



CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: Easter: We Believe

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Easter 2017

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I want to welcome you to Canyon Hills this morning for Easter 2017. I know we have a lot of guests with us today, friends and family from out of town. Maybe you're just new to town and this is your first time here, period, so welcome to you. We're glad you're with us. In just a minute, I want to share a message I think will be very encouraging to all of us, but before I do that I want to just let you know we have a little gift for you.

A very sweet and generous couple in our church purchased enough of these books to give to you this weekend. It's called *The Case for Easter*. What we realize is that not everybody here has bought in that Easter is really for real. There are some of you sitting here right now where you're still trying to decide if this whole Easter thing can be trusted. Is it true? We get that. This book was written by a skeptic for skeptics or for people who are still searching and wondering if Easter is all that these Christians believe it is.

This is an amazing journey of a man who set out to prove it was wrong, that it wasn't true, and at the end he realizes that was quite an impossible task, but the story in between is pretty moving. I want to let you know that on the way out today there will be tables right in the lobby out this door. We want you to grab one of these and take it home and check it out. We only want you to grab one, though. We have two other services. So don't walk out with an armload, but just take one. If it isn't for you, maybe you know somebody who might be blessed by it. So that is for you today.

What I want you to do right now is get your Bibles open to a place called 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4. Just in case you're without a Bible or without a Bible app, here's what I want you to do. There are Bibles (we call them the church Bibles) all around you underneath the seats in front of you. I want you to grab one of those as best you can. You might have to reach over a few chairs. Get one of those Bibles and open it up to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4.

You're going to find a letter in your Bible that was written by the apostle Paul in the first century. He wrote it to a church, and the church was in the city of Thessalonica. It's actually the second largest city in Greece, and it's still there today. Now a little background on this letter called 1

Thessalonians. About 20 years after Jesus died and rose from the dead (it was about AD 50), Paul and a fellow missionary named Silas landed in the city of Thessalonica.

In another place in our Bibles, in Acts 17, we're told that when Paul and Silas got to this city they spent the first three Sabbaths, the first three weekends, at the Jewish synagogue reasoning with the Jews, showing them that their Old Testament Scriptures, their very own Bibles, teach that their Messiah had to suffer, had to die, and had to rise again. Their Bibles prophesied that that's who their Messiah would be.

He shows them over the period of about three weekends that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the undeniable evidence that their long-awaited Messiah had actually come. They were still looking for him, and Paul said, "He has come." The cool thing is after about three weeks a pretty good number of unbelieving Jews and God-fearing Gentiles started to believe. They started to follow Christ. In fact, not a small number of some of the leading women in the city also began to believe. So the church was born by the message that Jesus is alive.

Now it didn't take too long... We're not sure how long, but it didn't take too long after that where the unbelieving Jews started to get jealous that these people were following another way, that they had believed their Messiah had come, so these unbelieving, jealous Jewish people incited a riot in the city against Paul and Silas, and they had to escape, we're told in the book of Acts, for their lives in the middle of the night. They had to leave town.

A few months later, we read, Paul sends his friend Timothy back to Thessalonica to check up on this young church to see how they were doing, and when Timothy returned to Paul after a few months he had two reports. The first report was, "Paul, the church is doing surprisingly well, considering that you and Silas had to leave so quickly in the middle of the night and they never saw you again. The church has held together. They're doing well. They're believing in Jesus."

But he had a second message, and the message was this: "Paul, some of them have a lot of questions. In fact, some of them are very sad and confused." You see, several of the people in the church had already died between the time the church started and when Timothy visited back, so they had questions for Paul, and they sent Timothy to Paul, saying, "Paul, you taught us while you were here that Jesus has risen, and you told us that he was coming again, but what good will that be, Paul, if we're already dead when he comes? What difference will it make to us if we're dead when Jesus supposedly comes back? How is that going to help us then?"

Church, that's one of the ultimate questions every honest human being struggles with and needs an answer to, desperately longs for an answer to. The question is... *What happens after here?* Where do we go when this life is over? That was their question. So Paul writes them this letter of encouragement, and we hold in our hands a copy of that very letter. What I want us to do is look at a portion of it together and learn how Easter makes all the difference in his answer back to them.

So with your Bibles ready and at 1 Thessalonians 4, let's stand for the reading of God's Word. That's what we do here at Canyon Hills. We always stand. We actually believe that this is God's

Word written down for us, so we stand out of respect and anticipation that when we hear God's Word we hear God. That's why we're standing together right now. I want you to follow along in chapter 4, verse 13, as I read it. Paul is writing. Near the end of this letter he says...

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words."

Let's pray for a minute.

God in heaven, we just ask in the name of your risen Son Jesus and our Savior that you would bless the reading and the preaching and the listening of your Word today, and we ask that your Holy Spirit would fill us. God, in spite of all of the things going on in our world today, we pray right now you would fill us with a joy and comfort from knowing and believing that your Son Jesus Christ is not dead, that he is alive and risen. I pray, God, that that will make sense for us even more today. In his name we pray, amen.

I want you to look back at verse 13, because it's in this verse that he acknowledges this question. They had several other questions for Paul that he spent the front part of the letter answering, but in verse 13 we see him now addressing the one question that brought them the most sadness. He's talking here. He says, "I don't want you to be uninformed, brothers..." Whenever he says *brothers*, he's talking about people who believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

He says, "I don't want you to be confused. Don't grieve for those who are asleep like others do who don't have any hope." When Paul uses that phrase *those who are asleep*, he's talking about Christians, believers, who have died. It's a metaphor to remind us that when we die it's not permanent; it's just temporary. We just sleep, and that'll make a lot of sense in just a minute. He says, "So I don't want you to be confused. Let me answer the question."

Then in verse 14 he starts his answer. He says, **"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again..."** It's from that very place, that cornerstone of all Christian truth, that Paul begins his encouragement. **"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again..."** That is the platform that all of Christianity is founded on. That is the platform the whole structure is built on, and that's where he answers their question.

It's because of the death and resurrection of Jesus that we can even make any sense out of life and death. Without the resurrection of Jesus, we are left to struggle with the answer to that

question. So that's where he begins his answer. "Don't forget now, as we deal with what happens when this life is over, that we believe Jesus died and rose again." Out of this part of his letter we get several points of encouragement, points of hope for us that are directly related to Easter. Let me give you the first one.

1. *Because Jesus is risen, we believe that when a follower of Jesus dies our grief is filled with hope.* It's overwhelmed with hope. That's exactly what he's saying here. It sounds kind of weird at first, but he says, "I don't want you to grieve as others do who have no hope." Now absolutely Christians grieve. We cry. We are very sad when we lose loved ones. We're no different. We shed tears, and it's deeply sorrowful.

Paul doesn't take that away from us, but what he does say here is, "I want you to understand how the resurrection of Jesus affects death for those who believe." I've been to two funerals in the last two weeks, and it never ceases to amaze me how much joy and laughter and even singing takes place at Christian funerals and memorial services. Over 32 years of being in the ministry, I've never lost the amazement of how many times in a Christian's memorial service we're cracking up and singing and laughing and there's joy in the moment.

That's because the doctrine of the resurrection is the springboard for real hope, for eternal hope. You see, what distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever in our day is not the outward accoutrements of going to church or praying or some form of pious living. That is not what distinguishes between the two. The distinguishing mark is that the unbeliever has ultimately nothing to look forward to. The unbeliever has no real God to turn to when he faces death.

Don't get me wrong. I think many unbelievers have some belief in God. They have some concept of God. A lot of people who don't necessarily believe in Easter and Jesus being risen from the dead have a god in their life, and what they tend to do is to pick and choose from different religions, different philosophies, and kind of pour it into a big bowl and stir it up and come up with a version of God.

They come up with a god who is the way they want him to be, but that is not the real God. That is a pretend god, and that god offers no hope, no peace, no joy, and no comfort when death knocks. For the believer, we have everything to look forward to, and we have a very personal and real relationship with a real God that is built on unshakable hope, and that hope begins at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the first way he wants to encourage us today is, "Don't forget when a follower of Jesus dies it reminds us of the hope we have." Let's keep going.

2. *Because Jesus is alive, we believe Jesus is coming again.* I don't know if you saw it when we read this passage, but four different times Paul affirms that what makes Easter the most epic event in all of history is that not only Jesus is alive but that he's coming back. Let me just point your eyes to one of those times he says it.

In verse 16 he says, "**For the Lord himself will descend from heaven...**" As he continues to encourage them about what happens to us when we die, he wants them to remember that Jesus

has risen from the dead, and that by itself is great enough, but he tells us even more. He's saying he is coming again.

People ask Christians all the time, "Why do you Christians keep saying, keep thinking that Jesus is going to come back?" Well, the first reason is because he's alive. He has risen from the dead. The second reason is because that's exactly what he said he would do. Now listen to the very words of Jesus himself before he even went to the cross, before he died and rose from the dead.

This is what he said in the gospel of John, chapter 14. **"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."** People, we're here today because we believe Jesus is not only not dead but he's going to come again, because he's alive and he promised he would.

3. *Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we believe all deceased Christian souls will return with Jesus.* Imagine this scene. When Jesus comes again, he is not coming alone. This is where the hope and encouragement really start to take root in the Christian heart. I want you to look with me again at verse 14. Paul writes, **"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."**

What we have there in that little phrase... God is going to bring with Jesus, he's going to send with Jesus when he comes again those who fall asleep. There are two incredible, hopeful truths that come to light for us right there. The first thing we want to see in that phrase is that we can be sure the souls of deceased believers are already with Jesus. This is where he really wants to encourage them.

Their question for Paul was, "If Jesus is coming back, then how does that help us if we're already dead?" Paul says, "Listen. I need you to understand something." In fact, the Thessalonians weren't the only ones who needed... This is deep stuff. This is deep water here. Many Christians needed to understand this doctrine. Paul wrote to another church in Corinth these words in 2 Corinthians 5:8: **"Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."**

Right there he's describing what happens to a believer who dies. He says, "Listen, when we die, our souls immediately go home." That part of us that lives forever separates from the body and ascends to our risen Lord, and we are immediately with him in our permanent home, heaven, with him. That's the first thing that comes out.

The second thing Paul wants us to know here and wanted the Thessalonians to know is that when Jesus comes again every single soul of deceased believers will escort him in his return. Every single believer who has ever died before Jesus comes will come with him when he returns. That tells us again that death isn't the end for the believer. You can begin to feel now the hope and encouragement that's building up in the Thessalonians' hearts as they're hearing this letter from Paul being read, but he keeps going.

4. *Because Jesus is going to come again, no human being will miss the return of Jesus.* Some of the Thessalonian followers of Jesus heard some false rumors, and these rumors were beginning to gain traction in the first century. The rumor was that Jesus had already come back, that he had come back and had left, and some of the Christians in the Thessalonian church said, "How did we miss it? When did that happen, Paul? Is that true?"

Well, let me give you a hint here. Let's see what Paul does to answer that. In verse 15 he says, **"For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord..."** That little phrase *until the coming of the Lord* is actually one word in the original Greek language. It's *parousia*. That word the Greek people absolutely understood. They got that word when Paul used that in his letter.

It was the same word they would use to designate the expectation or arrival of a big dignitary. It was usually used when they were told that their king was going to come to their city. They would announce it. "There's going to be a *parousia*, a gigantic arrival of someone really special." When the king came to the city, it was always grand. There was a lot of pomp and circumstance. So when Paul tells us that Jesus is coming back, he uses that word, and then he describes the pomp and the circumstance. Look at verse 16.

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." There are several descriptions of the return of Jesus here. First, when Jesus returns it's going to be very decisive. It's going to be by the command of God himself. Jesus is not going to show up just casually walking around in a white robe in downtown Bothell, sipping a mocha.

You're not going to be walking around down at McMenamins and going, "Is that him? Is that him right there?" You're not going to be confused. You're not going to be wondering, "That looks like him. Hey, is he here?" No, there's going to be no confusion. When he comes, it is going to be by the verbal command of God himself. It will be decisive. There will be no doubt. Paul chose that carefully.

Secondly, he tells us the coming of Jesus is going to be very loud. He says it's going to come with the voice of an archangel. Some of your Bibles say the *shout* of an archangel. Now we don't know a whole lot about the archangel. The Bible talks about them, Michael and Gabriel. We know a little bit about them. What we do know is the archangel is the chief of all of the angels in the universe.

I'm guessing if he's the chief of all of the angels he probably has a set of lungs on him. We're going to have no problem hearing his announcement that Jesus Christ is back. Then he says it's going to come with the trumpet of God. I don't know what that trumpet looks like, but I'm guessing if the God of the universe has a trumpet it's going to be the mother of all trumpets. Are you with me on that? It's going to be *the* trumpet. We're going to hear it. It's going to be loud. It's not going to be a flute or a little kazoo. It is going to be one mammoth trumpet.

So it's going to be decisive. It's going to be loud. It's also going to be universal. When Jesus comes back, it's not going to be a localized event. It's going to be cosmic. It's going to be magnificent. We know that because of what Revelation, chapter 1, verse 7, says. **"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen."**

Everyone is going to see him, and he says even those who crucified him. The inference there is even those in hell are going to see Jesus when he returns. It is going to be decisive. It is going to be loud. It is going to be universal, and we're told it's going to be sudden. In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 2, it tells us that when he comes it's going to be a lot like a thief in the night. It is going to be all of a sudden. There's going to be no warning.

What we can be sure of is that no human being will miss it. You don't have to worry that if Jesus comes in the middle of the night Seattle time or while you're napping or while you're working in your cubicle or while you're lying under your car changing your oil... Whatever you're doing, you are not going to miss it. That's what Paul wants us to remember. Jesus is coming, and when he does, you will be ready.

5. Because Jesus is alive and coming again, we believe that all followers of Jesus will receive a brand new body. The older I get, the more exciting this sounds. Look at what it says in verse 16. **"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first."**

All of the bodies of the deceased followers of Jesus will rise from their graves. Whether earthly graves or graves at the bottom of an ocean, whether the top of the mountain or the lowest desert, whether dust or bones, they will rise, and it will be some epic, mind-blowing visual that none of us can imagine, where the souls of all of the deceased Christians come with Jesus, and immediately after that trumpet their bodies will rise and reunite with their souls, forever and ever made perfectly new.

Then it says in verse 17, **"Then we who are alive, who are left..."** If we're alive when Jesus comes. **"...will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air..."** How amazing is this. We will rise next, and we will not rise as we are, praise God. Paul described what will happen in that moment when he wrote to the Corinthians. He says, **"I tell you this, brothers..."** Whenever he talks about *brothers*, he's referring to believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

"...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall...all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on

immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'"

We're not sure what these glorified new bodies are going to look like, but Paul tells us they will be immortal, which means there's no more death after that. He tells us they will be imperishable, which means there's going to be no more aging after that, and this is where I get really excited.

This means no more pacemakers, no more stents, no more fallen arches, no more fillings or crowns or root canals, no more eyeglasses, no more hearing aids, no more canes, no more wheelchairs, no more scales to weigh ourselves on, no more blood tests, no more x-rays, no more MRIs, no more CAT scans, and maybe most important of all for all of us who are over 50, no more colonoscopies. That's what this is going to mean.

All of you over 50 are knowing this is an "amen" moment. Those of you who haven't gotten there yet, you will, and your "amens" will become louder...especially the night before, but we won't go all the way there. Let's not spoil all of the surprises for the young people. You're almost there. Whatever these glorified bodies are, I dream that, starting in that moment, there are going to be a lot of desserts, a lot of carbs, a lot of gluten, a lot of dairy. It's going to be heaven.

My vision of heaven is it's just one giant, eternally long Italian food buffet, and we're just going to eat and just enjoy it and not worry about a thing. That's how it's going to be in *my* mind anyway. But seriously. If you are sitting here right now and you suffer with pain, if you're dealing with disease or sickness or infirmity, your day is coming. When that trumpet sounds, everything will be new.

6. Because Jesus has risen, we believe that all followers of Jesus will be with him forever. Jesus didn't suffer and die on the cross so we could all end up in some endless celestial soul migration, like all the new-agers like to tell us. Somehow they believe that when this ends we're all just going to drift aimlessly, bumping into satellites and planets and each other, like *that* gives us a whole lot of hope and encouragement. That's nonsense. That's pretend. That's made up. Look at what the Bible tells us in verse 17.

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." Always. He says he encouraged by that. This is how Jesus said it: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."** Then he ends that statement with a question. **"Do you believe this?"**

This is the eternal Easter question. Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? That's the ultimate question for all of us to answer today. Do you believe it? Now this is where we just need to be honest. We need to get really honest here, because Easter is not all good news. The resurrection of Jesus is not good news for everyone. We also sadly believe that the return of Jesus will mean wrath for the unbeliever.

There are eternal consequences for rejecting Easter, and that's why we really do want you to take this book home with you. If your heels are still dug in and you're still kind of going, "I don't know about this," I get that. I'm so glad you're here. We want you to have that especially. Keep looking. Keep digging. Keep asking, because the consequences of rejecting Jesus all the way to the end are serious. Look at 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 2.

"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."

Paul is saying, "Listen. When Jesus comes, it will be sudden, but what will be just as sudden is the destruction that will come upon those who do not believe, who have rejected him up to that point." He says those who think that all their peace and security is going to come from this world will have nowhere to run when Jesus comes. There will be nowhere to hide, and his judgment and wrath will come with him. If you look down at verse 8, it says...

"But since we [those who believe] belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."

He is saying, "When Jesus comes, those of us who have put on faith and love, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation..." Those are metaphors for our allegiance, for our faith in Jesus. Those of us who believe and love him will be saved in that moment ultimately forever, because he died for us. His death is that payment and that punishment for all of our sin. He came to save us from God's wrath and the white hot fury of his judgment, so when he comes he's going to come get us and take us out, and those who are left will be left facing God's judgment alone.

Again, in Revelation 1, verse 7, we read, **"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him."** There will be a simultaneous rapture of Christ's followers, and the rest of the world will be left wailing from every corner of the globe. When he leaves with us, it'll be too late.

Here's why I love Easter for unbelievers, for those of you who have yet to decide to love and worship and serve and follow Jesus the rest of your days. I know that describes some of you here. I know some of you sitting right here amongst us... Again, I am so glad you're here. Some of you still aren't sure. Some of you have been putting this off. Some of you have been ignoring it. I don't even believe that you hate Jesus.

There are some of you sitting here right now where it has just been kind of that religious thing, and you're here because someone bugged you to come, and you're just trying to get them off your back, and you're actually really looking forward to this getting over. I get that, but here's why I love this for you. Easter is God giving you one more chance to believe. He's giving you one more opportunity to hear the truth again.

His Son really is alive. He *did* die on that cross, he *did* rise from the dead, he *is* coming again, and he wants to give you a chance to live the rest of your life with your sins forgiven, made righteous by his death on the cross, so that you can joyfully serve and worship and follow him and trust him all the days of your life and look forward to that moment when he comes back.

This is how Paul describes it in Romans, chapter 10: **"...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified [forgiven], and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."** That's the exciting part for those of you who are here again.

I'm going to ask all of us right now to bow our heads and be very still. Just be very still, very quiet for the next 30 seconds. Many of you in this room, your hearts are smiling. You believe. You have believed, and this is such a good encouragement to you. Some of you are sitting here right now, and your heart is racing. Your mind is swirling. You're thinking, "These people believe this stuff." We do, and we're inviting you to believe as well.

If you want to put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you can do that right now. I'm going to pray a prayer, and I'm just going to ask you to repeat that prayer after me, just quietly between you and God. If this expresses the desire of your heart, right now you can walk out of here with new faith and unshakable hope in Jesus Christ. Just say these words, just between you and God.

Dear Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner and I need forgiveness. Thank you for dying on the cross for me. Please come into my heart and forgive me of all my sins. I put my faith and trust in you as my Savior, and I now call you my Lord. Thank you for saving me, amen.

There's nothing magical about those words, but if they express the desire of your heart, I want to say to you, "Welcome to the family of God." Here's what we have for you. These people who are standing here did not just drop out of heaven, although it feels like they did. They have something they want to give to you.

If you just said that prayer sincerely and you stepped over the line and said, "I surrender. I believe. I'm going for it now," they have something they want to give to you to go home with, a little gift. It has a Bible. It's kind of a starter kit of what comes next. What do you do next? We want to encourage you and maybe even pray with you if you have time before you leave. They'd love to do that.

All you have to do is come up here and say to them, "I believe now." That's all you have to say. We want to give you this gift to go home with. I hope you will do that. God bless you. I hope the rest of your Easter is amazing. I hope we can see each other again next weekend. Have a good rest of your weekend, and we'll see you then.