

**THE MAIN EVENT  
FIRST IMPORTANCE  
JOHN 20:1-18; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11  
APRIL 4, 2021  
EASTER**

**READ AT SERVICE OPENING: JOHN 20:1-18**

Happy Easter!

What a great day to be here!  
Spring time, a long weekend, flowers and butterflies, bunnies and chicks,  
Easter dresses, TWO Sunday services to accommodate the numbers,  
maybe a special family Easter lunch today,  
more people venturing out now that COVID numbers are down and vaccination numbers are up.  
And just think, all those young kids hopped up on candy egg sugar just went out the door with Carol!  
What more could you ask for?

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But while all that is fun and exciting, what's Easter really all about?

The resurrection of Jesus.

But the truth is, we're not always really clear about just what that is...  
and maybe less clear about whether it's really believable,  
and perhaps even less clear about what difference it makes.

It's sad but true that we use the word "resurrection,"

even tell the story of the resurrection,

but may not have thought through this at a very deep level.

I believe it is vitally important that we think deeply about this and seek out real understanding.

Because, as the apostle Paul said, this is a matter of first importance.

**1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11**

"I pass on to you as of first importance..."

Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,

that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

and that he appeared" to many people.

These are things of "first importance."

Paul is saying that this is the very core, the foundation, of Christianity.

If this is not true, the whole thing is a farce.

Jesus is just another Jew who suffered unjustly and died.

He wasn't the first, and he won't be the last.

History points us to the multiple attempts to kill not just one Jew,

but the whole of the Jewish people in the book of Esther,

the corruptions of the Crusades,

the Spanish Inquisition, Adolf Hitler's Third Reich,

the explicitly stated goals of some Muslim majority nations,

to the anti-Semitism sometimes expressed today.

If the resurrection is not true,

the death of Jesus just doesn't mean much in the midst of all that.

But if the resurrection is true,

Jesus' life, his words and deeds, and his death, mean everything.

We must get this right.

So today I want to provide some clarity on those three points:

what the resurrection of Jesus is,

whether it's really believable,

and what difference it makes.

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So, first, what is the resurrection of Jesus?

The Gospels tell the story of Jesus' death on the cross,

a death that was not just another death,

but somehow "for our sins."

On the cross our sins were dealt with,

our debt to God covered,

the punishment for sins taken,

so we can be forgiven,

if we will simply receive that as God's gift to us.

And, Paul says, it was "in accordance with the scriptures."

In other words, this did not catch God off guard.

He knew it was coming and was able to weave it into his redemptive work in the world.

The Gospels then tell us on the third day after Jesus died and was buried,

he ROSE from the dead.

The resurrection story.

This is not a story of natural cycles like the death of winter and the new life of spring.

It's not grass greening up, trees budding out,

flowers blooming and cocoons giving way to butterflies.

It's not even the spirit being released from the body at death.

It's not a natural process at all.

It is a supernatural miracle,

God intervening in the creation to do a shockingly new thing.

The body of Jesus received new life.

He rose from the dead,

his body alive and somehow transformed into some new form.

Specifically, the first evidence was the tomb was found empty.

His body was gone from the slab.

His spirit had not left his body.

His body was gone.

Only the cloth in which he'd been wrapped was left behind.

The next evidence was that he appeared in bodily form.

He appeared to women near the tomb.

He appeared to his closest followers.

At some point he appeared to a crowd of some 500 people.

Paul delivers to us a laundry list of appearances.

And then, he appeared to Paul... "as to one abnormally born."

Abnormally born because his appearance to Paul some time later than all the others.

And abnormally born because this appearance was not to a friend,

but to someone who had been a sworn enemy of the new Jesus movement,

one who organized and led the persecution of the church.

Real appearances of Jesus in tangible bodily form to so many people.

His body was so real,

the marks of the nails were still there in his hands and feet.

Ghost and spirits don't have wounds.

But the risen Christ did.

His body was so real,

Jesus invited a doubter to touch the wounds and see they were real.

His body was so real,

at least once he shared a meal with his friends.

But the body was more than just resuscitated.

He could appear in the midst of his friends when they were hiding behind locked doors.

He could appear to two people walking to the town of Emmaus,  
 and in seconds appear to his followers back in Jerusalem.  
 His body had been somehow transformed.  
 But it was still his body.  
 Paul described it this way to the church in Corinth.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-44

A spiritual body.

He stretches the bounds of language,  
 putting together two things usually thought contradictory,  
 spirit and body,  
 trying to express a reality that is beyond our full grasp.

So resurrection is the body being raised from the dead to life and somehow transformed.

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But is that really believable?

That's our second question for clarification.

Is that really believable?

Let me offer you some reasons to believe.

First, the tomb was empty.

More than one eyewitness testified to that fact,  
 and no one ever attempted to deny that.

There was one conspiracy we know of to try to explain it away.

Matthew reports the guards at the tomb were scared to death,  
 because this happened on their watch.

The assumption would be they were guilty of dereliction of duty,  
 and they could be executed.

The religious leaders suggested they tell a concocted story that

Jesus' followers snuck in, rolled that great stone out of the way,  
 unwrapped the body, and stole the body in the dark of night,  
 while the soldiers were all sleeping. (Mt.28:11-15)

But how likely is that?

First, how likely is it the soldiers could not stay awake,  
 even though their lives depended on the job getting done?

Second, how likely is it they ALL fell asleep?

Third, how likely is it they ALL fell asleep AT ONCE?

Fourth, how likely is it these friends of Jesus could sneak in,  
 roll back the great stone covering the mouth of the tomb,  
 unwrap his body, and carry it away,  
 all without waking even ONE of the guards?

The resurrection is believable because the tomb was empty,  
 there were multiple eyewitnesses to that fact,  
 and no one even tried to deny it.

And the only concocted conspiracy theory we know of does is not at all likely.

Second, it's believable because of all the eyewitnesses, not one of them ever changed their story,  
 even under threat of death.

And no one willingly gives up their life for a lie.

They knowingly and willingly laid their lives on the line,  
 and not one of them changed their story to save their life.

Oh, people might give their lives for something not true....  
 if they are unaware it's not true.

A couple of decades back there was a small cult which believed

God was hiding behind a comet in a space ship,  
 waiting to take his people on board.

In their final act of faith, they donned purple robes,

drank poisoned grape juice, put plastic bags over their heads,  
and all died.

I hope we would all agree they were terribly deluded.

But they gave their lives for a falsehood.

People will give their lives for something that's not true.

But they sincerely believed what they'd been told.

In the case of Jesus' followers, they were eyewitnesses.

They didn't hear it from someone else and believe.

They saw it for themselves and believed.

They would *know* if it was true or false.

And they knew it was true.

Which is why they were willing to die.

Not one of them changed their story.

A third reason it is believable is the conversion of a Jewish man named Saul, who became Paul.

You could make the case the first followers of Jesus,

after giving three years of their lives to following this man,

had a vested interest in continuing the Jesus movement.

You could chalk it up to a grief inspired delusion.

Except psychiatrists say such things do not happen to groups of people.

Or you could suggest it was cynical deception on their part.

Though, again, it's not likely they would be willing to DIE

for what they knew to be a lie.

But Saul, who became Paul?

How do you explain his conversion?

He was a committed enemy of the Jesus movement.

He had no vested interest in the continuation of the movement.

He had every reason to stamp out the brushfire before it spread.

But he encountered the risen Christ

and became one of the chief proponents of the Jesus movement.

Saul, the one "abnormally born."

A fourth reason the story is believable is that Jesus' first followers had a hard time believing it at first.

Yes, really, that's a good reason to believe it.

Because in the legends and mythology of the ancient world,

the heroes of the stories were all portrayed... well... heroically.

They are strong, sure, bold.

But in all the Gospel accounts the friends of Jesus struggle.

They have a hard time believing.

Thomas is famous as "Doubting Thomas."

"I won't believe it until I see it."

(Jn.20:25)

Even when they seem sure,

the text says, "But some doubted."

(Mt.28:17)

Why would anyone include such embarrassing episodes in a made-up story?

No one would.

But it would be told by an eyewitness who knows it to be the truth.

There are numerous significant reasons to believe the story is true.

And, finally, the truth of the story really does make a difference.

It makes all the difference in this life and the next.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:13-19

He's saying,

If it's not true, this is all a huge and sad joke.

My ministry has been in vain, your faith has been in vain.

It's like when you play Monopoly.

All that time spent, strategizing, buying properties and putting houses and hotels on them,  
losing and making Monopoly money.

But it's just Monopoly money.

It doesn't really count for anything.

Except bragging rights.

And even that only lasts for a moment.

When the game is over, and you've had your little celebration,  
it all goes back in the box.

Win or lose, it all goes back in the box.

Well, if the resurrection is not true,

when the game is over YOU go into the box.

And down into a hole in the ground.

End of story.

But.... But... Christ WAS raised!

Remember all those reasons it is believable.

Christ WAS raised!

And that makes all the difference in the world.

The resurrection means the vindication of everything he said and did.

So his life, his teaching, his moral example, count for more than others in the historical record.

The resurrection means he's more than just another Jewish martyr.

So his death counts for more than just martyrdom.

It is what he said it is:

He "gave his life as a ransom for many."

(Mk.10:45)

His death frees us from the guilt of sin and the power of sin.

The resurrection means he is victorious over the powers Rome and the religious elites,

and, more importantly, victorious over the powers of sin and death.

So he is rightfully called "Lord of lords and king of kings."

(Re.17:14; 19:16)

And as such, he is the Lord of MY life.

He is the one, above all others, who I am to follow and serve.

The resurrection of Jesus means he is alive today!

It's not just that he was alive on that Sunday morning 2000 years ago,

but he is alive today.

He is more than a historical figure from ancient times.

He is alive today; he is alive forever.

So he is forever the priority of my life, my Lord.

And he is available to us today,

ready to hear our prayers and lend us his aid as we live this life.

The resurrection of Jesus means death is not the end for those who follow him.

If we follow him in life,

we will also follow him through death and to life eternal.

That means when the new creation comes,

"we will be united with him in a resurrection like his."

(Ro.6:54)

For all who follow Jesus,

death does not have the final word.

Think of the difference that makes in dealing with

the death of a loved one who undoubtedly was a person of faith.

We can face it with a different attitude.

Oh, it doesn't mean we do not grieve.

But we grieve differently.

Perhaps the deepest personal loss I've experienced was

the death of my mom a few years ago.

It was a tough road through lung cancer,

constant hospice and nursing care at home,  
and all of us putting in time there,  
with so little we could actually do.

And when it was over I had a deep sense of loss.  
But I felt hope, too.

She had been a woman of evident faith.

It showed up in so many ways.

I had no doubt that I'd see her again

under much better circumstances.

Paul wrote to the church,

“Do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (1Th.4:13)

Yes, we grieve our loss when a loved one dies.

But if our loved one was a follower of Jesus

we know that's not the end of the story.

We can hope for a heavenly reunion.

The resurrection means we can face *our own* death differently, too.

That does not mean we seek death,

nor that we get careless about viruses or traffic or anything else  
as if daring death to take us.

And it does not mean we devalue the things of this life.

Enjoying our friends and loved ones, the beauty of the earth,

and relishing all the goodness of this life

are still part of our lives.

But while we might think of missing those things when we leave this earth,

we know there's something so much better,

something our minds cannot fully grasp,

waiting for us on the other side.

Finally, the resurrection empowers us to live *this* life with *courage*.

Early in the pandemic, before we knew a lot about this virus,

an interviewer asked a hospital doctor:

“How do you do it?

Day after day, going into the rooms of patients  
struggling to catch a breath because of COVID.

You could catch it from them.

Why do you keep walking in to their rooms?”

It wasn't the first time he'd thought about it,

and it wasn't the first time he'd been asked.

So his response was ready.

“I do it, not because it's my job, but because it's my calling.

I'm doing what God wants me to be doing.

I do it because they need someone to help them.

This is my ministry.”

But aren't you afraid of getting it yourself?

“I'd be foolish to not think about that.

I take the precautions I can:

Masking up, gloves, washing, distancing when possible.

So I do what I can to minimize the risk.

But I cannot let the risk paralyze me.

There's life to be lived, work to be done,

people to be helped,

and God's call on my life to be answered.

And if I do get it, and the very worst happens...

There's something much better waiting for me."

Courage.

**SERMON NOTES:**

What we believe (1 Cor.15:1-11, 35-44)

Is it believable?

Empty tomb (Mt.28:11-15)

Eyewitnesses didn't change their story

Conversion of Saul/Paul

Doubts of Jesus' first followers (Jn.20:25; Mt.28:17)

What difference does it make? (1Cor.15:13-19)

Vindicates Jesus (Mk.10:45)

His death means more than just another death

He is the victorious King of kings, Lord of lords (Re.17:14; 19:16)

He is alive today.

Death is not the end for those who follow him. (Ro.5:54)

We face death with hope. (1Th.4:13)

We have courage for this life.