

Three Easter Truths You Can't Live Without!

Matthew 28: 6; John 14: 19; 2 Corinthians 5: 15

**First Presbyterian Church
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I love the joy in the ancient prayer we used for the call to worship. Welcome happy morning! Age to age shall say, "Hell today is vanquished; heaven is won today." This is our day of days. Everything changed. Light burst out of the darkness of death, and nothing will ever be the same. This morning I'd like to reflect with you on three essential Easter truths. Honestly, we can't live without them.

1) The Historical Past: He is Not Here, He is Risen.



Jesus' burial had been rushed because shortly after he died the Passover Sabbath was beginning and all work had to cease. So early on the day after the Sabbath, the devoted women went to Christ's tomb in hopes of further tending his dead body. They expected to find a corpse. They might have wondered how they could convince the Roman guard to roll the stone back for them so they could

enter the tomb. But when they arrived, the stone was rolled back and an angel sat upon it. The Roman guard fell down petrified at the sight of the mighty being. But he spoke to the women, "Do not be afraid. I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead." Moments later, as they ran back, they met the risen Jesus. They spoke to him. They touched him. Jesus was alive.¹

He is not here, he is risen. That's the testimony of the witnesses from the very beginning. We did not say that Jesus is risen because he lives on in our hearts. We did not say Jesus is risen because now we carry on his mission. We said that the dead man got up. This was an event in the world of dust and swiftly passing time. It happened where we live. The impossible occurred. Jesus rose, in

his body, in history. It's a public truth, not a private one. It's physical rising, not a merely spiritual one.

A great teacher has written, "The simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point." In other words, this changes everything! This news demands of us "a very radical change of mind." Dead people in Jesus' time rose from the grave at about the same rate as they rise now. That is to say, never! But this man did rise. The tomb was empty. They saw Jesus the way you and I see each other now. The impossible happened. A new kind of man emerged from the tomb. A re-creation. An embodied life without the boundaries of death. Nothing better has ever occurred! This, we proclaim, is the truth about what is the case. Essential Easter truth #1: It really happened. Jesus rose.²

2) The Hopeful Future: Because I Live, You Also Will Live



On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus left his closest disciples with words of comfort. They could not understand what he meant at the time. But after Easter, the hope would fill them with joy. For Jesus told them, "Because I live, you will also will live" (Jn. 14: 19). Jesus' resurrection was not just for himself. It was for us! Jesus broke the power of death on behalf of all of us. He gives his own Spirit, the Spirit of life, to those who trust in him. We become united to Christ. Jesus is the eternal Son of God through whom all things were created. He lives in a Creator relationship to everyone whom he made. So he can give his resurrection life to anyone and everyone. He pours his Spirit into our hearts. We entrust ourselves to him. Resurrection then becomes our future.³

A few weeks ago, my beloved theology professor Douglas Kelly called me. He just wanted to check in and remind me that he still prays for me regularly. We talked some about doing ministry amidst a pandemic. He noted that in these days where everyone is masking their faces, something deeper has been *unmasked*. We see now how much modern people fear death. We have a terror of discomfort. It makes us rage: this must be someone's fault. And we have a deeper terror that when we die there is nothing more. You see, there is a trade off in flinging away any ideas that there is a God who made us and to whom we are accountable. At first, it's very thrilling. I decide what I want to believe. I create my own life. I determine my identity. There is no one above me. And then when a pandemic

strikes we realize where our beliefs have led: there is no one to help me. There is nothing beyond. This virus could end my entire existence. A cold stripe of panic runs through the heart.

But beyond an initial shock, this is not what the believer in Jesus' resurrection experiences. We know the mystery of what Paul called the peace that passes understanding. Death is not the end. These Sunderings from loved ones are not forever. There is more to come. Because Jesus lives, we also will live. The evil one rattles the fear of death over us. But we know better. His power is broken. I will die. But I will also live again. More life awaits, resurrection life.

About ten days ago, I lost a friend I'd known for 25 years. Jack Townsend had always had a hard time. But also he had always had a big heart. He lived an orphaned life. He experienced more disdain than support from almost all of his relatives. He struggled with alcohol and diet with all the predictable health consequences. He battled depression. He never had any money. But for all that, Jack was fun to be with. He never lost his child-like faith nor his sense of wonder. Jack loved acting and he loved watching movies and plays. He loved costumes and fabrics, pageantry and big broad humor. He loved flowers and plants, cats and decorated rooms. I felt so many things when I learned he had died. Some relief that a hard life was finished. Sadness that this friend who never judged me, who always laughed at my lamest jokes, who always had time to talk to me was gone now.

And then I had another wave of feelings. I thought of this big bear of a kid waking up in the reality of resurrection. I imagined Jack opening his eyes to the bursting colors of true reality. I imagined his delight. Seeing the pageantry of angels dancing. Feeling the fabric of heavenly garments. Watching the trees along the River of Life flowering in beauty. Hearing the music that our instruments only hint at. Being greeted him with the words of love and welcome he had so thirsted for. I thought of this man who never had a father running into the arms of the heavenly Father who has loved him since the world began. I thought of Jack nestled in the arms of his savior, free and whole and accepted by the God who would never fail him, use him, swindle him or forsake him as so many on earth had done. I could hear Jack laughing and laughing with delight. Oh, it's grand! Oh, it's all true! Essential Easter truth #2: *Because Jesus lives, we also will live.*

3) The Potent Present: Living for Him who Died and Rose



So we have news about something that happened in the real world. Jesus rose in his body. We have passed this news down through the centuries as the most glorious impossible. It fills with hope for the future. We will share in his resurrection. This life is not the end. There is so much more.⁴

Both the past and the future rush into our present days with energy and purpose. Paul wrote, “And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and rose” (2 Cor. 5: 15).

Belief in the resurrection demands a radical new way of viewing the world. If Jesus got up from the dead, this is the most important thing that ever happened. And he is the most important person to know. The one who got up from the dead is the one who is King. Our whole lives re-orient around Jesus risen. The freedom is glorious. Life is not about me. My purpose is fulfilled in being joined to the one who died and rose for me. Serving him is my fulfillment.

Last week in our Lent books, we read question and answer number one from a document that is 500 years old. It asked, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” That’s a great question, isn’t it? It sounds so contemporary. How do I find some peace? How do I get right with the way things are? How do I get some relief in a world like this one? How do I come to grips with living and dying?

The answer: *My only comfort is that I am not my own. I belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.* Breaking news: I am not a sovereign self. I am not out there on my own. I don’t have the final word. I do not belong to myself. I don’t get to claim that I can do whatever I want. I don’t belong to me. But I do belong. I belong to my faithful Savior. He died for me. He died to take away my sins. He died to take away my dying. And he rose for me. To quench the fear of death. To create me anew. To include me in his family. He gave me his own Spirit. His Spirit within me “makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

The historical fact of the resurrection is a potent force in our present living. The risen Jesus is the King, the one who matters most. I belong to him. My purpose is to be part of his mission of love to the world. My future is secure, because as he lives, I will live in resurrection glory. So I am free from fear to devote my life to living out his love. Even as I am doing the daily work of my employment, I am lit up by a higher calling. That can only make me a better banker, a more compassionate attorney, a more loving homemaker, a more patient teacher, a more caring nurse. I realize now that all my relationships have eternal significance. I can delight more in people. I can be more giving in my interactions. I can rest more secure in God's care of me. So I can find freedom to care more about the needy and broken in this world. I can engage in creative ministry.

When the past fact and the future hope of Jesus' rising floods my present, everything lights up. I can worship more vigorously, laugh more heartily, love more generously and sleep more peacefully. Hallelujah. I am *not* my own. I belong, body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior.

The angel pointed to the empty tomb, "He is not here. He is risen." Resurrection really happened. Jesus promised his disciples, "Because I live, you also will live." The future is as secure as his promise. And so in the present, we need no longer live for ourselves but for Christ, who for our sake died and rose.

To know this joy for the first time, it is necessary to make a move of faith. To tell the Lord Jesus that you believe in him. To tell him that you will not cling any longer to owning your own life, but agreeing that you belong to him. To know this joy in a deeper way, the exact same thing is required. Surrender to the hope. Believe that after you close your eyes in death, you will, as my friend Jack has, open your eyes to the splendor of resurrected life with the Triune God and all his saints. So, dear ones, receive the news, just take it deep into your hearts: Jesus Christ is risen today, never to die again. And you are in Christ!

In just a moment, after a bit of reflection, we'll prayer together. I invite you to make these words your own:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Living One! You broke the power of sin and death, then claimed us as your own. We do not belong to ourselves! We were bought with a price, the price of your life. This morning we lay aside the illusion that we are our own. We accept your claim upon us. We receive your forgiveness of sins. We receive your new life in us. We desire to live for you and for your glory. Fill us with yourself as we partake of you through the bread and the cup.

¹ Painting of the Three Mary's by Annibale Caracci 1600.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 11.

³ Painting of Christ Rising from the Tomb by Gaudenzio Ferrari 1540.

⁴ Painting of "Feed My Sheep" by Raphael, 1515 (technically, a "cartoon" in preparation for a tapestry).