

"What Easter Is Really About"

Pastor Dan Erickson

April 5, 2026

On Easter Sunday, Mrs. Thompson, the second grade Sunday School teacher asked, "Why do we celebrate Easter?" Hands went up. "Emily." "Easter is when the three wise men came to give baby Jesus gifts." "No, Emily. That is Christmas. Who else knows? Jimmy?" "Easter is when there is a parade and then a picnic and at night, we light off fireworks." "Jimmy, that in Independence Day. It isn't even a religious holiday."

"Can anyone tell us why we celebrate Easter? Amanda?" "Easter is the time when they put Jesus on the cross and He died and then they put Him in a tomb." "Yes, very good, Amanda." "And if Jesus comes out of His tomb and sees His shadow, then we will get six more weeks of winter."

No, folks, that is not what Easter is about. Yet, I am afraid a lot of people may not really understand the meaning of Easter much better than the second graders do. Though about 75% of Americans say they will celebrate Easter this year, for many it is primarily about bunnies and egg hunts. Some view it as a time for the family to gather for a big meal. Others get excited about all the chocolate that is available. For some, going to church on Easter Sunday is an important tradition, even though they see little significance in anything happening during that church service. Now, I am optimistic that you folks in this room are all about average and have a little better understanding of what Easter really means.

We understand that this day is about an event that happened outside Jerusalem in the spring of about 33 A.D. On the Friday of the Jewish Passover Jesus had been executed, crucified on a Roman cross. He was very much dead. A friend buried Him in a tomb he owned, the tomb was then sealed with a large rock and guarded by Roman soldiers. Yet, when some friends of Jesus, women, came to the tomb on Sunday morning, the rock was rolled away, the guards were gone, and the tomb was empty. It was empty because Jesus had risen from the dead. He was alive!

That is what the Christian church, all branches and flavors, has believed and taught for almost 2000 years. It is what 2/3 of Americans say they believe happened. Yet, the significance of what

occurred, why it matters, why it matters so much, often seems to be missed.

Today, I want to highlight three reasons why what happened that first Easter Sunday, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, matters to each of us, including you.

#1 Jesus' resurrection provided powerful evidence that Christianity is true. In a world full of all sorts of different religions, philosophies and spiritualities, Jesus' resurrection puts Christianity in a category all by itself. That was true in the first century. Jesus' apostles traveled throughout the Roman Empire, proclaiming that Jesus was Messiah, Lord, and God the Son. They insisted Jesus was to be trusted, worshipped, and obeyed.

Why did they believe this about Jesus? Because He had risen from the dead. Why did they think others should believe this as well? Because of Jesus' resurrection.

The Apostle Paul writes, **Romans 1:4 (He) was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.** As Paul preached the gospel, whether to fellow Jews in a synagogue in Acts 13, or the Greek philosophers in Athens (Acts 17), he spoke about Jesus' resurrection. He saw that as proof Jesus was who He claimed to be.

The same is true in the 21st century. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is a historical event that points to the truth of Jesus claim to be the Son of God, and points to the truth of Christianity. But do I really, really expect intelligent folks like you to believe something impossible like that actually happened? Yes, if you realize that is where the evidence leads.

In the first century, dead people tended to stay dead, always. The early Christians believed in Jesus' resurrection only because it made more sense than any other explanation of what happened to Jesus. I think that is still true. And I would add that with the discovery of quantum physics and the bankruptcy of scientific naturalism, we should be a bit more hesitant to proclaim what is possible and what is not.

For example, in 1985 Gary Habermas, then teaching at Liberty University in Lynchburg Virginia, began having a series of debates with Dr. Antony Flew, a philosophy professor at Oxford University, and one of the world's most prominent atheists. These debates often focused on the question, "Did Jesus Christ really rise from the dead?" With Habermas arguing the affirmative, and Flew, of course, arguing he did not. After almost 20 years of these encounters two things happened: Habermas and Flew became good friends. And Habermas won the debate.

How do we know? Because in 2004 Antony Flew said he was no longer an atheist and admitted the resurrection of Jesus was "plausible." Before Flew died in 2010 he made it clear he believed in God, but not necessarily the Christian God, and was uncertain about Jesus. Habermas continues his work, marshalling evidence and building the case that Jesus' resurrection is a historical fact. In 2024 his book "On the Resurrection" was published. It is over 1000 pages and is just the first of a projected four volumes that will meticulously make the case that Jesus truly rose from the dead.

Folks, Easter matters, because through His resurrection, Jesus continues to ask each of us, "Who do you believe I am? I claim to be the eternal Son of God who died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead." Friends, do you think He is a liar, attempting to deceive us with that claim? Or do you think He is a mistaken lunatic, like people in psych wards who think they are God? Or do you believe He is who He claims to be, the One worthy of your trust, love, and obedience? I would add, you don't want to be like Antony Flew and end up being "uncertain about Jesus." There is too much at stake. If you have questions I would love to chat.

#2 Jesus' resurrection provides hope in the face of death. A few years ago, the actress Terri Garr asked this question: Why does everyone I love have to die? Because we are mortals, Terri. Everyone we love and everyone we don't care about will die someday. An old saying puts it this way - Whether we are a King or a street sweeper, we all have to dance with the Grim Reaper.

Folks, I am seeing that very clearly as I approach my 69th birthday. At my 50th high school reunion last summer it was sobering to realize that 17 of

63 people in my high school class, 27% have died. Now, I know if you are a teenager or even under 40 years old, death may seem like something very far off. But it is not. Some of you have had a person very close to you die in this past year. It truly "stinks." As I sometimes say, "Life may not seem fair, but death doesn't have such a great track record either."

How do we deal with this grim reality? Frankly, most people just try to ignore it. I suspect Pascal was at least partly right when he said the purpose of human amusement and entertainment is to keep us from thinking about our mortality.

A few people grasp for straws in an effort to avoid death. There is Bryan Johnson, the subject of the Netflix documentary, "Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever." He does all sorts of crazy things to try to prevent himself from aging.

And then there are about 600 people who are cryogenically preserved, their bodies or heads frozen in liquid nitrogen. Yes, these people died, but their hope is that one day medical science will be able to bring them back to life. The most well-known person to do this is Ted Williams, the Hall of Fame baseball player, who yes, once got a haircut in Chisholm, MN. It is reported that Paris Hilton, Simon Cowell and Brittany Spears all plan to try to beat death this way. Incidentally, Alco Life Extension Foundation in Arizona charges you \$200,000 to have your body frozen, but only \$80,000 if you just want your head and brain preserved.

Many folks, however, are just hoping for the best, thinking they have at least a shot of ending up in a better place, the good place, after they die. But because of Easter, because Jesus conquered death, those trusting in Him have a far more solid hope. Jesus says, **John 11:25b, 26a** "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."

What a wonderful promise. And in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul tells us that because Jesus rose from the dead, we, who are trusting in Him, can be confident we will conquer death as well.

As a pastor part of my job is to perform funeral and memorial services. Sometimes that is hard. But what enables me to speak words of hope in the midst of deep grief and pain is the fact I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The hope Jesus' resurrection provides in the face of death is something we all need and for which we should all be grateful.

#3 Jesus' resurrection provides hope for the hopeless. There are many folks, likely including some in this room who have basically lost hope. There are many reasons why that happens. It might be chronic health issues and pain. It could be an abusive or loveless marriage or being single when you would love to be married. It may be a struggle with addiction. Perhaps it is a parent, son, daughter or sibling who will no longer speak to you. It might be working a job you need but cannot stand. It may be looking for a job but not finding one. It could be a pile of bills that you don't have the money to pay. It may be a social awkwardness that has left you lonely and without friends. It might be chronic depression or anxiety or perhaps it is the death of a spouse.

For whatever reason, this person is not only discouraged but is convinced there is no path out of the discouragement. He or she doesn't see any way to change the situation.

This type of discouragement can easily become despair. For some, suicide then becomes an option. Most, however, choose to keep plodding through life, going from day to day with no hope and no joy.

What these folks need, what you need if you are at all in this situation, is what G.K. Chesterton called "deep hope." This hope tends to rise only when ordinary hope is gone. It is a hope that transcends circumstances and it is not something we can rationally calculate. But it is very real.

An illustration of this deep hope is found in Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings." Frodo and Sam are deep in the land of Mordor, drawing closer to the heart of evil. The last bits of ordinary hope are gone. Frodo is asleep. Sam is keeping watch. In that moment of total despair, he sees a single white star peering through the cloud cover above.

Tolkien writes, "*The beauty of (the star) smote Sam's heart as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him...The thought pierced him that in the end the (evil) Shadow was only a small and passing thing, for there was high beauty forever beyond it's reach.*" Tolkien said he could not read that passage without weeping.

Friends, like that single star, Easter, the resurrection Jesus, is a "high beauty" forever beyond the reach of the troubles, tragedies and evil that surround us. Even when you do not understand why God allows something to be part of your life, even when God seems distant or irrelevant, even if doubts are seeping into your soul, even when ordinary hope is gone, Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, can provide deep hope.

High above all that is happening in the world today, Easter reminds us that neither death nor the devil will have the last word. Though these enemies may seem powerful right now, their demise and doom are certain, because through His resurrection Jesus has conquered both. The resurrection declares that Jesus is Lord of both history and eternity. And in the end, when He returns, truth, goodness and beauty will triumph, and everything will be for God's glory and the ultimate good of God's people. Friends, if you believe that you have deep hope.

Powerful evidence that Christianity is true, hope in the face of death, deep hope for the hopeless. Friends, that is why Easter matters. That is why Jesus' resurrection matters for you.