

# ***Undefeated***

Week 1 Easter

April 3-4, 2021

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I recently caught a few innings of a Pirate game on TV. One of the announcers was Matt Capps, a former pitcher for the Pirates. Matt said, "When I was in high school, I threw hard enough that I could just throw it by hitters and get them out. When I got to the major leagues that didn't work." In the majors, it doesn't matter how fast a pitcher throws, batters will hit it if the pitcher doesn't put the pitch in the right location and change speeds. So Matt had to learn how to pitch, not just throw. The higher the level of baseball, the higher the degree of difficulty. It's harder for pitchers to get batters out (and vice versa.)

That's the way it works with video games too. As you master each level and go to the next the game gets harder with each new level. The same thing goes for school. A student might do well at multiplication and then do fine with algebra but that doesn't mean they'll breeze through calculus. The higher the level of math, the more difficult the problems become.

The same is true in our daily lives as we face different levels of problems. Some are easy, others are tough. A teen-ager says, "I wish I had the problems I had when I was in elementary school..." A college graduate dealing with new job pressures, financial decisions and living on their own for the first time thinks, "The pressures I had in high school were nothing compared to now..." The problems we face come in all levels of difficulty.

**That's why the message of Easter is such good news! *It tells us that Jesus defeated the greatest problem we will ever face, so he is infinitely capable of handling our lesser problems, too.*** When I say "the message of Easter," let me be clear about what it is and what it is not. The message of Easter has nothing to do with bunnies or colored eggs or jellybeans. Those are all fun but completely unrelated to the message of Easter. The message of Easter is not a motivational self-help platitude like, "After winter comes the spring," or "Disaster holds the seeds for new beginnings." The message of Easter is much more revolutionary than that. The message of Easter is

what we heard from Matthew 28 at the beginning of the service. Jesus defeated death by rising from the dead! Paul lays out the message of Easter plainly in **1 Corinthians 15:3-4** *<sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*

There it is: Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give life to all who trust him to lead their lives. Jesus defeated death when he walked out of the tomb on the first Easter morning. So clearly, when we talk about Easter, we're talking about an **outright miracle** – a dead man came back to life! The disciples preached that miracle and that message has changed lives for over 2,000 years. But it is still astonishing at its core.

As a new believer in college I started to question the Easter message. I wondered, "Did Jesus really rise from the dead? How do I know that miracle really happened?" I thought to myself, "Maybe people just *thought* Jesus rose when he really didn't. That was 2,000 years ago and today we know that dead people just don't walk out of tombs." Then I realized that people in Paul's day knew that too – maybe better than I did, because back then people died at home and were buried by their relatives, not a funeral director. They knew from first-hand experience that everyone dies --- and that there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. I heard others teach that the story of the resurrection was more symbolic than literal – that it didn't matter whether Jesus actually rose, but that the important thing was that his teachings and example lived on.

But I didn't agree because I knew the disciples said they actually saw the risen Jesus. **1 Corinthians 15:5-7** *<sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also...* These disciples weren't speaking symbolically. They didn't say, "He's gone, but it's like I can still hear his voice." No, they said that the risen Jesus told them, "Look at my hands and feel the hole in my side." The disciples didn't say, "Jesus showed us that it's darkest before the dawn." No, they said, "He cooked us fresh fish for breakfast." OK, maybe that's what they said, but I had to wonder if they lied. Maybe they knew Jesus didn't rise, but they said he did. But why would they do that? People only lie when it benefits them. The disciples were killed for saying Jesus rose from the dead. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by lying. In fact, the Apostle Paul was blunt about this: **1 Corinthians 15:14** *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

Paul was saying that if Jesus didn't rise, we should all go home and forget about this faith thing. **1 Corinthians 15:20** *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.* *Something* changed Paul from a church killer to a church planter. What was it? *Something* turned those disciples from cowards into bold preachers declaring that Jesus rose, even when they were killed for saying it. Why did they do that? They told us, "Jesus rose from the dead."

Here's why it matters that Jesus actually rose. **Because Jesus actually rose from the dead, it means that Jesus himself is truly with me – not just his memory.**

And because the undefeated Jesus is with us, we can live undefeated too. Yes, the resurrection of Jesus was a miracle. And friends, there are times that a miracle is exactly what we need! Because we are going to confront challenges that we can't budge on our own. Since Jesus took down our biggest enemy, he is infinitely capable of dealing with all our smaller ones. It's like bringing in a major league pitcher like Matt Capps to face a line-up of Little Leaguers. He'd go undefeated – and so does Jesus!

He will not be defeated by anything we face.

**Because Jesus is undefeated he can Resurrect our dead dreams**

Jesus' disciples were crushed when he was crucified. All their hopes and dreams died with him. But when he walked out of the tomb, Jesus gave them a new future they never dreamed of. If you ever watched one of your dreams die, you know how hard it can be. Maybe an important relationship died. You thought you'd be best friends forever, but it didn't turn out that way. Or a family member turned their back on you and shut you out. And you grieve. Or a marriage becomes so sick that you think, "It will take a miracle to save it." Through Jesus, relationship miracles can happen. I've performed 2<sup>nd</sup> weddings for people who had divorced and then remarried each other because they experienced the transforming love of the risen Jesus that changed them. I've seen marriages blown apart by affairs and unfaithfulness healed by the power of God. Even when the relationship is not saved, Jesus can heal the rejection and move us into a new, richer life.

Maybe it's a vision for the future that has died; you thought your life would go one way but it didn't pan out. You didn't get accepted to the school; didn't get the job you wanted and the dream died. We get sick or are injured and the future seems to close down. Those early disciples told us that Jesus can remake our lives and give us new dreams from him when we let him.

### **Because Jesus is undefeated he can Free us from our dead-end patterns**

Sometimes we create our problems. A 20-year-old college student was booked into jail in the state of Washington for underage drinking. When he was released and leaving the police station, he saw some presents sitting under the department's Christmas tree and decided to steal them. He discovered that one box was empty, one was a box of facial tissues, and the third contained women's hygiene products. He also discovered that his theft was recorded on the station's security camera. Merry Christmas!

BBC News reported that an Egyptian bus driver came up with an ingenious plan to beat a mandatory drug test. Instead of submitting his own sample, he used his wife's. But he failed the test anyway. He learned that when his boss handed him the results and said, "Congratulations; you're pregnant."

The truth is sometimes we each make our own problems. We can be our own worst enemy.

- We may push people away without meaning to and end up lonely.
- We might fall into self-destructive habits that undermine our success.
- We cave into addictions that ruin our happiness.

We know we should quit, but we can't. We're stuck and powerless to change.

And on top of that, each of us have sinned; we've done what we want instead of God's good will for us. That breaks our connection with God and messes up our lives. We shoot ourselves in the foot. But Jesus died to pay the price for our sins and rose again to give us a new life that is not under sin's control. We can be free again! Whatever battle you're facing, invite Jesus to take over the fight, because he is undefeated. He has never lost! Jesus faced our despair and won! He faced our loneliness and won!

Jesus took on our sins and guilt and came out victorious. Jesus faced all these enemies of ours and knocked them all down, one by one.

### **Because Jesus is undefeated He can give us eternal life**

**1 Corinthians 15:25-26** *For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death.* On that first Easter, Jesus won the battle over the most difficult foe we'll ever face: death itself. He rose from the dead, and he promises to give eternal life to everyone who puts their trust in him.

**1 Corinthians 15:54 – 57** *Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory. <sup>55</sup> O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"<sup>56</sup> For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. <sup>57</sup> But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I saw that victory in Nancy Minner. I got to know Nancy after she joined our church family. A few years ago she got cancer. As the disease progressed, her body weakened, but her spirit kept shining. Let me share an excerpt from the poem she wrote toward the end of her life.

### **END OF MYSELF**

...“I am at the end of myself...

- The end of my human efforts
- The end of my plans and hopes
- The end of my prayer request

The world says to curse God for my condition but I choose to declare Praises to my God in the darkness....

- He has never left me
- He has given me strength
- He has given opportunities to share His Word and Love.

Praise be to God! And what happens next?

...a light to my soul breaks through and I give humble thanks.”

Nancy was not defeated by the reality of death because she knew that Jesus had already conquered it.

Earlier in the video we heard Craig Wolfley mention his good friend Tunch Ilkin. Tunch is a former Steeler player and a broadcaster on the Steeler network, and a man of strong faith. I shared a platform with him once as we preached the gospel on the streets of Homewood. He dedicated years to making a difference in the community as a men’s minister and a major supporter of Light of Life ministries. Tunch influenced countless people by the way he approaches both life and death.

And Tunch has had to face the enemy of death. In 2012, Tunch’s wife Sharon died of breast cancer a few months before their thirtieth anniversary. They loved each other deeply. She was a mother of three and a teacher who loved people. Throughout that painful loss, Tunch drew on his conviction that Jesus had conquered death.

And now Tunch is facing the final enemy himself. Several months ago, he announced that he has ALS; the progressive nerve disease where the brain gradually stops communicating with the muscles of the body. There is no cure. And yet, Tunch’s spirit is still strong. A mutual friend called him recently to see how he is doing and all Tunch wanted to talk about was how our friend was doing. He knows what is in store for himself, but he wants to talk about others. Once a week Tunch takes an early morning walk with some of his friends who pray over him and encourage him. Tunch is looking death in the face and is not defeated because he knows that Jesus already defeated death.

You can know the same thing. The Easter message is not about making our lives more comfortable, it is about making our lives new and giving us a new purpose for living. It is not about living with less pain; it’s about living with more significance. It’s not just about what happens when we die someday, it’s about how we live today.

Some of you are doing well. You’re healthy, you’ve got what you need. And that’s great! I am delighted for you! Jesus is calling you to himself; calling you to step into a relationship with him that will never end. But others here are not doing well. Life is brutal right now. You need God’s Spirit to work a miracle in you with healing, hope, and new

life. If that's you, it's time to put your hand in the nail-scarred hand of Jesus who already defeated whatever you face.