual aura about him or that his resurrection body could not be touched by human hands. Mary wanted to hold on tight to her Teacher and Lord, but Jesus reminds her of the bigger picture. The focus of Jesus was not on basking in the glow of the resurrection event, but on getting word to his disciples and getting them moving out on the mission of taking the message of the risen Christ into the world.

So here’s the deal for the Easter crowd: The glory of Easter, the glory of Jesus, was to be acted out by disciples. They were to be Jesus’ hands, feet and voice serving people everywhere.

For 21st-century disciples, being Jesus is about four components: walking the talk, dying, being buried, and being raised up.

First, **walking the talk**. Being Jesus every day means that as Jesus walked among the people of his day, showing mercy, healing the sick, interacting with others with respect and love, we, too, get to live in the world, healing the wounded, binding up the broken, blessing those around us, lifting up the fallen. *We* get to do that.

Second, **dying daily**. We may not get crucified on a hydraulic cross six times a week, but we do “die” to an old life, and chances are we go through a good crucifixion every day. The apostle Paul said he “died daily.” What makes us think we can get off with less? “Dying daily” means that there are bound to be those moments when our natural, selfish interests rear up. Being Jesus means we go through a dying. We change our priorities and sometimes get laughed at by the world. Tough to do. Painful. But no one said crucifixion was easy.

Third, we are **buried**. Being Jesus means we may feel like we’ve been buried and forgotten. We live faithfully and no one notices, no one cares. People throw a few daisies our way and move on.

Fourth, there is **resurrection**. There is a true story about a pastor who was doing a graveside funeral service at country cemetery about a two hour drive from town. The pastor decided to ride out with the undertaker in the hearse.

After the service was over, the pastor was feeling ill, so the funeral director suggested the pastor stretch out in the back of the hearse, since it was now empty. The pastor took him up on the offer.

When the vehicle stopped, he slowly sat up and drew the side curtain to see where he was. Suddenly he was face to face with a customer pumping fuel at a gas station. Needless to say, the fellow was surprised and shocked to see a body in the back of the hearse rise up and stare back at him. With all the color drained out of him and his eyes as wide as saucers, the guy

ran on shaky legs into the gas station, while the funeral director tried to catch up to explain the whole situation.

Resurrection appeared to be a distinct possibility to that witness at the gas station. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee was once asked if he believed in the resurrection. “Of course I do,” said Huckabee. “Dead people vote in every election we have in Arkansas. Resurrection is very real to us.”

Resurrection is very real to us Christians as well. Being Jesus means that the power of God energizes us afresh each day. We’re alive *to* a new life, and we are alive *with* a new life!

Easter morning is our reminder that we are called to “be Jesus.” And not only called, but empowered to be what we’ve been called to be.

This call cannot be made with reference to any other person. It’s not about “Being Mother Teresa,” or “Being the apostle Paul.” It’s not about adopting 25 kids or writing theological essays.

Being Jesus is about recognizing our new relationship to God as a child of God, reconciled to God through Jesus — a turn of events which allows us not just to act the part, as does Les Cheveldayoff, but to live the life day after day.

Richard Beck can help us here. Beck teaches at Abilene Christian University, and he has a lot of experience playing the part of Jesus in passion plays. Here’s his advice for those of us who want to be like Jesus:

“The key to playing Jesus is not to be different. The key is this: Be yourself.

“You are never closer to being Christ-like than when you are at your best. Think of yourself when you are feeling compassionate or generous or merciful and *act like that*. Being the *Imago Christi* isn’t hard. It’s just being you.

“We tend to think Jesus is bringing to the human encounter some special Jesus-ingredient that we, mere mortals, don’t have. But most of the things we are called to do are mundane and straightforward. Do them, do them well, and not even Jesus could perform them better. You don’t need to be the Incarnate God to give a thirsty person a cup of cold water. Just give him a cup of cold water. It’s not magical. If someone needs a kind word, then speak a kind word. If someone needs forgiveness, then say ‘I forgive you.’

“Sometimes being Jesus is just listening over coffee. The point is, for large parts of the day, you *are* being like Jesus. So if you want to be like Jesus, don’t try to be different.

“Be yourself.”

Les Cheveldayoff looks the part of what a lot of people picture Jesus to have looked like. He gets stopped in the mall by kids and gets double-takes on the street. How does looking so much like everybody’s idea of Jesus affect him?

“It’s improved my driving,” he says with a smile.

Imagine what improvements a group of people who physically *look nothing like Jesus* could make if they simply chose to act like him — serving humbly, speaking passionately, living generously, doing justly and experiencing the elevated life in Christ.

That’s “The Resurrection Experience,” and it can turn spiritual tourists into transformed people transforming the world. Alleuia! Christ is Risen! **The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!**