

Easter Sunday, 2024

Last week, I was talking to a man at the gas station and I made the comment that Easter was coming up, and he said, “really? When is that?” And as I was about to answer, I realized that I didn’t know the specific date so I said, “It’s coming up!” The reason that struck me is that if I as a pastor had to look and see that Easter fell on March 31st, then maybe a lot of Christians wouldn’t know the exact date either. Which, when you think about it, is pretty mind-blowing. No one needs a reminder when Christmas is coming up, everyone knows when Christmas is coming up. But for Easter, some of the only signs you’d notice is that Cadbury eggs are on sale and Walmart has piles of ham all over their meat section. There are no Easter songs, or Easter decorations other than eggs and a bunny. Easter, really, to most people, isn’t that big of a deal. But today I’d like to make the case to you that Easter is not only a big deal, but the biggest deal- the most important thing to ever happen. Easter is the biggest deal for 1. Your Faith, 2. Your Future, 3. Your Friendship.

1. Your Faith. At this point in Jesus’ ministry, he had gained quite a following as a religious teacher and miracle worker. He had twelve men who were his closest followers and students, and a number of others who loved him and followed him. But Jesus was much more than just a religious teacher. He actually claimed to be God himself and the religious leaders of his day condemned him to die for blasphemy- he was crucified- executed in the most brutal, humiliating way possible. And when Jesus died, so did the hopes and dreams of his followers. What were they supposed to do? They had invested their lives into following him, and now he’s dead. Regardless, Mary Magdalene and some other women want to honor Jesus by putting sweet-smelling perfumes and grave clothes and on the way there they are thinking, “How are we going to get that stone moved?” But they get there, and the stone is already moved away... And so she goes to the disciples and Peter and John sprint to the tomb and what they notice is bizarre. The ancient Jews would wrap their dead bodies up in strips of linen, kind of like mummies- so the fact that the grave clothes were there, untouched, with no body, means that no one could have taken it off Jesus’ body, no one could have stolen his body, but that Jesus’ body must have supernaturally escaped the wrappings so that they just fell flat. And John realizes it: the only rational explanation for what he is seeing is the impossible: Jesus was right about himself. He has risen from the dead.

A beautiful story. Powerful. Rich. But is it true? Could this just be a nice story to teach us a lesson, or a way for the disciples to make Jesus’ memory live on? No. Firstly, look at the details that John puts in here. Mary is so convinced that Jesus wouldn’t rise from the grave that she goes to perform the dead body rituals. Peter and John, Jesus’ own disciples, didn’t believe that Jesus would do what he said he’d do.. Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus when he’s in front of her. The disciples and Mary look foolish here- so if the disciples were just making up a story so that people would follow them as religious leaders, they are doing a bad job. The only reason they would allow themselves to look so spiritually slow and foolish is if that’s how it really happened. And do you notice who the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection is? Mary Magdalene. A woman. During that time, a woman’s testimony wasn’t valid in court. Women’s words were not taken seriously. So the only reason why the disciples would write that the first person to see Jesus alive after his death was a woman would be because it’s true. And years after, when the Christian Church was spreading throughout the world, the Apostle Paul says that Jesus rose from the grave, and the disciples saw him, he saw him and so did hundreds of others, who are still alive- think about that! Do we understand how radically vulnerable that is? The entirety of Christianity depends on this: Did Jesus rise

from the grave? If he didn't, everything in Christianity is a lie, Jesus is a liar and a lunatic, and we are all fools and we shouldn't waste our time. Christianity is extremely disprovable- if they could find the body, but they couldn't, and you had hundreds of people say: I saw him. And if that's true, if he really did come back to life after he died, that means that he has done what no other religious leader ever dared to do: He claimed that he was God himself, and said, "I'm going to be killed, and I will rise again," and then did it.

What's my point? Faith in Jesus is not blind. Do you notice that the stone was rolled away from the tomb? Why? It wasn't for Jesus. He's true God and his body isn't governed by the Law of Nature, he can move and appear when and where he likes, as we see with the grave clothes. The tomb was opened for Mary, for Peter, for John- so they could see with their own eyes that Jesus wasn't there. Whether or not you are a Christian, you must know this: The evidence is there, and God invites you to look. The disciples all claim that they saw him alive- that they touched him. Hundreds of people saw him, something that Paul wouldn't claim unless it were true. God invites you to read his word, do your research, and wrestle with that question- is Jesus who he says he is, and how would my life change right now if he was? Please do not walk away from church today thinking Easter is a nice story. It is either the most important thing to ever happen, or it is the biggest and most destructive lie ever told. It's a big deal, the biggest deal for your faith. Here's why.

2. Your future. If you've ever lost a spouse, parent, child, or close friend, you may be familiar with what are called bereavement hallucinations. What happens is when someone loses someone close to them, they will sometimes hear their voice or even see them. What's happening is the brain can't comprehend the fact that this person is gone, so it creates images and sounds to make the person "there" again. When basketball star Kobe Bryant and his young daughter died in a helicopter crash, thousands of people in Los Angeles came together and mourned, but also acted with a bizarre joy, celebrating his life. The reporter covering the story said something I'll never forget- "They are attempting to make sense of something that doesn't make sense." And we do this too. When our loved ones die, we say things like, "She's still with us," or "He's looking down on us," even though there's no scientific or logical reason to believe that, but we tell ourselves that because we can't swallow the fact that they are gone. We can't do it! Why? Because we were never meant to. When God created this world there was no death- Adam and Eve were created as perfect, holy people. But they rebelled and when they disobeyed God they brought death upon themselves and all their descendents- cursed with something that we can't make sense of. My friends, that's why Jesus came. He came not just to defeat poverty or wickedness or sadness, but death itself. And because Jesus, the author of life itself willingly died the eternal death that Adam and Even and their children all deserved, we can have his life.

Look at what Paul says- Christ is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Because Jesus' grave is empty, yours will be too. Because Jesus has risen, death cannot defeat you. Death for you is nothing but a sleep from which you will rise when Jesus comes back. Death is not the end of your story, but the beginning of your eternity. Now, death is the portal through which you enter eternal life, your escape from your broken, sinful, decaying body. Because Jesus has risen from the grave, we do not say goodbye to the ones we lower into the grave, but "see you soon." Sure, it hurts. It still hurts. And we weep at funerals because death hurts. But we don't despair. We mourn with joy and hope because death is not the end, and there before Mary, Peter, and John, and 500 more stood undeniable proof. This is not shallow sentimentality. This not a spiritual opioid that we inject into our spiritual veins to get us through this sorry

life. It's true. Because Jesus resurrection is true, eternal life, eternal joy, eternal love and a world recreated brand new- completely perfect with no sorrow, no pain, no violence, no loss, no death, it's all true. And the evidence is there. Because Jesus lives, you will live. Easter's a big deal.

3. Your Friendship. There's a great deal we could talk about in this portion of Scripture, but one thing stopped me dead in my tracks as I prepared for today. What did Jesus say to Mary Magdalene? "Go tell my servants?" No. "My disciples? My students? My friends?" No. "Go tell my brothers." Are you aware of what the disciples did only days before? On Thursday night, they all swore to him that they'd never leave him, they'd never abandon him, no matter how costly it would be. They'd die for him! And the minute Jesus is arrested by soldiers, they abandon him. They let him die without putting up a fight. And Peter, even worse. The last time Peter saw Jesus, Jesus was being beaten to a pulp, and a little girl asked, "do you know him," and he called curses on himself, swore to God that he never met him three times." They were failures and the worst, most hypocritical followers imaginable. But Jesus says, "those are my brothers." How? Because when Jesus went to cross days before, he was punished for every sinner, every person to ever live, every evil, every atrocity, every sin, Jesus was punished for so that all sinners, no matter what they've done, could be forgiven and cherished by a holy God. That's why he came. He died for them too, so that although they are sinners, they can be his brothers. And the fact that Jesus stands alive is proof the sacrifice was enough, and we are all forgiven and are Jesus' brothers and sisters. Even the cowards, deniers, and sinners. Jesus calls us his brothers and sisters. And I don't care who you are, that's a big deal. Let me explain.

There is likely a great spiritual diversity in this room. I know not everyone here is a Christian, that's okay- you're still welcome here. If you are a Christian, Easter means that you are not a fool for believing what you believe- and that your faith is founded not on some teaching or idea, but the living breathing proof of Jesus alive and the countless testimonies that all say: We saw him. Maybe you're not a Christian, and you don't really want to be. You are satisfied with your life and you don't need religion to mess it up- Easter is nice for people that believe that kind of thing, but you don't really need it. Fair enough, but I'd like to politely challenge you. Because of what Jesus claimed about himself, and because of the hundreds of people that saw him alive after he died, and because the disciples and early Christians willingly were tortured and executed for what they preached, you can say that they were all liars, you can say that Jesus was a liar and a lunatic, and you can say that Easter is a myth and a cruel lie. But you cannot say is, "maybe, who cares?" Because if this is true, that means that Jesus is truly the God of the Universe, and that we are all broken evil sinners, but that he willingly was killed in our place, and that you are more loved, more cherished, more forgiven, more important, more valuable, than you would ever dare hope. What Christ offers to you is what no other religion or worldview would dare to: not a new set of rules, but a friendship with God that would fulfill the deepest desire of your heart. It means that your accomplishments, your attractiveness, your moral goodness, your money don't define you, and that death cannot defeat you. Maybe some of you are here, but feel that because of the mistakes you've made, the people you've hurt, the ways you've disobeyed God, that you don't know if God could ever truly accept you. Outside of the grave in Jerusalem stood living, breathing, proof, that you are absolutely, completely, radically forgiven and loved. That's what Easter means. That's a big deal. Amen.