

"Resurrection Sunday"

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First Things

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15

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This morning, it is a privilege to invite you to open your Bibles to two very specific places both in the New Testament, the book of 1 Thessalonians 4, and the book of 1 Corinthians 15. Now today, we're gonna spend the majority of our time in 1 Thessalonians 4. If you're a guest, if you're a visitor, if you have not worshiped with us in some time, I want to welcome you today not just to Resurrection Sunday, but I want to welcome you to a journey, a very strategic journey walking through a small book of the Bible that we know as 1 Thessalonians. Why is it so strategic? Why over the last few weeks and months have we seen that it is so timely for our lives? Because 1 Thessalonians, if you look back chronologically, this is the very first communication that the Lord gave us, his church, after his resurrection and ascension. For three days, as we sung, his body lay in the ground victoriously. He raises from the grave. 40 days later, he ascends on high. What we know as the visible church is initiated. And then for approximately 20 years, those early believers who started in an upper room, physically fearful for their own lives, began to go back into their homes, into their communities, testifying that this Jesus had not only been crucified, but he'd been raised from the grave. It began a movement, not just in Judea, but in surrounding areas.

By the time we get to Acts 17, it says that they, these early believers, they have turned the world upside down. What we know as 1 Thessalonians is actually given to the church about the same time as Acts 17. It's been about 20 years and the reason it's important is because this allows us to kind of recapture who we were always meant to be. Today 2,000 years later, not just in this community, but in every community, if you use the term Christian, or you describe something as "Christianity," it elicits a multitude of emotions, perspectives, opinions, and ideas because when it comes to what we know as Christianity, there are so many different expressions, so many different preferences, opinions, and such, in fact, over the course of time and history, it's produced formalized creeds and confessions which have led to debates and ultimately division. And so today, what better day to look at, to be challenged about the early church than what we know as the first communication to the church, focusing on what we know as the reason for the church, and that's the empty tomb.

Today in 1 Thessalonians 4, we continue our journey in verses 13 through 15. This passage begins with one of my favorite words in the entire Bible, the word "but." The

reason this is important is because for three and a half chapters, he's been encouraging them, he's been admonishing them about what it looks like not just to believe in Jesus, but to walk literally in his footsteps. When we get to verse 13 of chapter 4 there, we discover as we'll address in a moment, there's a concern, there's an issue that has been raised and so what does the Apostle Paul do through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? In the midst of this concern, in the midst of this issue, he takes them back to the reason, he takes them back to the whole reason why they even call themselves Christians in the first place is that Jesus Christ has overcome death and the grave. Verse 13 of 1 Thessalonians 4, he says,

13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

Again, this passage begins by addressing a very heartfelt, sincere, and yet devastating concern. It says that you sorrow not. Now these are the same group of people who are seeing the whole world turned upside down. These are those who are seeing not just individuals and families, but entire communities, won to the gospel of Jesus Christ. So why would they be concerned? Why would they be bothered? What is it that need be addressed in this passage? Because 20 years earlier, this Jesus whom they believed in went on the rooftop one evening with a very well-known famous man at the time, a man by the name of Nicodemus and they had a discussion regarding eternal life, everlasting life, how can we, that desire of our heart, how can we "live forever"? And it was there on that famous rooftop that Jesus spoke these incredibly famous words, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." That which this religious leader and every human being has desired for, Jesus said, "I promise it's found in me."

A few chapters later in John 11, this teaching was put to the test. There was a man, not just any man, a friend of Jesus by the name of Lazarus who has breathed his last breath. He's been placed in the family tomb. It's been four days since he died. His sisters, Martha and Mary, entertain a conversation with Jesus prior to that famous raising of Lazarus to which they question, "Is what you have claimed really true or is our brother never going to be again?" Jesus asked a very important question. He said, "Do you believe that your brother will one day live again?" They said, "Oh, we believe at the last resurrection." And then Jesus in verse 25 and 26 of John 11 makes this incredibly famous statement. He said, "I am the resurrection and I am the life." Now listen to this next statement. He said, "Though a man die, yet he shall live. If a man lives, he will never die." Now do you understand the concern? Twenty years down the road, and you know what has happened in these people's lives? They've attended funerals they never thought they would attend. They have fallen ill gravely to sickness that they thought would never capture them. Yes, there's this new life. Yes, there's this transformation that has taken place. But when you

hear those statements of Jesus, there is this concern that why are we still falling ill? Why are we still experiencing funerals? Why are we still having to say our last goodbyes?

What does he say, "Do not sorrow." Yet it's natural. It's expected. It's part of the human condition to sorrow at this reality and this concern, and so in this passage, it shows us a very stark contrast. He says, not only but, he says, sorrow not, listen to this in verse 13, "like those who have no hope." You know, in spite of the last few years, as we've navigated and walked through some of the most tumultuous times of human history, one of the things that it has reminded us, though we try to avoid it, though we try to out-research it, though we aspire with everything we've got, what we know as the mortality rate is still 100%. We can delay it. We can push it back sometimes weeks, months, even years and decades. But the one thing we know for sure is that which we call mortality assuredly comes into each and every one of our lives and because of that, it says there are those that do not have hope. You know, when we talk about hope and emotions, I think two of the most emotion-packed words in the English language are fear and hope. You think about it, fear is that concept which paralyzes you. When you are fearful of something, when you are fearful of an event, it's often as if you cannot move at all. But hope, or shall I say hopelessness, has even a more dramatic effect. When you are hopeless, it doesn't just paralyze you, it spirals you. It sends you into a pattern of decisions in life that you wish you were paralyzed, but unfortunately you just keep going deeper and deeper into the abyss of your thoughts, your emotions, and your decisions.

You know, when it comes to hopelessness, according to the latest research, at least, and I'm being conservative, at least one half of Americans define themselves in today's context regarding one or more matters as hopeless, that when it comes to our economy, it's spiraling. When it comes to the political rhetoric, it's spiraling. When it comes to the expectations and the hopes that all that we've done to prepare and plan for the future, hopeless, spiraling. And I would dare say just on personal experience that those that are the youngest in our culture are experiencing it the most, walking through life without hope.

Now think about hope for just a minute. Hope is powerful. When you have hope, you can go places you never dreamed. When you have hope, you can endure things you never thought you can endure because hope means an expectation or a desire of something that is greater than what is currently being experienced. And here it says that there are those that have no hope, but we as believers, we are not like them. There's a contrast here and the explanation is found in verse 14 and 15. Why? Because our hope is not in this life. Our hope is not in the meager aspirations and desires of that which we can touch and see and smell, etc. That our hope is that which humanity has dreamed since day one, that there is life beyond the grave, that there is life beyond that which we experience no matter how many years the Lord graces us with, that we can experience hope.

Now, let me speak this in what I jokingly call Southernese at times. What that means is this, that if you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you said, "You know what, I can do it on my own. I don't need faith. I don't need religion. I don't need spirituality. I don't need all that mess." Then this world is all the heaven you're ever going to know. But

if you're that individual that says, "You know what, I've got a sin problem. I can't fix it myself. I can't out-date it, out-work it, out-give it. I believe that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem." Then this world, listen, this world's all the hell you'll ever know. You see the contrast there? And for those of us that are believers, that means that we have hope but those who do not are spiraling in hopelessness.

Verse 14 and 15 talks about it is Jesus that died and he rose from the grave but have you ever had one of those moments where you say how can we know that we know that we know? How can we "place everything into one proverbial basket"? That's where 1 Corinthians 15 comes in handy. Hopefully you have it marked. 1 Corinthians 15, I'm just going to read the first four verses of this great chapter but I want you to hear what it says about Jesus Christ being the only one who can provide this hope, the only one who can conquer the mortality problem and death in the grave.

It says in 1 Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 1, it says, "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel." Push pause. That gospel means good news. We live in a world with enough bad news. We need some good news here. Here's the good news, "which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." Now it's a brief summary, but it's powerful. Let me share with you why: those two phrases in verse 3 and 4, "according to the scriptures," describe to us the prophetic nature of what's being said. Now, most of us are pretty good at predicting things based on evidence and data that's given to us, but a prophetic statement is something that is given so well in advance that those making the statement could not be a part of the fruition or the solution therein.

About a half century ago, when the greatest modern archaeological discoveries was found in the valley of Qumran in the Middle East. A young boy, probably middle school or early high school days in our culture, was looking for an animal of which was lost. He threw a rock into a cave, heard the breaking of clay, and you and I today on great academic display have what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls. Now, most of us don't give a whole lot of thought to the Dead Sea Scrolls, but maybe today it's worthy of attention, and here's why: the Dead Sea Scrolls isn't just a bunch of ancient documents, it contains a perfectly preserved copy of the Old Testament, minus the book of Esther, that dates at least 100 years before the Christmas story in the time of Christ. You say, "Well, why is that so important?" That means that Jesus Christ is not a self-fulfilled prophet. That means we didn't write the story after the fact. The story was written so far in advance that you cannot dismiss the supernatural fulfillment therein.

And if you look back at the Old Testament, just a cursory examination, you'll discover in the very first book, third chapter, humanity falls into sin, and there's this great prophecy of the coming Messiah whom we know as Jesus Christ. It says one day from the seed of a woman, we know that in the Christmas story that God became and he dwelt in flesh. In the book of Micah, it gets even a little more specific than that. In chapter 5, verse 2, it says he will come to one of the little towns, one of the little cities that people often

overlook, that little town of Bethlehem. You go back into Deuteronomy 18, the Lord spoke through Moses saying that, "This Messiah will come in a like manner as I," and as Moses delivered the people of God from bondage to freedom through the water of the Dead Sea, it's there in Matthew 3, fulfilled where Jesus Christ at his baptism was declared by the heavenly Father, "This is my Son in whom I'm well pleased." Forty-eight specific events from his birth to his death to his resurrection, all written hundreds of years in advance.

How about a thousand? The book of Psalm 22. King David, even the most non of faith individuals believe David lived a thousand years before Christ, and in Psalm 22 there are eight specific prophecies about his death. It's in that famous chapter where it says the garment of clothing will be gambled over. They will mock him. They will curse him. And famously it says his hands will be pierced as well as his feet on the tree. All these prophecies leading up to his coming, his living and his death. But then there's Psalm 16. Psalm 16 is not one of the most famous of the Psalms. It's probably because the first eight verses are pretty hopeless. It talks about the despair of the human condition. It talks about how in anguish we navigate this life. But then there's a turn in verse 9. It says, but there is hope in the flesh. You say hope in the flesh? Can there truly be hope in a world of hopelessness? Then there's verse 10. Verse 10, which is actually quoted twice in the book of Acts 2 at the mouth of Peter at that famous Pentecost event. Here's what verse 10 says. It says that his soul will not be left in hell nor shall his Son see corruption. A thousand years before Jesus walked on water, it was declared in scripture that Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would not only come, he would not only live, he would not only die, but he would not stay dead.

It was prophesied. What does it say here? He died. That's a specific process. Why? For our sins. Understand that what Jesus Christ did on the cross, bearing those nails, that pain, that anguish, what he simply was doing was bearing the price of the sin condition that every one of us inherited. In fact, all the way back in Genesis 2, the Lord made it clear that when humanity sinned against him, we would "surely die." You go to the book of Romans 6, what does it say? The wages of our sin, the result, the consequence is death. The reason we have a 100% mortality problem is because we have a sin problem and the only hope we ever have of reversing this condition is in God himself willing to descend, inhabit flesh, reject all forms of temptation, be nailed to a cruel Roman cross, and three days later to raise from the dead.

And there's the power. Did you notice that both in 1 Corinthians 15 and in 1 Thessalonians 4, both passages don't leave him in the ground. Both passages say it's not just that he taught like nobody else, both passages say it's not just that he walked on water, it's not just that he multiplied food, in fact, tens of thousands of individuals bore their last breath on a cross and I'm sure many of them were innocent of the crime that they'd committed. But what does it say? It says not just that he died, but that he rose. This is the confirmation that our hope is not in just something that makes us feel better for a few decades, our hope is not just in that that allows us to have a "religious crutch" walking through life. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness and that three days later, the angels declared to those who came in attendance, "Why, why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Allow me to close with this, back to 1 Thessalonians: it's conditional. Even though Jesus said, "For God so loved the world," he also said, "whosoever believes." Notice what it says in verse 14 of 1 Thessalonians 4, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again," not if we believe that Jesus lived, not if we believe he healed people, not if we believe he multiplied food, not if we believe fill in the blank, but if we believe that he died and he rose again. Romans 10:9 and 10, it says, "If we confess with our mouth and we believe in our heart that the Lord Jesus died and rose again, that we shall be saved for with the heart and with the confession it is made unto salvation."

The reason is conditional, it says "if we believe." Now that word "belief" has kind of taken a new twist and a turn in our culture. It doesn't mean to acknowledge. It doesn't mean just to simply agree with the facts. Allow me to give you a very relevant illustration that probably at some level each and every one of us has not only experienced in our own life, but maybe in the lives of others. There is that day, there is that time in our life where we stand on the edge of the swimming pool, unable to swim a stroke, unable to bring ourselves up from the depths of the water on our own power, and how many times have we experienced or have we witnessed at a hotel or some type of theme park or such those moms, dads, grandparents, brothers, sisters, whomever sitting in the water saying, "Don't worry about it, just jump. I gotcha." We've seen kids put their toes in the water and then get a little scared. We've seen them get down on their knees and scoop it up and splash it on themselves. They've heard the promise, they can see the person, and yet how many times, we've all seen it, does that child scamper back to the table and say, "Nope, not today"? Can I ask you how many of you have done the same throughout your life? You hear the story of Jesus, you know the truth of Jesus, you know that you're dead in your sins and you can't save yourself, but you keep running back to the table thinking, maybe not right now.

You see, when it comes to our mortality problem, we can't "swim our way out of this." When it comes to our death problem, there's nothing we can do. We've got to have somebody who's going to catch us. It says, "For if we believe," here's what the Bible is saying: when it comes to your sin problem, when it comes to your mortality problem, if you will just jump off the edge and trust that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection will satisfy for your life and your eternity, it says you shall be saved. Today, what keeps you from simply believing?

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. Today, not only in this place, also online and by way of radio, you may be that individual, you may be that person who's here for the very first time or maybe you've opened the door of a church a thousand times in your life, maybe today's that day you never questioned the person of Jesus, you never questioned his miracles, you never questioned his teachings, you never even questioned his crucifixion, much less the resurrection. You've acknowledged the facts. You've agreed with the story. The very important question as we draw close to this service is have you believed? Have you done what Romans 10:9 says? Have you confessed and believed in your heart for the salvation of your soul? Three verses later in Romans 10, it makes this incredible statement, "Whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be

saved." Let me clarify before we pray together. It does not say whosoever will become a Baptist will be saved. It doesn't say whosoever will pass a test, whosoever will jump through these hoops, whosoever will stop this or start that. It says whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Whosoever will just jump off the edge and say, "I'm trusting Jesus and Jesus alone." If you're that person in this place or online today, can I encourage you just to call out to him? It's not about repeating the same words that myself or somebody else might say. It's not about reading the perfect script. This is a heart's cry. This is you being transparent and honest with God about your sin condition and his ability and willingness to save. If that's who you are today, can I encourage you just cry out. It doesn't have to be out loud. It's a heart's cry. It's a prayer. Maybe your heart's cry would go something like this, "God, today I realize I've got a sin problem. God, I've been places I should have never been. God, I've participated in things I should have never participated in. God, you know there are words that have come out of my mouth that should have never taken place. God, you and you alone know the thoughts that have been between my ears and your word makes it clear that the wages or the result of my sin is death. God, today, I understand that. I believe it. I know that that's what I deserve. But your word says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. God, today, I believe. I believe I've got a sin problem but also believe that Jesus Christ is the only one who can solve it and he's the only one that can fix it. So, God, today, I believe. You said whoever would call would be saved and so I'm calling upon you. God, today, I believe. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that as we talked about in Psalm 22 today that when he allowed his hands and his feet to be nailed to the cross, he was bearing the price and the punishment of my sin. God, today, I believe that three days later, when he rose from the grave, he actually made it possible for my sin to be forgiven, my soul to be saved, and my eternal destiny to be heaven rather than hell. God, today, I don't have all the answers to the struggles and the problems of life but there's one thing I know, I know I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who had that heart cry toward the Lord for salvation. In a moment, I'm going to pray for us. We're going to stand and sing. We've got a whole team set aside. We've got a room set aside. We'd love just to celebrate with you, just to hear your story, to pray with you or pray for you. Maybe you're that person today who cried out to the Lord for the very first time or maybe today the Lord used the preaching of his words to convict you that now that you're saved, you need to follow in believer's baptism, or maybe the Lord has said this is your church home, or maybe today even on a day of great celebration, you just need to be prayed with or prayed for. Whatever the Lord has weighed upon your heart as we stand in a moment, if you would make your way, we'd love the opportunity just to hear, to be a part, to pray with and to pray for.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, God, we recognize that the only reason that we can believe is because you live. The only reason that we can put trust in not just today, but eternity in our sin condition and our salvation of our souls is because

Jesus Christ has overcome the grave. So God today, help us to see whatever our struggle is, whatever our hindrance is, whatever our battle is, help us to see it through the lens of the empty tomb. And God, today, as we come to this time of decision, may we know that because you live you are the one that can help us face tomorrow. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.