

Easter 2010
Why Come Back?
April 3/4, 2010

Good morning everyone.

As Michael said, we are remembering and celebrating the most significant event in the Christian faith; the most significant event, some would say, in the history of the world ... the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

Scripture tells us that on the third day following his crucifixion ...

Very early on Sunday morning, the women [among Jesus' disciples] came to his tomb, taking the spices they had prepared [for the anointing of his body for a final burial]. They found that the stone covering the entrance had been rolled aside. So they went in, but they couldn't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

They were puzzled, trying to think what could have happened to it. Suddenly, two men appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes. The women were terrified and bowed low before them.

Then the men asked, "Why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He has risen from the dead! Don't you remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again the third day?"

Then they remembered that he had said this. Luke 24:8 (NLT)

So they rushed back to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened ... but the story sounded like nonsense, so they didn't believe it.

Luke 24:1-9,11 (NLT)

Later that evening, as those disciples and everyone else were meeting together, discussing not only what the women had said but also the reports of other disciples who claimed to have seen Jesus and talked with Jesus; two who claimed to have even *eaten dinner* with Jesus ...

Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them.

"Peace be with you," he said.

But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!

"Why are you frightened?" he asked. "Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don't have bodies, as you see that I do."

As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet. Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder.

Then he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it as they watched.

Luke 24:36-43 (NLT)

On Friday, Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. All hope was lost.

On Sunday, he was alive again ... and not just alive spiritually, as if the disciples could somehow "sense his presence" in a

supernatural way or even see his form as a ghostly apparition. “He has risen from the dead” the angels had said, and that meant exactly what it sounded like – that the one who had given up his life *in the flesh* had now taken it up again *in the flesh*.

This is what we celebrate today ... and it’s no exaggeration to say that this is the fundamental claim upon which the Christian faith rests.

In fact, if this is *not* true, there is no reason whatsoever for the Christian faith to exist, a conclusion first arrived at by the chief proponent of Christianity, the Apostle Paul.

Paul wrote:

If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

1 Corinthians 15:17-19 (NLT)

“Our faith is so tied to the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus,” Paul says, “that if it didn’t really happen, then we have got to be the most pathetic people on the planet because we have staked our lives on a fairytale.”

For those of you who believe in Jesus, have you ever thought about that?

It took me a long time before I did. I wasn’t raised in church, so I didn’t become a follower of Jesus until I was a teenager and because of where I was as a teenager and some struggles my family went through, it was a life-changing experience for me. All I knew was that my life was different – better – because of Jesus and that was good enough for me. I really didn’t worry too much about whether or not the claim concerning his resurrection was true. The Bible said it, I believed it and that settled it. Maybe some of you can relate to that kind of thinking.

But as I got older, I began to see what Paul was saying, that if Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead, then this whole experience, regardless of how helpful it had been, was a sham and you would have to be a fool to continue in it. And not wanting to *be* a fool, I was compelled to understand how something so *unbelievable* could be *believable*.

So, I began to study things that were written and said – pro and con – by people much smarter than me. I still do. And I am convinced for many reasons that Jesus really did rise from the dead, literally and physically.

For example, and this is something I read a few years ago by New Testament scholar and author N.T. Wright, who is one of the leading authorities on Palestinian Jewish culture in the first century.

There were, he writes ...

“... a dozen other [messianic] movements that arose in Palestine within about 100 years either side of Jesus (what he means by that is there were guys 100 years before the time of Jesus and 100 years after who were going around the Palestinian countryside saying ‘I am the Messiah. I am the chosen one. I am the one God has put here to redeem Israel and the rest of the world.’) ... In each case, the death of the leader meant the death of the movement or it was taken over by someone else in his family.”

So, the rule of the day was ...

“If you follow a messiah and he gets killed, then you obviously backed the wrong horse. You should either give up or get yourself another leader from within the same family.”¹

Wright goes on to say, but, after Jesus was executed, *his* followers didn't quit. And they did *not* choose another leader from his family (and there was one available; James, the brother of Jesus, who eventually became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, but no one ever suggested that "James, you should take Jesus' place and be messiah"). See, the disciples were quite insistent that Jesus, in spite of the fact that he had been crucified, was, indeed, the messiah sent from God.

And the reason they were so insistent is that they believed that following his execution and burial, Jesus was raised to life in the flesh.² They were so convinced of what they had seen and experienced – and its significance – that they were willing to *risk everything* to hold on to that belief.

And they did risk everything. They were thrown out of the synagogues; thrown out of their families. They were persecuted with beatings and executions not only at the hands of the leaders of the Jewish community, but also from the Romans.

If they were not 100% certain of what they had seen and experienced – and its significance – that kind of rejection and persecution would have quickly broken them. But it didn't.

Now I'm not saying this is proof that Jesus really did rise from the dead on Easter Sunday. I'm just saying it's one more brick in a pile of evidence that says the most reasonable explanation for what followed is a literal resurrection: the most reasonable explanation for the survival and the expansion of the church in its earliest days when it should have gone the way of so many other movements of that time, is that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

Why Did He?

But I have to tell you that as intrigued as I've been by the question of veracity (and encouraged by possible answers to it), in recent years I've become much more interested in another question about this resurrection thing – the *why* question: assuming that Jesus really did come back to life on Easter Sunday ... *why* did He?

Have you ever wondered about that?

- Was he doing some kind of Divine Magic Trick – you know, God just showing off? "Lookee, I was dead but now I'm alive!"
- Was he aiming a "gotcha" at those who killed him? "Try as you might, you just can't keep a good man down?"
- Was he attempting to prove the truth of his other claims with "the Grand Finale" – the big miracle to top all miracles?
- Did he just come back to keep his word – he said he would come back, so he did?

I mean, you could probably make a case for each of those reasons (well, probably not the Divine Magic Trick), but I think the main reason why Jesus came back to life *in the flesh* is much more profound than any of those.

I think Jesus came back because forgiveness isn't enough.

I think Jesus came back because forgiveness isn't enough. Let me explain what I mean ... and let me start by explaining what forgiveness is, because I don't think we understand it very well in our culture.

Forgiveness, whether it's between two humans or a human and God, is a wonderful thing. Forgiveness is what says "you owe me nothing." It says, "I will not extract from you what is due to me. I will not punish you. I will not cause you to suffer for what you've done. Instead, here is what I'm going to do; I will allow what *I* have suffered at your hand to count as the suffering you deserve to

suffer.” And I can do that because that is my right, however I want to handle your offense.

Forgiveness says, “I am paying for your offense; so you do not have to. I release you from your obligation to make this right because I am making it right for you.”

And if you’re a person who has done something wrong towards another person or towards God (and we all have), the prospect of forgiveness is a happy thought. The possibility that this other person or God would not *justifiably pursue righteous revenge* against us is really good news. The fact that they would choose instead to pay for our sin themselves is astounding.

And somehow, in a way I don’t completely understand, that’s what Jesus did when He died on the cross.

The Bible says that ...

God made Him who knew no sin [Jesus] to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

That’s the definition of forgiveness that we just talked about. Instead of demanding that we pay for our sin, God took our sin upon Himself and paid the penalty for it so that we no longer had any guilt or obligation. And if you believe in Jesus, that’s your standing before God. You owe nothing. You are completely forgiven. You are considered by God to have the righteousness of Jesus in you.

And that’s great ... as far as it goes, but it only goes so far because, as I think you can see, *forgiveness deals only with the negatives*. It says nothing positive about the future (other than, “I won’t in the future renege on my promise concerning your sin”). Forgiveness makes no promises about what could be. Forgiveness makes no offer of anything better for the offender going forward. Forgiveness takes no action to fix what is broken.

So, forgiveness – as wonderful and astounding as it is – isn’t enough *if your goal is to create a better way*; if your goal is to create a better person; a better future.

- Fortunately, for us, when God looked at a world that was fallen and in rebellion against him, that was His goal.
- Thankfully, He wasn’t willing to settle for just paying the penalty for our sin – as amazingly gracious as that is.
- Fortunately, God was interested in doing much, much more for us and our world.
- Thankfully, God wanted to create a better way; better people and a better future for those people.

And *that*, friends, is why Jesus came back to life again on that first Easter Sunday morning. Jesus came back because forgiveness isn’t enough.

Jesus came back because, in his resurrection, God was *literally*, not figuratively, creating a better way for everything.

And I don’t completely understand this, but the Bible says that in the same way that Jesus became the sin-bearer for all who believe, he also became the life-bringer for all who believe.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes this. He says,

Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

In other words, Paul is saying, what happened to Jesus is going to happen to a whole bunch more people and even to the whole creation one day. He explains elsewhere in this scripture, he says,

*Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.
1 Corinthians 15:20,22 (NLT)*

So, here's the big picture. See if this helps you understand:

In Jesus' death, all of the old sin-cursed way of *everything* was judged, condemned and then atoned for – forgiveness was granted.

And that's really wonderful. But it wasn't enough for God. God wanted more for us and for his creation.

So, in raising Jesus up, he began the renewal, restoration and regeneration of everything *literally, in the body of Jesus.*

And we know this because when you read what happened at the resurrection, obviously Jesus' body was the same, but it was different. It was flesh and blood (we heard the stories of him eating), yet it had the ability to appear and disappear, to move from the realm of the spirit world to the realm of the physical world, back and forth.

And when Jesus returned to Heaven, he went to Heaven in that body (which, by the way, tells us that Heaven is not some place "up there"; Heaven is some place right next to us in an unseen dimension). And that's the body that Jesus has even to this day, the body in which He will return at some point in the future, and the body in which we who follow Him will see Him for all of eternity.

And it is the same kind of body we will receive, if we believe, when he returns.

The Apostle John writes:

*What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him ... 1 John 3:2
(NIV)*

Our resurrected body will be made like his resurrected body, which is why John could also write that ...

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All of these things (the old way) are gone forever. Revelation 21:4 (NLT)

One day in the future, friends, those who believe in Christ are going to live in new and restored bodies in a new and restored creation. The world and everything in it (including you and me, if we believe) will be like it was supposed to be when God created it in the beginning, before the curse of sin marred it.

And it all began on that Easter Sunday so many years ago after the old way had been nailed to the cross and the better way broke forth – literally, in the resurrected body of Jesus ...

... because, thankfully, forgiveness alone isn't enough for God. God wants so much more for us. He wants us to be part of the better way, the better people and the better future that he has created through the resurrection of Jesus.

Next Steps

Now, last night when I did this message, someone came up to me afterwards and said, "Wow, that was a really clear explanation of what was going on on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And, for the first time, this is all starting to make sense to me – and how it all fits together and why it matters to me."

And this person, when speaking to me, was actually a little choked up because this isn't something you just understand intellectually, although it is fairly intellectual (which makes sense because, after all, God's pretty smart). This is something that, once you get it, once you realize what God did for you and for all of us, it has the power to actually bring you to your knees before Him.

So, I could probably end this message right here by saying that I hope and pray that ...

1. ... if you've never said yes to God's offer of forgiveness made possible on the cross, that you will.

Because this is where we need to start, by admitting that we need what Jesus did on the cross ... just saying in a prayer something like, "God, I admit that I am a sinner. I might not be the world's biggest sinner, but I have rebelled against, ignored you, and tried to do life without you. I'm part of the problem that needs to be forgiven and fixed through the cross and the resurrection. And so I thank you for sending Jesus and I accept him as my savior."

That's how we say yes to what God has done for us in the cross. And by the way, even after we've been Christ followers for a long time, we keep saying "yes" to this because we've not yet experienced the completeness of what God is doing and we still struggle with sin and we need to be reminded often that we are forgiven and that we are "new creations" and we need to rejoice in that. If you're a Christian, you should be rejoicing about the fact that you've been forgiven.

So, I could end the message with that. I could probably end this message by saying that I hope and pray that if you've never understood and believed that Jesus came back from the dead because forgiveness isn't enough for a God so wonderful that He wants more than that for us; that if you've never understood and believed that God, in the resurrection of his Son, has created a better way for you that begins now and runs through eternity ... I could end by inviting you to embrace that truth and make it your own ...

2. ... which would mean for a lot of us to stop thinking of yourself as a victim and start thinking of yourself as victor, because that's what you are in Christ and that's what you will be in Christ.

That is your destiny, so start living like it. Start living *in* it.

3. I could also end this message by inviting you to be part of the baptism that's going to take place in our services on May 15th & 16th.

It's one of the greatest things we do as a church. We set up a baptismal pool right here in the front of the auditorium and people who have come to the place of saying yes to God's forgiveness and believing that Jesus rose from the dead and embracing what that means for themselves, they get in that pool with one of our pastors and we dunk them under the water and they come back up.

And the reason we do that is because the Bible tells us that believers in Jesus are ...

... buried with him in baptism and raised with him through [their] faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. Colossians 2:12 (NIV)

See, baptism is a picture of what happened to Jesus and is also happening to us if we believe:

- See, Jesus died for sin and he rose again to create a better way.
- For me, when I accepted Christ, my sin was condemned and judged, but now I've been included in God's better way.

That's what baptism is all about and I'm quite sure that in this group, there are more than a handful of you that would benefit so much by doing that, because you've come to these places in your life, but you've never had that experience of doing what Jesus said about being baptised. So, I could end this message with that invitation to you.

But, as you've probably guessed, I'm *not* going to end this message in any of those ways. (Obviously, if you need to do those things, then please do them!)

But, I want to end this message by inviting you to do what some of those very first disciples of Jesus did following his resurrection.

4. I want to end this message by inviting you to simply come back.

Just come back.

Now I don't mean *come back from the dead* – at least, not yet because you're not dead and that's not going to happen to anyone until Jesus returns.

What I mean is to come back next week and the week after and the week after and the week after. Come back and be part of the community of men and women who believe in and follow Jesus; the people who are committed to the better way that God began in the resurrection.

Earlier in the message when I read the story of what happened on Easter Sunday *night* – when the disciples and everyone else were gathered together, I mentioned that one of the things they were discussing was a report from two of their number who claimed to have had dinner with Jesus.

Well let me tell you the rest of their story, because I think it applies to all of us and I think you'll see why I'm giving you this invitation.

It seems that sometime on that Sunday afternoon, these two disciples had become so discouraged with how things had played out that they decided they were just going to leave this little community of Christ-followers they had been hanging out with for however long, and head back home to the village of Emmaus where they lived. They'd seen enough. They'd had enough.

The Bible tells us that ...

As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened (they were discouraged). As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him.

Again, Jesus' resurrected body was the same but in some ways very different.

Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days."

"What things?" Jesus asked.

"The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth," they said. "He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel.

You can just hear the dejection in their voices. "We *had hoped* he was the Messiah, but we were wrong. We had hoped that when

Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God being near and being now – things being renewed, restored and regenerated, set back to the way God intended from the beginning – we had hoped that it was true. We had hoped ... but we were wrong. And so, we're done. We quit. We're going home."

As they continued to walk towards Emmaus, Jesus – still unrecognized – begins to explain to them how the O.T. scriptures taught that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things so that the Kingdom of God could begin breaking into human history, one life at a time instead of all at once, which is what they were expecting.

That discussion must have continued for quite a while because the sun began to set. It was getting late and so these two former disciples invited this unknown traveler to stay with them in their home that evening. And he agreed. Scripture says,

As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them.

And since they had seen Jesus do this on so many other occasions ... Scripture says,

Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. It's Jesus.

And at that moment he disappeared! Luke 24:30-31 (NLT)

That's that "new kind of body" in action!

They said to each other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" Luke 24:32 (NLT)

And you can understand why they felt that way, can't you? It's kind of like what happened to that person who spoke to me after last night's message – the heart was burning. Maybe that's even happening to some of you right now. Your heart is burning because, "I see it."

And that's wonderful if it is, just as it was wonderful for these two formerly discouraged followers of Jesus.

But that's not the end of the story. That "burning in the heart" isn't the most significant thing that happens.

Here's what's most significant:

And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them. Luke 24:33 (NLT)

Within the hour – in the darkness of night – they were on their way back. And they probably ran back because the way the story goes, they are present when Jesus shows up in the middle of the room and eats the fish to prove that he's not a ghost.

And this is what I want you to see: *Jesus didn't come just to influence individuals; He didn't come just to create a burning heart here or a burning heart there; he came to create a community of burning hearts; a community that would burn brightly before the world; a community that would live in concert with the better way that God began in the resurrection of Jesus and will find its fulfillment in the coming Kingdom of God; a community that would live as those who already belong to that Kingdom; a community that would open its arms to as many others who would want to join in. That's what those guys went back to.*

And that is what this church is supposed to be about. Every church. This kind of community. See, the church is not about a "meaningful moment with God once a week" that pumps us up to go back out and face the cold, harsh world. It's about being the community who loves and cares for one another so much that the world is drawn to it and changed by it. That's what these two disciples went back to.

And that's why my closing invitation to you today, whoever you are, is to simply come back – come back to this community that Jesus was starting.

- And, for some of you, coming back means just doing what you've always been doing: you come back every week; you come back in the middle of the week; you come back when people don't even know what you're doing and you serve and you love and you give and you pray. And this is your community, or maybe some other church somewhere else. And, to you I say, "keep coming back, just stay involved." And, here's the deal – church is hard sometimes (I know, I work at one). But it's worth it. It's worth it. Just keep coming back.
- For some of you, it means that your visit this day because someone invited you (or bribed you or forced you or guilted you into showing up because going to church on Easter "is just the right thing to do") ... for you I have pity. This might mean that you do a little experiment, that maybe next week you come back and you say, "what is this deal about, really?"
- For others who live far from here, you're visiting, it means you go back home and do whatever you need to do. If you're part of a church, then go back. Get engaged. Support it. Love it. Let God work through you and through that community. And, if you're not part of a church, again, maybe you do that experiment. Go find a church and see what this is all about.

Whatever your situation, do what these disciples did: *come back* because Jesus didn't come just to bring individual forgiveness and individual "better ways." Jesus came to form a new people of God who would live in that better way.

Now, having said all of that, I am not a stupid man (I may look like one. I may sometimes say stupid things). But, I'm not stupid, I know that the reality is that some of you here today are not going to come back. And you're not going to come back because, as you look at Christ-followers and the church, you don't see a better way. You don't see better people. You see a lot of bad stuff and a lot of junk. You look at the whole deal and you see a lot of trouble with Christianity.

So here's what we're going to do in our next series of weekend messages, which begin next weekend and will last for four weeks, we're going to talk about that junk in a series called "The Trouble With Christianity." We'll have a website:

www.thetrouble.org

We'll have a banner on 152 highway for people who drive by. It will lead to the website which will explain what we're going to talk about in the next four weeks. We're going to talk about some of the troubles with the church such as the fact that there are a lot of hypocrites, and there are a bunch of rules that sometimes don't make any sense or are hard to live up to or they kill the joy out of life. Or the fact that sometimes churches and pastors and Christians come off as being very arrogant and know-it-all.

So, we're going to talk about those things and try to own up to some of those things. And, you might be surprised on our take on these. So, my invitation to you if you're a person who is put off by the trouble with Christianity, come back. Just come back and hear, and give me feedback. I'd like to know what you think. Because this is the invitation Jesus offers to all of us, to come back.

So, I'm going to close here. I don't know where you all are, so I'm just going to pray for everybody who is here, that God would speak to you in some way.

Let's pray.

ENDNOTES

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Original Jesus*, pg 70

² Wright, pg 71-72