

“Easter 2011”

Resurrection. Wow. Easter is all about Jesus being dead one day and alive the next. It's a big deal. Ken Davis writes about a woman who looked out of her window and saw her German shepherd shaking the life out of a neighbor's rabbit. Her family already did not get along well with these neighbors, so this was going to be a disaster.

She grabbed a broom, ran outside, pummeled the dog until it dropped the rabbit which was now extremely dead. She panicked. Didn't know what else to do so she looked around (nobody in sight) grabbed the rabbit, took it inside, gave it a bath, blow dried it to its original fluffiness, brushed it until that rabbit was looking good, snuck into the neighbor's yard, and propped the rabbit back up in its cage and waited.

An hour later she heard screams coming from next door. She ran over and innocently asked her neighbor, "What's going on?" The neighbor just was in shock pointing at the cage. "Our rabbit! Our rabbit! He died a week ago. We buried him, and now he's back!"

All resurrections are shocking, unexpected, and hard to believe. Jesus' followers didn't believe the resurrection at first. So if you have some skepticism about resurrection, you're not alone. In fact, as a congregation we're focused on reaching non-religious and nominally religious people. And I regularly have people say something like, "Aaron, I believe in God, I love coming to church, the people, the music, the messages, the donuts and coffee. When you talk about Jesus and what he taught I'm right with. I love his compassion for the sick and outcasts. He stuck up for the underdog and I love that about him. He challenged the status quo; he went up against the hypocrisy of authorities and I can relate to that. And even when you talk about the crucifixion I think that Jesus a man who died for what he believed in. But Aaron, when you start talking about the resurrection, my guard goes up. 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 message may be just for you today. Let's take a close look at that very first Easter.

On **Friday**, before that first Easter Jesus was being held as a prisoner and his disciples, his 12 best friends, had gone into hiding. In some ways you can understand why, because when the Romans captured the leader of a group, they would go after all the followers too. If the leader was crucified, then all of his followers were put to the same death. So 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 let it slam to the ground. If the centurions were kind, they might have done Jesus' family a favor and taken the spikes out of his wrists and ankles so the family didn't have to do it themselves.

According to their customs Joseph and the women would gently wash Jesus' wounds and washed his body and started preparing him for burial. You see, the Jews had a very specific way of treating their dead. They would wrap the body in layers and 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 frantically trying to get Jesus' body ready. All they had time to 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 nearby. 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 had to hurry 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 may have been around 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 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?!" They were afraid that the Romans would drag Jesus' body through the streets as a way to make an example.

The women began to cry. 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? Angels 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, "**But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense**". The disciples didn't buy the women's story!

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. 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 speaking nonsense. 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 never 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.

But 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 back 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: One day they're a bunch of cowards hidden in a room, worried about their lives. But the next day they're 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 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.

The resurrection means that you can be free from sin and its consequence which is death. Instead you can have eternal life. You can be free from the power of hatred. Jesus is alive and his spirit can work in you to free you from that. You can be free from the slavery of addiction, the boredom of a life without purpose, you can be free from the restlessness of a life where you have gained the whole world but lost your soul.

But the resurrection isn't just about being freed from things. It's about being freed for something even bigger. It's about being free to experience real, lasting joy. It's about being free to experience authentic relationships, it's about being free so that you can live the life that really is life. Embracing the resurrection of Jesus is life-changing.

Fred Hampton, our church administrator shared a story in staff meeting last week. A man observed a kid at a Chuck E Cheese restaurant that had an ice cream bar. You know where you get a bowl of ice cream and then they have all these different toppings and sauces that you can put on it. This man watched a kid, maybe 8 or 9 who got a big bowl of ice cream and was clearly excited about what sauces he was going to put on it. What the kid didn't realize was that the ice cream bar was right next to the hot dog bar and what he ended up squirting on his ice cream was mustard.

The kid looks down at his ruined ice cream devastated. But at that moment an employee at Chuck E Cheese jumps in and says, "That's OK let me give you a brand new bowl of ice cream." But the kid looks up at the employee and down at his ruined bowl of ice cream, he's so ashamed and embarrassed that he'd put mustard on his ice cream he tells the employee, "I'm fine. It's no big deal. I'm fine." And then starts to stir the mustard into the ice cream turning it into a yellowish, mushy mess that he took back to his table to try and choke down.

Lots of us have thought, as we looked at our lives, "Well, if I just stir harder, this mess, will be ok, I'll be fine." We end up with nasty mustard ice cream. And I don't know about you, but I've put a lot worse than mustard in my bowl of ice cream. I've got motor oil, and D batteries, and a dead bird in there. I had sin and habits and hurts and hang-ups. That was my life! For a big chunk of my life I just tried to stir the mess harder.

All the while Jesus, because he's very much alive, after the resurrection is saying, "Let me just give you a brand new start. A new beginning. Stop wearing yourself out stirring that mess. Come to me and I'll give you a new life. I'll set you free. I'll help you see the world, see yourself, see others in a brand new way."

Jesus' resurrection means that it's not about trying harder, it's about accepting a free gift of life. If you choose to accept that gift, then get busy living out your faith. Loving God through worship, loving others through some kind of a small group, and serving the world by finding ways to make a real difference.

The resurrection changes everything if you let it. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.