

One of the first TV shows I ever fell in love with was *The Twilight Zone*. I've always loved weird stories - stories of worlds that were almost - but not quite - like our own. From the creepy music and Rod Sterling's iconic introduction to the inevitable twist at the end of each episode, that show is A+ storytelling like few other shows that have ever been made.

[Still from episode] Maybe it's because I've always loved science fiction, but one of my favorite episodes is called *To Serve Man*. In it, some aliens come to earth and give us gifts - infinite energy, enough food for everyone, etc. They essentially create world peace in a matter of days. Earth is suddenly a paradise, a new utopia.

Life is so good, no one thinks to question the motivations except for a linguist named Lloyd. He's sure there's no such thing as a free lunch, that the aliens must have a hidden agenda. He and his team set out to translate the alien language by using a manual the aliens all carry around with them. After months, they manage to translate the title: *To Serve Man*.

Of course that only makes him seem crazier. *See?*, everyone tells him, *they just want to serve us!* Soon, the aliens announce a cultural exchange - they're going to take a few choice humans back to their planet. Lloyd, more suspicious than ever, manages to get on the exchange. It's only once they're hurtling through space toward the alien homeworld that Lloyd manages to translate the first page of *To Serve Man*. He reveals to his friends - and to the viewer - the horrifying truth: it's a cookbook!

That's *super* creepy, isn't it? The aliens' gifts were too good to be true. They were treating us like cattle, keeping us fat and happy so they could use us, consume us. It was never about what's best for us, only what's best for them.

The reason this story works is because we have a sneaking suspicion that the reality of this story is the reality of the world we live in - that *everyone* has a hidden agenda. Every gift comes with strings attached. The basic rule of reality is look out for #1 - which means that every relationship is ultimately about what I get out of it.

Well. Today is Easter, the day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. Today marks the culmination of God's greatest gift to the world: life, hope, a future. Today we'll examine God's gift and ask how we can be sure God isn't somehow just like those Twilight Zone aliens. How can we be sure God's gifts are real? How can we *possibly* believe that God's love is truly unconditional in a world where everything has strings?

We'll see that Jesus' death is all the proof we need of God's love for us, and we'll see how the Cross carves a path toward freedom for us. But first, since *it* is Easter, we need to sing, to celebrate God's victory over death and the endless new possibilities bursting forth into the world. Stand with me, and as we sing, reflect on how you see God, and God's gifts!

## Message

The first Christians talked about the resurrection as a gift from God, as a new reality God invites us into. Take how the author of Colossians describes it:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory. -- Colossians 3:1-4

[God distant in Heaven, judging] For someone skeptical about faith, these verses have a definite Twilight Zone vibe. Through Jesus' resurrection, God has swooped down and transformed us so that now all we do is think about Heaven. It has a very "Beam Me Up, Scottie" feel to it - once we become Christians, we quit caring about the world around us, become focused on going away to Heaven someday.

That disconnect is at the heart of our suspicion about God - that God is away over there in Heaven, watching from a distance, judging and condemning. And if we try really hard (or believe without any doubt at all), then God will snatch us away.

It's no wonder we get suspicious of faith. When faith means you quit caring about the world, it does smell pretty fishy.

[Heaven all around] But this is not actually what "set your sights on the realities of heaven" means. In the Bible, Heaven is not a far off place somewhere above the clouds where you go when you die. I know that's how we've all been taught to think about it, but you can't find *anywhere* in the Bible that describes Heaven like that.

In the Bible, Heaven is more like the control room of reality. Today we might describe it as another dimension, a layer of reality that's in the same space as us, but (mostly) invisible to us. Heaven is where God is, and it's sort of a microcosm of our world.

The best way to think about Heaven is like this: Heaven is where the world is as it was created to be.

So to set our sights on the realities of heaven doesn't mean to quit caring about the world and act like an out of touch, holier than thou space cadet. It means to insist on seeing the world as God sees the world. To insist on acting in the world not as we've been taught to act, but as we were created to act, as God calls us to act.

[Pic of Kesha w/ lyric] What's the difference? Kesha can help us out here. On her first major studio release, Kesha has a song called "Cannibal". The song is all about how she likes to consume her lovers - literally. In the chorus, she brags, "I eat boys up, breakfast and lunch. Then when I'm thirsty, I drink their blood. Carnivore, animal, I am a cannibal. I eat boys up, you better run."

Shakespeare it's not, but there's a level on which this song is clever. As a pop princess, Kesha is the kind of person who is usually consumed by our culture. How many child stars and young musicians end up burned out and discarded when they cease to entertain us? So to see her flip the script, so to speak, is entertaining.

This song resonates with me on another level, though, because it makes explicit the ugly truth of a no-free-lunch world: if there are always strings attached, then the law of the jungle is the way of the world.

There was a time in our world where you could expect to work at the same place your whole career. There was a loyalty the company showed to you as the employee. But that's less and less true as bottom lines become more important than the people. These days, if they can hire someone else cheaper than you, many companies often won't hesitate to restructure or do layoffs or whatever they need to do to get rid of you.

Relationships are often about the bottom line - is this meeting my needs? It has become increasingly common to replace "till Death do us part" in marriage vows with "as long as our love lasts." We're friends or lovers until it's not convenient anymore, until the other person no longer meets my needs.

The law of the jungle is kill or be killed, eat or be eaten. Watch out for #1 because no one else will. We don't literally consume each other. But we take and use. And we call that wisdom, guarding our hearts or good business.

We're all Kesha. We're all the aliens in *To Serve Man*. It's the way of the world.

Which is why Colossians tells us to set our sights on the realities of heaven. The realities revealed to us by the Cross.

In a world where we know only how to use and abuse, God came among us. And when we sought to use and abuse God, he allowed it - even to the point of death on a cross. He said, "Do you see what happens? Do you see the results of this kind of life?"

In dying, God demonstrates once and for all that he is not that kind of God. Rather than use us, rather than force himself on us, rather than consume us, God gives himself to us to be consumed.

As Jesus instructs his followers at the meal they share the night before he was killed, he gives them bread as his body, says "take and eat." He offers them wine as his blood and says, "Take and drink."

In a world that sees everyone as expendable, every relationship as a means to an end, God gives us his own life for OUR good.

You need proof that God's way is better than Kesha's? (Really? This is something you need?) The Cross is it.

You want proof that God is not just a souped up version of the *To Serve Man* aliens? The Cross is it.

You want proof that the way of Heaven is good? The cross is it.

In a world that's all about consuming, Jesus gives himself to us to be consumed. That's how we can be sure his way is different.

And three days later, on Easter Sunday, God raised him from the dead. *That's* how we know his way is *better*.

We bite and scratch and claw to build a life for ourselves and the resurrection shows us that God *gives* us life. Freely and abundantly.

Our task now, on this side of the resurrection, is to live into that reality. As Colossians says, now we must set our sights on the realities of Heaven. The reality that the fundamental law of the universe is not the law of the jungle. The fundamental law of the universe is love, giving, sharing, generosity and peace.

That's difficult for us to believe. I get it. This is why we need to act on these heavenly realities. A really fun practice is the act of secret service. It's just what it sounds like - do something for someone else without telling them or otherwise calling attention to it. Do the dishes or take out the trash when it's not your turn. Pay for the person behind you at a drivethru. Give money anonymously. Get creative. Get weird.

But don't get caught. And don't post about it on social media. Don't do anything that directs praise back to you in any way. Because you're learning to give with no strings attached. You're learning to serve when there's no benefit to you. Like God does.

The world tells us that's foolish. It's a waste of time and resources that could be invested more wisely. God tells us that's the way to life. He proved it by dying and being raised from the dead.

Friends, this is what we celebrate on Easter: that the law of the universe is Love. That because God raised Jesus from the dead, we are all welcomed into the reality of Heaven. That Heaven is bursting forth everywhere we gather to celebrate this upside-down way of living that God calls abundant life!

### **Baptism & Communion**

Baptisms!

In a world that teaches us to consume, Jesus gives himself over to be consumed...

### **Assignment/Blessing**

Friends, Jesus' resurrection means Heaven is near. God is among us, bringing new life, and calling us to be part. God is not trying to turn us all into pod people, or steal us away to Heaven while the Earth goes to Hell in a handbasket.

God is calling *you* to join in this rescue campaign. Jesus' resurrection invites you to set your eyes on Heavenly realities, where the law is love. This week, try to perform at least one act of secret service each day. Do it for people you know and people you don't. And pay attention to how your eyes begin to see a different reality, one where people aren't most basically objects to consume. Pay attention to how you become a source of life to the people you encounter.

Now go...