

***The Story: Raised To Life***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Psalm 16, 1 Corinthians 15:17-26, John 20:1-18***

Today's final Scripture reading comes from John 20:1-18. Listen now to God's Word. "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her."

My son Cameron recently celebrated his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Since his brother Jackson's birthday fell a couple of months earlier, he was very excited for when his would come. We marked it on the calendar each day as we waited. But there was one problem...Cameron couldn't say "birthday." So each day, he'd asked, "When's my happy to you? When's my happy to you?" And a few days ago, we had a big celebration. And this strikes me as really important, because Easter is truly the day when God says to the whole world, "Happy to you."

A lot of us think that Jesus' birthday is the "happy to you" day, and that's not wrong, but Easter is the day when it all is proven true. The resurrection is where the rubber meets the road. Either God can do something extraordinary beyond our realm of experience or He can't. The resurrection is the lynchpin on which Jesus' teachings hang. If He rose from the dead, then He was telling the truth all along. If He didn't, then He was a false prophet unworthy of praise.

So let's take a look at the resurrection from the other side this morning, like an Easter version of "It's A Wonderful Life." Let's say that it didn't happen. What would it mean if Jesus didn't return from the dead? We'll start at the beginning. The disciples had fled from Jesus. As our reading this morning said, they didn't understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. They were likely in fear for their lives, afraid they would wind up like their master. They wouldn't have stuck around Jerusalem for a month beyond the Passover.

The disciples had set aside their lives, and without a teacher to follow, they would have had little to do except go back to those lives. Peter, James, and John still had a fishing business to attend to. Others had families, wives, children. There would be no Christian movement, no sudden surge of interest in the crucified rabbi from Nazareth. Paul would never have had a church to persecute, never met Jesus on the road to Damascus, never written letters that would have been preserved for posterity. Israel and Jerusalem would still have been destroyed by the Romans, but beyond that, who knows? The Roman Empire would never have become Christianized, nor would have Europe ever been transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ's forgiveness.

While it's impossible to know what history could have been, we know these things: almost all of us would not exist. The savagery and cruelty of the world would never have been tempered by the message of God's grace and mercy. Charity and kindness and self-sacrifice were not virtues throughout the world before Jesus. Survival of the fittest would have been the only law. The early church saved children left out in the elements to die, and the church was among the first to study medicine because Jesus was the master healer. Without the resurrection, millions around the world who received medical care and treatment by Christians would have died.

Our progress in science? Gone. The church wanted to discover the wonders of the world God created and supported scientific endeavors for huge swaths of history. Without that desire, superstition reigns. What about the arts? Without the resurrection, there is no Bach, no Beethoven, no Michaelangelo...no hymns, no gospel choirs. There is no New Testament, no King James Bible that shapes and forms the English language for centuries. Tens of thousands of books over the centuries bringing comfort and hope to millions stay unwritten. These are just a few of the untold ways the resurrection of Jesus inspired progress that has benefited humanity through the centuries.

But beyond all that, beyond all the ways society has improved because of believers who have stood for Christ, far more important, actually, is the meaning of the resurrection for each of us. If there is no resurrection, then we are truly hopeless. Here's what Paul said about the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15 – it's so important to hear it again: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

Let me break that down for us: if Jesus was not really and truly raised from the dead, there's nothing else for us. Because while Jesus' death on the cross is the sacrifice that frees us from the penalty of sin, His resurrection proves that His sacrifice conquers death itself. Jesus' resurrection is His vindication, a sign for all the world that the good news is real, that salvation has come, that God has dwelt with us and come to save sinners like you and me. If there is no literal resurrection, if it's all just a nice idea somebody made up to inspire people, it's worthless. Go home and go back to bed and sleep in on Sundays.

But I am here this morning to shout it out loud: Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive! Let every knee bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God who died and rose again to claim us as His own! Sing it from the streets; proclaim it from the rooftops; roll down your car windows and tell the guy at the stop light – Jesus is alive! God has kept His promise!

How do we know that the resurrection is true? It's because the story makes no sense as fiction. All four of the gospels confirm that Jesus first appeared to the women that had been a part of their company. None of the disciples would have made that up...as offensive as this sounds now, in their culture, a woman's word had no standing. The very last thing you would have done to get new followers into your movement was to base your foundation on the testimony of women. The gospels show the proof of it – because the disciples thought they were crazy. And their doubt continues. While we pick on Thomas for not believing that Jesus had come back to life, the other disciples were little better. When they first saw Him, they thought He was a ghost! They had to see Him several times for the truth of His resurrection to become real to them. They were just like us...they knew that this was the impossible made possible. It was beyond their comprehension. Their own reluctance to accept it as the truth goes to confirm the reliability of their testimony.

In an earlier part of 1 Corinthians 15 that we didn't read this morning together, Paul explains that the church's belief in the resurrection was never based on a nice idea. There were over 500 eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Paul wrote his letter at a time when many of those witnesses were still alive. He was telling the Corinthians that they could deal with their doubts by going to the source. God never intended for them to believe in gods that were myths – the Roman and Greek philosophers admitted their gods were as much. In comparison, the Jewish faith was always based in the real history of their people, and the good news of Jesus was just as based in historical fact.

We could point to a lot of other historical facts – that the disciples to a man stayed loyal to Christ in the face of persecution and death. That those who met the resurrected Jesus for themselves were radically changed, that a band of unlearned men who had abandoned Jesus suddenly were able to withstand the fury of the Pharisees with a story that would be utterly absurd unless it was true. But there comes a point where proofs must finally give sway to faith. One of the church fathers named Anselm helped write convincing arguments for the existence of God that the church still uses today. Yet for all his work in proving the gospel's truthfulness, he wrote, “I do not seek to understand so that I can believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe, I shall not understand.”

Belief is what Jesus asks of us. It seems to be far too much to ask, to trust in a man coming back to life two thousand years ago when those who personally witnessed it could barely believe themselves. To have faith enough in His resurrection to turn away from sin and to follow a new way of life – to trust God enough to put ourselves totally in His hands – how is it even possible for us?

But that's the very essence of the resurrection...the impossible made possible. Jesus' life was full of impossible signs – in Jesus' own words, the lame walked, the lepers were healed, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and good news was given to the poor. And in the resurrection, God takes everything we know about the universe, the cycle of life and death, and sets it on its ear. In the resurrection, God says “no” to death being the end of all things and “yes” to eternal life for all who believe. God says “no” to the power that sin has over us and “yes” to being made into His image. God says “no” to the world, its governments and kingdoms and authorities, and “yes” to His Son, the servant King who holds authority over them all. God says “no” to all those who exploit the poor and the helpless and the powerless and “yes” to those humble of heart enough to turn to Him. God proves that His foolishness is far greater than the wisdom of the world.

In the resurrection, God make those “yeses” into personal promises. God says “yes” to the resurrection of every single believer – He's saying “yes” to your resurrection if you believe in His Son Jesus and turn to Him. He's saying “yes” that you no longer need fear death, because when it comes, He will welcome you into His kingdom. He's saying “yes” to your transformation into a new creation starting here and now, a new creation that's totally still you and yet totally transformed to reflect His image and glory and nature. He's saying “yes” to your being able to serve the risen King and to serve others with joy in His name rather than being stuck in the cycle of selfishness. He's saying “yes” to giving you His power in your own weakness. In the resurrection, He's making promises to you that if you follow Him faithfully, your life will be made whole forever. The resurrection tells us that God makes good on His promises to us and to all those who came before us in faith.

But there's that word again...faith. Do you have it? Because faith is not just something in the mind, something you've decided to agree with. Faith in Jesus is not just believing He existed and that He died. It's not even just believing in your head that He came back to life. Jesus' brother James tells us in his book that God's enemies, the demons, know the fact that Jesus came back to life. Faith is something different. Faith is not just believing it all to be true. Faith is trusting in Him that He will keep those promises. Faith is believing in His power to forgive you and save you. Faith is hoping in Him enough to turn away from sin and turn away from what the world says is important. Faith is relying on Him so closely that reading His words and following His teachings is part and parcel of your days. Faith is belief enough to do what He said.

Are you there yet? You can't get there alone. None of us has the power to follow God faithfully by ourselves. The Pharisees tried that and failed, and they killed Jesus in part because He told them that their own good works and self-righteousness could never get them right with God. Are you tired of trying on your own to please God? Not only can't you do it, you don't have to. If you want that faith I've talked about, if you know you don't have it but you earnestly desire it, ask God for it. Ask Him to give you faith. Ask Him for everything you need to be His faithful follower. He will do it. Jesus said, “Come to me, all who you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

As I close this morning, I want to remind you of Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene that she was to say to the disciples: “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” That's the final promise of Easter, of resurrection. The Israelites knew of God as the father of their nation, but not as their own personal father. Jesus knew God as His father and said so throughout His ministry. But never would anyone dare to call God by such an intimate title...until now. In resurrection, God proves that He is not a wrathful deity to be obeyed out of fear or a distant being who made the world and left it alone to collapse. No, God is the Father of every believer. He is as real as our earthly fathers and far closer to us than even the best of earthly fathers could be. He loves us as His own and showers us with His blessings, His Spirit, even His discipline in order that we might become the beautiful creations He intended. In this wonderful family into which we're adopted, Jesus is our Savior, Lord, and King, but He is also our brother. And in the fellowship of the church, we are surrounded with brothers and sisters committed to Him; we don't do it alone, but we become His disciples as we become a true family rooted and nurtured in God's love.

Is God your Father? Is Jesus your brother? Have you found your perfect home in Him? Then today is a celebration of Jesus' resurrection and your own resurrection to come. Let us sing with all the angels the truth: “Why do you look for the living in this place of the dead? HE IS RISEN!” Amen.