

***“Who Was Jesus? The Victor Over Death.”***

Here we are, gathered together, to celebrate this big day! It's so big that I actually put on a tie today! I don't do ties! Some of you got some new clothes. Some of you, if this is your first time here thought you really had to dress up! I won't be in a tie next week! We've got some pretty decorations around. Why? Why all the big deal? What is Easter anyway?! Let's talk about this big day. You know, one of the great things about Saint Paul's and being a pastor here is that this is a church that's focused on reaching non-religious and nominally religious people. Because of that I get to have wonderful, refreshing conversations, very honest, blunt, conversations with people who struggle with their faith. Most of the time, the people that come to me to talk about the struggles they have with their faith, are men and his is how it typically happens: A man will call and schedule an appointment with me. He'll walk in with a list of questions, sometimes they are even written down and typed out. They'll be questions that have kept him from being a committed Christian. Sometimes it's stump the preacher hour! It's, "Preacher, I'm going to throw as many questions as I can at you and see if you can answer them." Generally we have a great time!

The conversation goes something like this: The man will say to me, "Aaron, I generally buy the whole God thing. I think that God is probably real and out there somewhere. I'm there on the God thing. And I'm pretty much there on the Jesus thing too. I like Jesus. I buy the fact that he lived and did some amazing things. I come to church and I enjoy the music and the sermons and the people are great. But when you start getting real specific about Jesus then I start getting a little bit nervous."

I say, "Well, tell me a little bit more about that." They might say something like, "When you talk about Jesus caring for the down-and-out and how he ministered to the lowlifes, of his time. I'm like, 'That's the kind of Jesus I like.'

"When you talk about how Jesus had a huge heart for people who were broken and sick, I'm thinking, 'I like that picture of the compassion of Jesus.' And when you talk about how Jesus confronted the religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees, how he was seen as a rebel, I'm thinking, 'Go Jesus!'

"And even when you talk about how he died on the cross, how the spikes pierced his wrists and ankles and how he was crucified with all that mockery and pain, I'm thinking, 'Wow! This is one real guy who died for what he believed in.' I'm right with you on that, Aaron. But when you get to this resurrection business, I don't know about that. I don't know people who die and rise again, Aaron. I don't know if I can buy that. **Do I have to believe that part?**" I love that kind of honesty, and there are probably a lot of you in this room who are at that same point in your faith. If that's you, then this sermon may be just for you today. Let's take a close look at that very first Easter.

On the Friday before that first Easter Jesus was captured, tortured, and crucified. Spikes were driven through his wrists and ankles. He endured unthinkable torture and suffering. And then he died. Let's pick up the story from that point.

After Jesus was captured, his disciples, his 12 best friends, ran for their lives! In some ways I can understand why, because when the Romans captured the leader of a group, most of the time they would go after all the followers too. If the leader was crucified, then all of his followers were put to the same death. Jesus' disciples were afraid for their lives and went into hiding. They all hid except for John, Joseph of Arimathea and the women. They seemed to be the courageous ones.

After Jesus was dead on the cross the Roman centurions would have lifted the cross out of the ground and slammed it down. If the centurions were kind, they might have done Jesus' family a favor and taken the spikes of the wrists and ankles so the family didn't have to do it themselves. Once the spikes were taken out the women and Joseph carefully lifted Jesus' body off the cross and laid it on the ground. As was the custom they gently washed Jesus' wounds and washed his body. You see, the Jews had a very specific way of treating their dead. They would wrap the body in layers upon layers of cloth. As each layer of cloth was applied they would also apply myrrh, aloes, ointments and spices. It was a long process that would take several hours to do.

But on the day that Jesus was crucified there wasn't enough time to do all of that. You see the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday at sundown and last until Saturday at sundown. According to the Jewish law, Jews

were not allowed to touch a dead body during the Sabbath or to do any work on the Sabbath. So these women were in a hurry, frantically trying to get Jesus' body ready. So all they could do was quickly wash his body, drape it once in a cloth, wrap his head in a separate cloth, and carry him to Joseph's tomb. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man and had a tomb carved in a rock ledge.

A typical tomb would have been large enough to hold 3 or 4 bodies. A large stone would have been used to close the opening. These stones were generally flat and rolled into a groove in front of the opening to the tomb. The stone would have weighed anywhere between 2 to 5 thousand pounds. They were big and heavy to keep out grave robbers. They sealed Jesus in the tomb that afternoon and planned to come back when the Sabbath was over so they could finish preparing his body.

After the tomb was sealed the women went back to their village called Bethany. While all that was going on, the men were hiding in Jerusalem, probably in the room where they celebrated the last supper with Jesus. In that room you could have heard a pin drop. There were no more tears to cry. There were no more words to share. They were numb. They were in shock, and they were frightened for their lives.

You see these men had put their whole trust in Jesus. He was their friend, he was their teacher, he was their mentor, they believed that he was the chosen one of God. But everything had come crashing down! They probably didn't sleep much on Friday night. They probably tossed and turned sleeping on the floor of that upper room.

The next day was Saturday, and as the sun came up they would have still been in shock. They may have started to ask questions like, "What do we do now? Do we sneak back to our homes? Do we go back to our jobs? Do we act like nothing ever happened? What's next? What does this mean?" They had a lot more questions than answers.

It was about noon on Saturday when they heard a knock at the door. It had to have scared them to death, wondering if it was the Romans coming for them. But it was a friend coming to tell them that Judas had hung himself. Judas was one of their own. He'd committed suicide after betraying Jesus. Maybe the other disciples were thinking about doing the same thing. Hopelessness and despair were thick in the air. Maybe they were thinking thoughts like, "If we live in a universe where God would allow Jesus to be crucified, then maybe there is no God at all! If something this awful could happen, what's the use in going on?"

Saturday evening, I doubt if they ate much. They might have tried. Again, they slept on the floor of that upper room, tossing and turning through the night.

Early on Sunday morning, the women got up and they packed all the aloes and spices and burial clothes they needed to go and finish the burial preparations for Jesus. It was an hour-long trip from their village to where Jesus was buried.

As they arrived at the grave the sun was just starting to come up. It was that gray time of day before sunrise. But, even in that grayness as they approached the tomb, they could see that something was wrong. They saw that the stone was rolled away and that the tomb was gaping open. They dropped everything they had and ran to the tomb. As they looked inside and their worst fears were confirmed—someone had stolen Jesus' body! Can you hear them crying out, "Wasn't it enough that they tortured him?! Wasn't it enough that they crucified him?! That they humiliated him?! Why did they have to steal his body and desecrate his grave?!" You see, they feared that the Romans would do to Jesus' body what they did with so many others--drag it through the streets as a way to make an example.

The women began to weep. It was at that moment that they turned and they saw two strangers standing there. Their clothes radiated light, and these strangers said, "Have you so quickly forgotten what he said? Don't you remember that he said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again?' Don't you remember how he said that he would suffer and had to die at the hands of others and that he would be raised up? Have you forgotten that already? Why have you come looking for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!" And instantly these strangers disappeared.

These women look at each other and say, "Could it be? Could it be that Jesus is raised from the dead? Is it possible that he's alive? I remember him saying that he would suffer and die. And I remember that he said that he would come back from the dead! Could it be?"

They left everything right there and turned and headed to the hiding place where the disciples were.

They pounded on that door as hard as they could. The disciples opened the door and let women in. The women said, "He's alive! He's arisen! The tomb is empty? Angles stood there and told us so!" The disciples said, "Calm down and tell us again, slowly." They told them again. In Luke 24:11 it says, [SLIDE...] "**these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them**" (Luke 24:11, NRSV). The disciples didn't buy the women's story!

But Peter had to see for himself so he runs to the tomb and looks inside and it's just like the women said. There are the burial cloths that they had wrapped around Jesus. The cloths were lying there and it looked like Jesus' body had passed right through them. John's gospel says that John and Peter ran to the tomb. It says that they went in and believed, but it's clear that what they believed was that Jesus body had been stolen.

Let's pause here for just a second. Here's what we have so far. We have some women who **said** that they saw strangers in radiant clothing who told them that Jesus was alive. But the women didn't see Jesus. We have a group of disciples who said that the women were telling tales. We have Peter and John at the tomb believing that the body had been stolen. They all assumed what you and I would assume...that someone had stolen Jesus' body.

By this time we have the Roman soldiers saying that the disciples must have snuck in while they were sleeping and stolen the body, so they didn't know where the body was. You have the Pharisees, the ones who orchestrated Jesus' death, wondering where the body is, bribing the guards to say that the disciples took it. Nobody knows where the body is!

The truth is that if the Pharisees had the body, all they would have had to do is produce it and there would have been no Christianity. You understand that, don't you? If the Romans had the body all they had to do was produce it and there is no Christianity. If the disciples had the body they certainly wouldn't have been willing to die proclaiming that Jesus was raised from the dead. They wouldn't have died for a lie, but 10 of the remaining 11 disciples **would** be tortured and die proclaiming that Jesus was raised from the dead. They would not have done that if they had the body stashed somewhere. They would have gone back to their homes, their jobs and tired to forget the whole thing.. Where is the body? This is what we have by noon on the first Easter. The case of the missing body.

By the afternoon of that first Easter, people started seeing Jesus. And it's not just one or two people who see him, there were 15 or 20 people who saw Jesus that first Easter day. It started with Mary Magdalene. She is there in the cemetery and Jesus speaks to her. At first she thinks it's the gardener, but when he says her name she recognizes the voice of Jesus. And then Peter, who's back in the city of Jerusalem, Peter who thinks Jesus' body was stolen, suddenly feels a tap on his shoulder and he turns around. Who is it that's tapping on his shoulder? It's Jesus.

Two other disciples are on the road to a city called Emmaus. As they walk along a stranger joins them and asks them why they're so sad. They explain what happened and then the stranger teaches them from the scriptures and then has a meal with them. They ask the stranger to bless the meal and as he takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it, they suddenly realize who he is. It is Jesus! Then he vanishes!

They run back to Jerusalem and meet up with the other disciples in that upper room. Peter is talking about what he saw, the women are talking about what happened to them, these two disciples are telling what they saw. They begin to believe that maybe, just maybe, it's true! And then from the shadows of the corner of that room they hear a familiar voice saying, "Peace be with you." They look and there he is! Jesus says, "Here, touch me." He wants them to know he is very real. He says, "Give me some food to eat so you can see that I'm real. I'm not a ghost or an apparition and my tomb is empty. And I am risen from the grave...just like I told you I would be."

One disciple named Thomas wasn't there that day. He thinks all the disciples are crazy, until the next week when Jesus appears again and says, "Thomas, it's me. Touch me, I'm real."

The apostle Paul says that over 500 different people had seen Jesus raised from the dead. Whatever you choose to do with this, somehow you have explain the fact that something really big happened that first Easter. Something that utterly transformed those disciples. Because here's what happened to them: They

went from being cowards hidden in a room, to going into the city streets in Jerusalem preaching that Jesus is the messiah. They were saying, “Look, you can flog me, you imprison me, you can kill me, but nothing will change the fact that I have seen him risen from the grave!”

Personally, if anything convinces me of the resurrection it is this: 10 of the 11 remaining disciples were tortured and put to death for their faith in Jesus Christ and they died proclaiming they’d seen him risen from the dead. And they were not afraid to die. Why? Because they knew that Christ was alive. And this means that Christ is alive today!

Those of you who are committed Christians you know a little bit about this already. Because if you’re in Christ you have a prayer life and talk to the Lord, you take walks with him, you open up your scriptures and he speaks to you, you come to worship and connect with him. You have times when you feel his presence in your life. You see his guiding hand, you know his mercy and grace, and you know how completely he transformed you.

Some of you may be at a point where you’re saying, “OK there is a compelling case for the resurrection, but do I really have to believe it? Is it that important that I believe in the resurrection? Can’t I just believe that Jesus was a great guy?” Well, that’s up to you. But you’re missing out on the greatest part of the gospel if you don’t accept Easter.

There are some beliefs you can hold that are so powerful that they change everything—how you look at the world, the decisions you make, how you face life and death and difficulties. Some of you had parents who raised you to believe that you could grow up to be anything you wanted. And because of that belief you had confidence and you knew that you could go after about anything. That made you the person you are today. That belief changed everything. Some of you had parents who did just the opposite. They told you that you would never amount to anything, and you know how powerful those beliefs are too and how hard you’ve had to work to overcome them.

The resurrection of Jesus from the grave is one of those foundational beliefs that changes everything about how you approach life, if you chose to accept it.

There are three things that all this can mean for you, [SLIDE: “Three things Easter Means...”] three things that Easter can mean for you today. First, [SLIDE...] **Easter is about the triumph of hope over tragedy and hopelessness.** If you’re a Christian it doesn’t mean that everything is going to go perfectly in your life—please understand this. Being a Christian doesn’t immunize you from sickness, or losing a job, or the death of people you love. Jesus suffered in torture and pain. He wasn’t immune from suffering and pain and betrayal and we won’t be either. Jesus said in John 16:33, [SLIDE...] **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).** Bad things will happen in this world, even to good people.

Jesus didn’t promise that your life would be free of pain if you follow him. But, here’s what he did promise, that after the crucifixion comes the resurrection. In other words, no matter how bad things seem today, there is always hope for tomorrow. If God can bring life in the midst of death, he can take whatever hard thing you’re going through and make life come from that too! He says, “As long as I am with you, you’re going to be OK.” That’s a promise you can bank on, even in the midst of losing a job, divorce, betrayal, and death. Jesus says, “I promise that I will never leave you or forsake you. I promise! I will carry you through this. Tomorrow will be bright if you just stick with me.”

Second, [SLIDE...] **Easter validates everything that Jesus said and did.** When the disciples saw Jesus alive, they said, “Whoa! What he said and did was real and true!” When Jesus said, “I am the way the truth and the life.” It was true! When he said, “Your life doesn’t consist of the abundance of your possessions” it was true! And when he said, “I go and prepare a place for you, and...I will come back and take you to be with me, so that where I am you will be also” (John 14:3). When he said that, it was true too! His resurrection validates what he did and taught.

There was a man who wanted to start his own religion. He said, “I’m going to take a little bit of Christianity, a little bit of Hinduism, a little bit of Buddhism, a little bit of Islam, a little bit of Judaism.” He was going to write a book and sell millions of copies and be the guru of his own religion. He talked to a pastor and

said, "Do you think I'll get any followers?" The pastor said, "Sure, just get yourself killed and rise from the dead on the third day and people might believe you."

There is no better way to validate a message than through a resurrection.

And finally, **[SLIDE...]** **Easter was God's way of dispelling our fear of death.** Inside every single one of us is a fundamental fear of death. If we're not afraid of death for ourselves then we fear the death of those we love. I've seen it over and over again. We fear the unknown that death is. But think about this, if you were God and you wanted to dispel the fear of death for your children, and you wanted to make sure that they weren't afraid any more, what would you do? If you wanted to make sure that they knew that if they, or the ones they loved died tomorrow, it was OK. If you were God how would you go about dispelling that fear? How about this: how about if you sent your son to walk among us to show us the way the truth and the life? How about if he chose to go through the worst possible death and then on the third day he rose from the grave and held out his hands and said, "See, touch me, because I live, you will live also." We don't have to fear death because we can know for sure that death is not the end. God gave us Easter to tell you that. There is incredible freedom when that's your perspective on living and dying.

Here's the bottom line. You may be here today and be someone who has been straddling the fence. You're not ready to take the plunge of faith until you have absolute proof. But, you know, there is no absolute proof of anything. You'd never get married if you waited for absolute proof. You'd never do anything if you waited for absolute proof. But there's some pretty substantial evidence that Jesus Christ lives today and reigns forever and ever. And maybe today is the Easter where your life changes. Where you hear his call to follow in his footsteps and say, "Yes, Jesus, I choose to commit my life to you and follow you, come into my life. You can have all of me." In doing that you begin this day forward to live as a Christian and serve God faithfully in the church, to grow in your faith. To trust him and trust in the resurrection. And for today, Easter day, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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