

Easter 2018 - Not in Vain

Good morning. Happy Easter. We are here to celebrate the greatest event in the history of the universe, the most meaningful event for everyone here, and the event that we will be celebrating not only today, not only every Sunday, but for all eternity: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God among us, from the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

So this is written to remind us of what we are so prone to forget. The good news. The Gospel. And when Paul describes the gospel, he doesn't say, "Here's what you need to do."

He tells the story of something that has been done!

He doesn't say, "The good news is that there are some great commands you have to follow," even though Jesus does give us good commands. He doesn't say the good news is that we will fix the world, that would be a false promise that clearly hasn't panned out in 2000 years.

He says the good news is that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again and appeared to a bunch of people to confirm it.

So the gospel, the good news, is not anything that I've done, or anything I need to do. In fact, what Paul describes as the gospel doesn't say anything about me. It doesn't describe anything I bring to the equation, except one thing: my sins.

That is good news, because I'm good at that. I've found I can really consistently not obey commands, not follow good guidance, not try hard enough. I have that down.

With nothing to give back, we've been invited to a feast.

Luke 14:12-14 "12 He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

And in the Gospel, Jesus practices what He preaches. He invites us, the poor, the lame, the blind who could never repay Him and spreads a table of grace in front of us.

We're invited to receive what has been done for us, we're invited to a feast that Jesus has prepared and we pay nothing and can give back nothing, we just receive.

Today is all about Jesus and what he did.

So what did He do? What is the good news?

Christ died for our sins

First, Jesus rightly diagnosed our problem.

Getting the right diagnosis is part of the good news.

When you are sick for years and doctors finally figure out what's wrong, even if your condition is a terrible one, it brings incredible relief to just know what the problem has been all along and why nothing else was working.

By coming to die for our sins, Jesus demonstrated that we are not just confused people in need of some direction. We have proven throughout history that we can get perfect direction, perfect laws and commands from God, but not have any desire or motivation to follow those commands, so they don't work. This is why tips and strategies for a better life, and laws and commands for obedience, have failed to change us. Because our biggest problem has never been our lack of information and rules and strategies.

The diagnosis is that the problem is severe: the problem is sin. It goes

deeper than just the surface. On a fundamental level, by nature, I just don't like God. The good that I should do, I don't do. What I shouldn't do, I do. The Bible says I'm dead in sin, I'm rebellious against God, and that sin problem permeates to every cell of my being. And that is my big problem.

But Jesus didn't just diagnose. He cured. He died for our sins - the only solution that would work.

He is CHRIST who died for our sins. The Savior, the One.

Through our own efforts we can't fix this. So we need a Savior.

We don't need a bandaid, we need an organ transplant, and you generally need to enlist some outside help with that. It's not a do it yourself project. You don't just watch a youtube video and swap out your heart. You can't do that one on your own.

And we can't fix our biggest problem. So Christ - the Savior - came to do it for us. God isn't so cruel as to tell us to get it all together and fix it on our own. Christ died for our sins.

What we need isn't inside of us. It's outside of us - it's a Savior who came and died.

God is not giving us a bunch of medical instruments and saying, "Fix this." He fixed it in Jesus.

So Christ died.

He was buried

They took him down off of the cross, wrapped his body for burial, and put him in a tomb.

This was an actual, physical event in history, not just a myth. The accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection in the bible read nothing like the myths that were being written at the time. This is written like history, with eyewitness accounts of the spear the stuck in his side on the cross and the confirmation of his death by the soldiers.

And up until this point, it was a story like any other. Another martyr who dies for a cause, another rebel put down by the Roman government, another teacher who met the same ultimate end as any other teacher.

At this point, it didn't look like He was worth devoting a life to. His disciples seemed to regret their decision to leave it all and follow Him. If he was just a teacher, not someone who would change the world, then why not just learn in a classroom and go back home to your normal life. Why give up your career, your plans, your family, and your identity to follow Him?

At worst, you take out some student loan debt to learn from a great teacher. You don't give up everything. That would be investing far too much in your education.

BUT HE ROSE. HE ACTUALLY CONQUERED DEATH.

Which means that a life invested in Him completely, then or now, is not a waste. The sacrifices are not in vain.

If He conquered death, He is worth trusting. He is worth investing your life in.

He is instant and total credibility.

Anyone can say they have power over sin and death. Anyone can claim they can forgive sin. Anyone can promise everlasting life to people. Anyone can say they can defeat death. But this guy actually walked the walk and rose from the dead. Jesus confirmed that His words hold up. Jesus is legit.

And He didn't ask us to take the word of one or two, but he said of 500 more, many of whom were still alive when this was written and could confirm that they saw Him after His resurrection.

And many of them were so sure that He rose, that they refused to recant their story, even when threatened with torture and death.

If you've made up a lie, if you've invented a religion because you want to make some money or gain some influence or power over people, you will admit that it was all a lie when torture and death is at stake. But dozens and dozens of eyewitnesses to resurrected Jesus were tortured and killed for their faith, unwilling to back down from their story that He rose. The only thing that would make them do that was if they were utterly convinced that He indeed rose from the dead.

And the only thing that could convince them was seeing Him, for at least one seeing the holes in his hands and his side, confirming that He who was dead is alive again.

So He rose. Which means we can trust all that He said, and that His word,

preserved for us in scripture, is authoritative because it was given by the one who conquered death, proving that He knows things about stuff.

He did it. The story is true. And it is worth investing a life in.

Why We Drop Out

A recent study by Lifeway Research says that 70% of Christians between the ages of 18-22 have stopped going to church. And I honestly don't blame them.

The world is an exhausting and frustrating place. Life is hard, we spend our lives doing a lot of futile things. The job is hard and doesn't have a future. Family life is difficult. We're constantly given burdens by work and family and school - the world is constantly giving us more to do and attempting to motivate us with slogans to keep us going. And it burns us out.

We need something that is different than what we normally hear. People come to church looking for something different, a drink of fresh water. And most of the time, we pile on more burdens and frustrations.

More you should be doing, more advice, more instruction, with some slogans to keep you going.

In traditional churches we receive lists of rules we can follow to be a good Christian and be accepted by the Christian community, which include some real rules from the bible and usually a handful of additional ones.

In contemporary church, you don't have the same rules, but dressed up rules that we call relevant advice: how to live your life, and now the rules don't feel like rules, they feel like motivational slogans that your personal trainer would inspire you with.

Really, that sounds pretty good and pretty Christian. That sounds like a changed life, and isn't Christianity all about lives changing?

Lives changing is great, and Jesus changes lives.

Rules are not all bad. Direction is not bad, motivational slogans aren't bad.

But we've already had to give our lives to following rules and getting motivated. The Gospel is something so much better, the message of what God has done for us for free. It is an invitation not to another set of burdens we can't carry, but to a feast.

And it absolutely changes everything.

But it doesn't say, "transform yourself to be accepted by God." It says, "Jesus died so you could be accepted by God." It's an acceptance based on His work, not yours. So when you falter and stumble and fall, it is still yours by faith.

If you don't change as much as you should or see the results you had wanted, if all of your hope was anchored in your own ability to make everything different, underneath it there will be an ache. Because I know, while there have been some changes, the transformation isn't complete. I don't sleep around, but the lust still creeps up. You're better at some Christian social skills, but still wrestle with anger. You're great at controlling yourself around the church and looking changed there, but at home, your wife sees the parts that haven't changed and you feel a little hypocritical, or a lot hypocritical.

So if you tie your sense of well-being to your own transformation, on the inside it always feels shaky. Because, while change is real, it's never deep enough.

So you are driven to either despair, because you've failed at what matters most. Or you're driven to delusion, where you just ignore the reality of how far you have to go.

So the message, "Do more, try harder" is not good news.

But when we call that the good news, so many hear the same thing they hear everywhere else and walk away from Christianity. And you can't blame them. Because that is the same that any religion offers, it's the same help that Dr. Phil offers - why get up on Sunday for that? Why give money to further the spreading of what Christian Smith calls "moralistic therapeutic deism?" Why give your life to the cause of spreading that news?

If you're not a Christian, you've probably heard that the Christian message is "be good."

I'd ask you to open up your ears to what the Bible says. I'd encourage you to read the Gospel of Mark, you can take one of our bibles. Read the book of Romans. You'll see there that the Christian message is not, "stop being bad and be good." It's that Jesus is good, and he died for your badness.

And the way you get that is not by doing anything yourself, but just by

simple faith. Just trust him, don't do anything.

Michael Horton said the Gospel is, "Don't just do something, sit there." That's what grace is, a totally free gift - not a list of requirements.

Now, if you're a Christian who takes living a holy life seriously, you may be squirming in your seat. You're thinking, "You're making this way too easy. Jesus did give commands, he even said things like if you want to follow him you've got to take up a cross yourself. Ephesians says don't say unwholesome things, Jesus said not to covet, not to lust. There are all kinds of commands for us to do justly and love mercy, and if we make it sound like we don't have to do anything, nothing will get done! We'll all be too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.

Is this whole faith in vain? Do we believe, but with no effect until we get to heaven?"

1 Corinthians 15:9 "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Paul goes from saying the Gospel is all about what Christ has done for us, and in response: "I worked!" If God is this for us, who can be against us? If God loves us like that, we can love others with a relentless love and always have His well to draw from.

He said, "I'm the least of the apostles, I received this grace, and that produced in me an incredible amount of hard work."

Not work to be better than everybody, not work to earn God's approval, that would be paying for what I get for free. But work that comes out of delight. Work that comes from the confidence that God is at work in us and through us.

This is the counter intuitive power of the gospel in our lives.

We would think we'd do more good things because we have to. That if someone really believes they don't have to do anything, they'll just sin all they want.

But the good news doesn't excuse impure living. It is the only thing that

enables it. This doesn't excuse the kind of living that doesn't care for our neighbors, that doesn't work for a better world, it is the only thing that sustains it.

We worry about being too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good. But you've never met that guy. He doesn't exist. The guy who just loves Jesus so much, and finds so much peace and contentment in Jesus, that as a result he cheats on his wife or steals money or ignores the needs of others isn't out there.

When you love Jesus and believe the gospel, it gives you new freedom and motivation and staying power in your efforts to serve others.

What will not change you is wondering if you've changed enough. If you're good enough. If you're sincere enough. If you've done enough to feel close to God yet.

But when you say, "I don't have to prove anything, do anything, earn anything, keep anything. God doesn't need my good works", it is only then that you're truly free to give your good works to your neighbor and to serve out of delight, not just duty.

Radical free grace like that does shape and change us. It's the only thing that can.

This was a theme in Les Mis.

It begins with Jean Valjean, fresh out of prison, having been made a ruthless and evil guy during his unjust imprisonment of 19 years for stealing bread. He needs a place to lodge, but nobody in town will take him in because of his reputation, except for the local bishop.

Still ruthless, he steals the bishop's silver, knocks him out, and escapes. But he gets caught. The police bring him back to the bishop's house in handcuffs with the stolen silver, all the while he is claiming the bishop gave him the silver.

But the bishop tells the police, *"Yes, that's right, I gave him the silverware. And I'm glad that you brought him back because he forgot to take the candelabra, and they are worth much more."* And then he stuffs the candelabra into Valjean's bag, and he is released.

The bishop says, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver I've bought your soul. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God."

And it is this radical act of grace for a criminal that does change him. He goes on to be a good man and a leader in the community, bought and transformed by grace.

Free grace doesn't make us lazy. It changes us.

This message is the heart of the Christian faith and life. And without the resurrection of Jesus as the evidence that His cross was a free gift for sinners, the Christian faith and life is total vanity.

The Resurrection of the Dead

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

The love of God given in the cross and resurrection of Jesus is the essential element of the Christian faith.

If you've ever played Jenga, the game where you have a perfectly stacked tower of blocks and you take turns taking a block from the bottom and putting it on top, you are constantly testing which blocks the whole structure is resting on. The way you find out if a block is important to the structure is you take it out.

Some blocks slide out smoothly, showing the structure wasn't dependent on them at all. Some are harder to get out and cause the whole thing to wobble, and eventually, someone has to take out that block the whole thing is built on and it all collapses. The importance of the block is determined by how much things change when it is removed.

Among the Christians in Corinth, there was a belief floating around that there is no resurrection from the dead and that Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead. They thought that, since the body is bad, after death our spirits go elsewhere and leave this world behind. And also, Jesus must not have physically risen from the dead, because he wouldn't have a bad physical body forever.

So they were trying to easily slip this idea of Jesus and his resurrection out

of their faith. And Paul writes to tell them that this is the block everything rests on and if its gone, the whole Jenga tower of Christianity falls.

He says, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

He says "If Jesus is not God, DON'T BE A CHRISTIAN! NO! IT is not worth it to be a Christian if there is no Jesus! Its all in vain, it is all meaningless!" That seems extreme.

Many of us live a form of Christianity where if Jesus didn't exist, things wouldn't be much different and we would say its still worth it to be a Christian.

- Christianity gave me a great work ethic that can got me into the middle class.
- It gave me a really good group of friends, and it is a support network like no other.
- It gave me a moral code that kept me out of so much trouble.
- I met my wife because of Christianity.
- I get to go to these services every week, and sure I was deceived by them, but they were uplifting and encouraging and got me through some really hard times.
- Christianity was like Dumbo's magic feather for me - I thought it made me fly when in reality it didn't, but it gave me the confidence I needed.

I didn't lose anything really. It really doesn't matter whether this happened, or whether Jesus rose or not.

Most of us could say that. Most of us could slip a real and living Jesus out of our lives relatively easily, *without much of a wobble*. Many of us might go on living the Christian life we were living because it was worth it without Jesus.

But the apostle Paul didn't say that. He said NO WAY - do not be a Christian if Jesus isn't real. It would be a vain waste of time and money to be a Christian without Jesus. Keep reading:

15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

- We'd still have our sins and guilt to deal with. He says that if the Jesus stuff is not true, then we still have sins to answer for to some god out there who can't like our sin, whoever he is, so we're in trouble. Its nice that we have friends and we have great emotional rushes when we sing sweet songs, but if Jesus didn't raise we have a huge problem to deal with in our sin.

The central hope of Christians would be gutted if Jesus didn't die and rise again.

And also all the Christians who have died before us are gone, they are lost forever, with no hope.

If Jesus isn't real, then the whole Christian life falls apart and becomes worthless.

He says it even more strongly:

19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

This is a statement that should shatter our notion that the Christian life is worth living if there is no Jesus. Paul says if there is no Jesus, the Christian life is a foolish way to live. And Christians are pathetic - most to be pitied, because they have given up so much of what this world has to offer to follow this Jesus delusion.

For Paul, everything rose and fell on the resurrection of Jesus.

If He rose, then our faith is not in vain. Our work is not in vain. Our sacrifices are not in vain. Our giving up temporary pleasures for the good of others is not in vain.

But if He didn't rise, the Christian life is not a life worth living.

If all there is to life is the 80 years or so that we get on earth, then live for self. Get all that you can out of every minute because when it's all gone, it's gone. And the Christian life, motivated though it is by grace, is a life of sacrifice and doing hard things in response to our faith and for the good of our neighbors.

If death is the end, don't live that life. Live for self. Eat, drink, and be merry.

But if death is not the end, if Jesus rose from the dead, and if we will too, then build a life on Him in a way that would be foolish and pitiable if he weren't true.

If He rose, put all of your eggs in that basket.

If He didn't, living for Him would be utterly foolish.

Look at the hope we have:

20But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

This says Jesus rose from the dead, and when he comes back - we will too! The Christian life is not just turning 80 years here into 80 hard years instead of the better years they would have been.

It is about accepting some difficulty in the hope that it won't be difficult

forever!

We're going to rise again.

Our hope is there's coming a day when death dies.

And our life will go on, in the same world we live in now, only a resurrected one with no more pain or sorrow or death, where God is all in all.

So clinging to him, sacrificing for Him, making decisions that would be foolish were it not for Him, giving to your neighbor at cost to yourself, working hard to do far too little good and in the midst of many frustrations, will not be in vain.

>