

Big Deal
The Jesus Deal
April 8, 2012

Feature – “Were You There?”

**Feature / Painting – “The Victory”
w/Caitlin Homan**

Worship – Happy Day / Christ is Risen

Good morning everyone – and thanks Kitti for bringing us up to date. I want to add one more thing to those announcements before I begin and that’s to let you know that ...

... two weeks from today we’re going to begin a very special series called “40 Days in the Word.”

During that period of time – for 40 days – we’re going to go on a little journey

together as a church that will help us better understand the Bible – God’s Word to us. It will be an all-encompassing experience including the Sunday messages; mid-week small groups; a special midweek training event for people who want to take it to another level; and even a short daily video online that will help you get into the Bible for yourself.

I’ll give you more details on that next week but, for today, I just wanted you to know what’s coming.

OK, let’s pray and then we’ll get into this morning’s message.

God, I thank you so much for this day. Thank you for what it means to

those of us who are Christians, those of us who know Jesus, but God, I also thank you for people who maybe just came today to check it out and find out what's going on or maybe came because someone invited them. I just pray that your Spirit would be here and that you would empower what I say and what we do this morning in this service to bring glory to yourself and what you've done on this day. And, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, today is Easter Sunday – a day that is being celebrated by Christians and churches all over the world. Today, more people will attend a church service of one "flavor" or another than on *any other Sunday of the year*. That's

true here at NHCC as well. More people will show up in our building on this particular Sunday than on any other day during the year.

In addition, today, all over the world, more people who are *not* Christians – people who don't really believe in Jesus as the Bible presents Him: crucified, risen and one day coming again – more people who are not Christians will attend a church service than on any other day of the year.

- Some of them will go because it's a family tradition that everyone goes to church together on Easter (whether they like it or not).

- Some will go because they feel internally drawn to connect with something spiritual and they think “it’s Easter, if I go to church, maybe something will happen.”
- Others will go because a Christian friend said, “hey, it’s Easter – come with me” and they’re genuinely curious or they just want to be a good friend.

Whatever the reason ... today, there are a bunch of folks in churches all over the world for whom “church” is a not regular pattern of their life.

And I’ve been thinking about this dynamic for a couple of weeks now –

that you have a whole bunch of people who really don't "do" church coming to hang out for an hour or so with a whole bunch of people for whom this day is a really, really big deal. And it reminded me of a friend of mine from years ago who wasn't a church guy ... at all. (This is before we started this church and I was working at another church – a very good church not far from here).

I invited him to come to a service with us one day and he did. Afterwards, I was kind of expecting him to say something nice – like, *how good the service was* (you know, the same stuff you'll say when you leave here this morning) – but, instead, he asked a bunch of questions that told me that he just didn't "get" what we were doing.

He was polite about it, but it was clear: those of us who were “initiated” in the faith, we got it. But he didn’t.

That experience was a real eye-opener for me, and it’s no exaggeration to say that it was the catalyst that led us to launch *this* church at New Mark Middle School in October of 1994.

But, as I was thinking about what I would say today, it occurred to me that the same thing that happened to my friend *could happen again ... here ... this morning* ... because there would be a lot of people showing up who, like him, just don’t “get” the whole Jesus thing and the whole church thing. That’s not to say they don’t have some ideas, but Jesus and church are not

what they've built their life on. And, truth be told, they're a little confused as to why this is all such a big deal to Christians.

So, I thought to myself "you know, that might be worth talking about on Easter Sunday" because, after all, the Easter story itself is pretty straightforward and it doesn't require a whole lot of time to tell. In fact, between the music and the scripture reading and the art, we *just told the Easter story!* (By the way, wasn't that amazing how Caitlin drew that picture? Was that incredible or what? Some people are so talented it makes me sick! Just kidding)

Anyway, the Easter story is pretty simple:

- Jesus, after being beaten to near death, was crucified on a Friday morning and his body put into a sealed tomb later that afternoon.
- On Sunday morning, the boulder that sealed the tomb was mysteriously rolled away and Jesus was raised and alive – and not as a spirit, but in the flesh.
- Over the next 40 days, not only did he meet with his disciples he also appeared to many others – once even to a crowd of 500 people.
- After that, he disappeared into another realm which the Bible calls Heaven.

I guess that goes a little further in the

story than Easter Sunday but, as I said, it's still pretty straightforward.

Why I Believe in the Resurrection

Of course, it *does* raise some questions that need to be considered – like, “*really?* Did that really happen? Or, is it just some kind of make-believe fairytale that the early church made up to justify its existence?”

I could spend most of my time talking about *that* this morning and why it's not irrational for a logical, thinking person to believe it's true. But, I'm not going to because ...

α) I don't have the time to do it justice.

b) We have some great resources available at our bookstore for those who are interested in it. Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ* and Tim Keller's *Reason for God* are two excellent books that deal with the resurrection in depth.

c) I think I'm supposed to focus more on why all of this is such a big deal ...

... which is what I'm going to do in just a minute.

However, before we get to that I do want to throw out, very quickly (for about three minutes), what, to me, are some of the most compelling reasons to believe that the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus really did happen.

Reason #1. In the biblical accounts, the first eyewitnesses are women – not men.

That's important to note because, in that patriarchal culture, women were not considered to be trustworthy witnesses about anything. If the church was trying to justify its existence by making up a story, this is a really dumb story to make up. The only reason you would make up a story like this is if ... it really happened that way.

Reason #2 as to why I believe in the resurrection is that the transformation of the disciples from cowards to missionaries is best explained by it.

As one Orthodox Jewish scholar has

written:

“If the disciples were totally disappointed and on the verge of desperate flight because of the very *real reason* of the crucifixion (in other words, they were scared to death and they were going to run away because they saw Jesus get killed) it took another very real reason in order to transform them from a band of disheartened and dejected Jews into the most self-confident missionary society in world history.”ⁱ

... which is exactly what happened to them. They turned the whole world upside down with this message: “Jesus is alive.”

... which leads to reason #3. Other messianic movements of that era *died out when the leader died*, but Christianity did not.

Jesus wasn't unique in starting a movement among the Jews in that era. History tells us of several others who were believed to be messiahs and prophets. Almost all of those movements ended with the violent death of the central figure. Members of that movement, whatever one it was, (assuming they themselves weren't executed) then faced a choice: either give up the struggle, or find a new leader, who was typically a relative of the main guy who just got killed.

And the early Christians could have

done that, too. They had an obvious candidate: James, the brother of Jesus. From the book of Acts, it's clear that he was the central figure in the early church. However, no one ever went around saying, "well, you know, Jesus was killed, so he couldn't be the Messiah; it's got to be James, his brother. Let's all worship James."ⁱⁱ Didn't happen.

Why not? There's no other reason that makes sense other than they believed Jesus really was alive.

Reason #4. Given first century Jewish theology, the disciples' belief in the resurrection cannot be explained outside of the actual event itself.

For centuries, Jewish theology had taught that, one day, there would be a literal physical resurrection. However, prior to Easter, no first-century Jew (including Jesus' disciples) expected that to be anything other than a large-scale event happening to all God's people, or perhaps to the entire human race, at the very end of time.

And yet, the fundamental proclamation of the disciples was that a resurrection had happened to *one person* – Jesus of Nazareth – in the *middle* of history.ⁱⁱⁱ There's no reason for that kind of radical shift in theology other than ... they believed it really happened.

**Reason #5 (Why I believe) is that
Jesus' followers suffered and died**

for this claim.

All but one of the disciples/apostles died a martyr's death. Jesus' brother, James, was thrown off the temple in Jerusalem and then clubbed to death for believing this. See, there was no motive of personal gain at all for them to persistently lie about Jesus' resurrection – it only brought them suffering!

The Big Deal about Jesus

And, those are some of the reasons why I believe that it really happened, but I really don't want to talk about that this morning. If you want to dig into it more deeply, again, check out the resources we have available. Instead,

as I said earlier, I want to talk about why all of this is such a big deal to Christians.

“Well, duh ... don’t you think it’s obvious, Rick? *People don’t rise from the dead!* If this really happened to Jesus, then Jesus really is something special! Jesus really is a big deal!”

Yeah ... He really is. If Jesus rose from the dead then He really must be who He claimed to be.

So, who did He claim to be?

In his own words ...

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father
except through me.”
John 14:6 (TNIV)

*“I am the living bread that
came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this
bread will live forever.”
John 6:51 (TNIV)*

*“Anyone who has seen
me has seen the Father.”
John 14:9 (TNIV)*

*“I and the Father are one.”
John 10:30 (TNIV)*

See, Jesus claimed to be more than just a man ... He was a man, but He claimed to be God, as well. And the resurrection is the vindication of that

claim. And that makes Him a big deal.

Or does it?

I think most people would have to admit "in terms of cosmic spiritual reality (or however you want to put it), I guess it *does* make Jesus a big deal. But, quite frankly, in terms of *my everyday personal reality*, Jesus – resurrected or not – isn't a big deal unless ... who He is and what He said and did is relevant to my life here and now, April 8, 2012, Kansas City, Missouri."

I say that because, as I was preparing this message, I heard about a guy who did a survey of 300 college students who claimed to be agnostic. He asked them one question: "what is the main

reason why you are not a Christian (why you're not a believer in Jesus, why you're not a follower of Jesus)?"

The number one answer was "because I do not find Jesus, or the Church or Christianity to be relevant to my life."

Wow! What they were saying was "Jesus might be a big deal in some cosmic spiritual sense. He might even be a big deal to people who, by nature, are religious or to people who are in some kind of crisis and need something to lean on. But, for me, *personally*, I can't connect the dots to my everyday life. I don't get it."

And that's what I *really* want to talk to you about this morning. I want to talk to you about why Jesus is relevant to

everyday life, why Jesus is relevant to *my everyday life*; why He's a big deal to me – and, actually, to a lot of us in this room today.

And I have to tell you that this idea came to me while I was mowing my yard last Tuesday evening. As I was going back and forth across the lawn, I was thinking about this morning and what I would want to say to people for whom this whole “Jesus thing” seems irrelevant. And I started thinking about the ways in which Jesus is a big deal on an everyday basis for me and, almost immediately, I came up with a list of four roles that He plays in my life. And, again, not just for me. I think those in this room who are Christians would also say “yes, that's what Jesus does in

my life, as well.”

Anyway, here’s my list.

1. Jesus is my Teacher.

And, some of you are thinking, “Wait a minute, Rick. Jesus isn’t physically with us. He’s not doing messages over the internet or on TV or in churches anywhere. How can he be your teacher?”

Thankfully, we have his words and the words of his closest followers recorded in the Bible (which is why we’re going to do that series in two weeks). We have the stories of the things he did and how he treated people as examples for us to follow. That’s how He is my teacher.

And His teaching, quite honestly, has changed my life.

- It's changed the way I think about God. It's changed the way I think about myself and people.
- It's changed the way I look at money and possessions.
- It's changed the way I think about the all of the evil and suffering in this world. (Specifically that this isn't all there is – there truly is a day of justice and redemption coming).
- It's changed the way I think about my emotional and physical health.

I could go on and on but I think you get

the idea: one of the ways in which Jesus is relevant to my everyday life is that He is my teacher.

2. Jesus is also my Leader.

And that means that, to me, his teaching is more than just a suggestion or good advice. It's something to be followed and obeyed.

Many of you were here back in January when I talked about the physical transformation that's taken place in me over the past year with losing weight and getting into better shape. You remember the day I brought my trainer, Jonathan, in to share some of his insights and observations on the subject and you know I have a lot of

respect for Jon. He's done what I'm trying to do. I'd really like to look like him some day. He knows his stuff.

But, you know what? When he tells me something to do or not do in terms of training or especially eating, a lot of times, I think to myself, "Thank you for your input. I'll take that under advisement. I'll think about it and maybe I'll even do it."

That's because, in my life, I've allowed Jon to take the role of an *advisor* whose counsel I can accept, reject or modify as I see fit.

Not so with Jesus. I've invited him to be more than that. He's my *leader* which means that even though I don't always

like what He says, most of the time I try to implement it. Even though it's hard sometimes; even though it sometimes doesn't make sense at first; even though it doesn't always work out the way I thought it would, in the end, for me, Jesus is the ultimate authority. He's the boss. Or, to use the biblical terminology, "Jesus is Lord."

And thinking of Jesus in that way – trying to follow Him as my leader – has changed my life.

- It's why I live in Kansas City today instead of New Jersey.
- It's why I have the family I have.
- It's why I'm doing what I'm doing today instead of being a software

engineer.

- It's why Jetta and I have gotten to the point where we give away more of our income that I would have ever imagined.
- And, quite frankly, it's why even though I'm still a jerk in a lot of ways, I'm a lot easier to get along with than I used to be. You can thank Jesus for that.

And I could go on and on but I think you get the idea: Jesus is relevant to my everyday life because He is my teacher and He is my leader.

But He's more than that.

3. He's also my Friend.

And I realize that may sound a little weird, sort of like saying "I believe in the Easter Bunny. He's my friend."

Because Jesus isn't physically present and walking on this earth any longer, for me to think of Him as my friend means that either I have a very active imagination (maybe *too* active) or it means there is something going on spiritually which allows me to experience His presence in a way that's not typical of earthly friendships.

Fortunately, for me (and, I think, for you), it's the latter. The friendship of Jesus is something I experience through the Holy Spirit.

On the night before his death, Jesus

told his disciples:

“Unless I go away, the Paraclete [a Greek word meaning comforter, encourager, counselor] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” John 16:7 (TNIV)

What Jesus was promising his disciples is that, even though he was going to return to Heaven, they would still have a relationship with him; a friendship with him, through the Holy Spirit.

And having Jesus as my friend has changed my life because I can talk to him and I know he’s listening because the Spirit is there. But not only does he listen, like a good friend, through the

Holy Spirit, he comforts and encourages and counsels me.

- He's helped me with how I feel about myself which is something I've struggled from time to time. (If Jesus likes me, it's not so important what anyone else thinks).
- When I feel like I've been treated unfairly, He reminds me that He has suffered the worst kind of treatment and He made it through and He encourages me that I will, too.
- Sometimes when I start getting into a victim mentality and I start thinking "woe is me; it's just not worth it," quite frankly, Jesus just kicks my butt and tells me to quit

whining or to get going. (I know some of you are concerned because where in the Bible does it say that Jesus kicks your butt? Theologically, we call that “the conviction of the Holy Spirit” if you need to know).

And I could go on and on but I think you get the idea: Jesus is relevant to my everyday life because He is my friend ... as well as my teacher and leader. He’s relevant because I have a personal relationship with Him.

Unfortunately, however, there’s a big problem with everything I just told you. Actually, there are several problems:

- I don’t always pay attention to his

teaching. Actually, to be honest with you, there are times when I intentionally tune him out. I turn him off; I don't want to hear what he has to say.

- There are times in my life when I don't follow his leadership; times when I decide my way is better than His; times that I decide that even though His way is better, I'm doing it my way anyway.
- There are times when I am a terrible friend to Jesus, even though he is a friend to me; times when I, to quote the Apostle Paul, "grieve the Holy Spirit" that is in me because of my attitudes and my actions, because of my words and my deeds.

And, friends, all that I just described is what the Bible calls “sin” ... which simply means “falling short” or “missing the mark.” See, the truth about me – and about you, too, if you’re honest – is that I am a sinner. I fall short, I miss the mark of who and what God has intended for me to be and do.

And the Bible tells us that unless that condition of sin is dealt with, there is a very bad consequence. Specifically, it puts a barrier in the relationship between us and God.

We see this from the very first pages of the Bible. When Adam and Eve disobey God – when they reject him as teacher, leader and friend – what happens?

They lose Eden. They lose that intimate relationship they had with God, where they would walk every evening in the garden.

As the Apostle Paul put it:

*The wages of sin is death.
Romans 6:23 (NIV)*

And death, in this case, means loss and separation from God.

Somehow, the condition of sin that marks my very existence has to be dealt with. It has to be removed somehow.

And that's where a lot of people get really confused about the Jesus deal. A

lot of people when they really look at their lives and really think about themselves, and they're really honest, they realize they do not measure up to what God intends for them. A lot of people realize they really have fallen short of God's design. A lot of people understand they are marked with kind of an "X" as sinners. And a lot of people try to ... well, I've asked our drama team to illustrate what a lot of us do.

So, I'm going to sit down for a few minutes and let them take the stage. As you watch, see if you can relate to some of their "strategies."

Drama – "X Marks the Spot"

Jesus is relevant to my everyday life because not only is He my friend, my teacher and my leader. He's relevant because ...

4. Jesus is my Savior.

And what that means is that I don't have to be responsible for dealing with my sin – with the "X" that marks me so to speak. In fact, I can't do it. The Bible says that all of the things we try to do to clean it up, to cover it up, to wash it off – it doesn't work.

But a lot of us are confused about that. We think that in order to have a relationship with God – in order for him to be a relevant part of our lives as teacher, leader and friend – we have to

do something to fix it. In fact, for a lot of people that's what they think Christianity is all about: *that you do stuff to get back into God's favor* and then, when you do get back into God's favor, you better make sure you don't mess up again because then you'll fall *out of favor*. For a lot of people, the deal with Jesus is spelled "D O" ... do. You've got to do this; You've got to do that.

But that's just wrong. When Paul wrote that verse about the wages of sin being death ... he actually said more than what I showed you earlier.

Here's the whole statement.

The wages of sin is death,

but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (TNIV)

But the good news is that the Jesus deal is not spelled "D O" do. It's spelled "D O N E" ... done. Jesus has already done what needs to be accomplished for us on the cross. All we need to do now is what we do with a gift. What do we do with a gift? We receive it.

What Now?

And that's what I want us to do this morning as we close. I think some of us walked in here today thinking, "I got dragged here to church" or "a friend invited me and I'm going to hear the

resurrection spiel, and I already know the story." Maybe you're sitting here going, "I think I'm getting it. I think I see the relevance. I can see, as I look at my life, that it might be good to have Jesus as my teacher because I've been listening to the world, I've been listening to my friends, I've been listening to my family, and *my life is screwed up*. And maybe Jesus has a better plan, and maybe Jesus could be my teacher. Maybe I won't take him just as an advisor, maybe I do need to make him my leader and try to do what he says, even though it may not make sense all the time and it's hard and it won't always work out the way I want. And who doesn't need a friend? My life is a mess and I see a lot of pain, and I need somebody I can talk to about it.

And, if Jesus is going to send his Spirit, I'm down for that, it sounds good ..."

But at some point, we come back to this question of what are we going to do with the "X" that marks the soul? What are we going to do with our sin? We have to come to Jesus and say, "I don't need to do anything because it's already done. Jesus, I want to take what you did on the cross, that's vindicated by your resurrection, and I want you to be my savior, as well."

So, this morning as we close, I'm going to say a prayer, which is similar to a prayer that I said many, many years ago when I understood the deal about Jesus. Some of you need to pray this today. You need to say, "I get the deal and I want Jesus in my life as all of

those things." So, as I pray, just kind of pray along with me. There is no magic in these words, no formula, but just the desire of your heart.

Let's pray.

God, I thank you for the fact that it's done. It is finished. When Jesus died on the cross he finished paying the penalty for sin so that we don't have to. We don't have to "do" in order to earn your favor. And that opens the door for this incredible relationship where you can be our leader, our teacher and our friend. And, God, I know there are people sitting here this morning, who for the very first time in their life they need to say "yes" to Jesus. So, I'm going to pray for

them as they stand before you and say, "yes, God, it is true of me. I have an 'X' on my soul. I am a sinner. I'm a little sinner; I'm a big sinner; I'm a clean sinner; I'm a dirty sinner. Whatever the flavor is, I am a sinner. That's what is true of me. But, I understand what you did for me on the cross and I want to say 'yes' to that and I want to stop trying to pretend that I'm better than I am. I want to stop trying to cover it up. I want you to be my savior and I say 'yes' to what you've done on the cross for me. I ask you to come into my heart, come into my life. Be my leader. Be my teacher. Be my friend. I want a relationship with you."

God, I thank you that you will do

that for anyone, *anyone*, who turns to you and asks and wants to receive the gift of eternal life that is in Jesus. And we pray in his name. Amen.

Feature – O Glorious Day (5)

And, *that* is why Jesus is a big deal, cosmically, eternally, spiritually, however you want to say it, but also personally. I hope and pray that as you leave this morning that you have a sense of who Jesus could be in your life.

And if you prayed this morning, when we prayed that little prayer, do me a favor, take the prayer request card from the seat pocket in front of you and write on there somewhere, "Today, I

prayed for Jesus to be my savior, my forgiver, my leader, my teacher and my friend." And as you leave this morning, drop the card in the offering basket – you don't need to put your name on it. It's just kind of a way of saying, "hey, I'm with you on this, and I asked Jesus to be my savior today." Just let us know in that way and we would appreciate it. Or you can come and talk to us and that would be great

As I said, we'll receive the offering at the door, for those of us who consider this our church home. God works through us in this way, so this is our opportunity to do that.

Next week I want to talk to you about The Church Deal, because when Jesus

ascended into Heaven, it wasn't the end. It started a movement, and that movement is the Church, and I want to talk to you about why the church is a big deal.

Then, in two weeks, as I said, we'll start the "40 Days in the Word" series, and that is going to be awesome, as well.

Thank you for coming today. Go home and hunt Easter eggs, or whatever you're going to do, and have a good time. God bless you and see you next week.

Endnotes

ⁱ Pinchas Lapide, former Chairman of the Applied Linguistics Department at Israel's Bar-Ilan University quoted at http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/why/why_10.htm

ii Tom Wright at http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/CIS/Wright/lecture.htm#Sect_3

iii Wright