

Introduction

I want to begin by welcoming everyone here this morning, whether it is your first time here or whether you have been here 10 or 100 or even 1000 times before. If this is your first time you are especially welcome, and it is our hope that you will be so blessed by the service that you will want to return again next week

We celebrate this morning what Christians believe to be the central event of human history; the hinge on which the whole of history turns. Christians believe the fantastic claim that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, that he is still alive today, and that one day he is coming back to establish his kingdom forever. And so we greet each other with the words “The Lord is Risen” and are greeted in return with the response “He is Risen indeed!”

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And this is an amazing claim, because we know that dead people do not walk out of funeral homes! So some of you understandably may have doubts about this. Perhaps you are a sceptic, and you think the whole thing is just unbelievable. In your view, Christians are like the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, who said “sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Or perhaps you are a Christian who has doubts about God. Does God really love me? Did Christ really rise from the grave? And doubts are not wrong; anything worth believing has to be worth doubting. And so we first need to remind ourselves of the *fact of the resurrection*.

But we cannot stop there, because if the resurrection is only an interesting historical fact, like the fact that Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC, then we miss its profound importance to us today. So we need to look at *the relevance of the resurrection* to us today; what difference does it make to you, on April 1, 2018, that Jesus rose from the dead almost 2000 years ago?

And finally, we will all face death at some point; some of us sooner than others. And none of us is looking forward to our death. We are like Woody Allen, who said “I don’t mind dying... as long as I don’t have to be there when it happens.” *What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make to our fears of death and what happens after that?* So there are three tenses to our understanding of the resurrection of Christ: past, present, and future.

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A. The past: the fact of Jesus’ resurrection

Let us read Luke’s account: Luke 24:1-12

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24:1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." 8 Then they remembered his words.

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9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

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Prayer

Let us begin by trying to put ourselves in the shoes of these women. Imagine how you would feel if someone you loved deeply; someone whose teaching you had followed for 2-3 years, someone who you had seen work miracles, someone you called your Lord, was suddenly arrested and tried and unjustly condemned to a horrible and painful death. And to make matters worse he had died just before a big holiday, and had been hastily buried in a borrowed tomb without all the proper embalming spices that he needed. You are completely devastated, but there is nothing you can do except wait for an agonizing night and day and night and weep and cry out to God to ask why this happened. And God is silent. And then finally, when the holiday is over, you get up early in the morning to go with other women to the tomb to pay your last respects to your dead teacher. Your faces are streaked with tears, and you try to console each other as you walk along. And then you have a big question; how are we going to get into the tomb, since its entrance was sealed with a big stone, too big for us to move?

So you get to the tomb, and as you round the corner you see that the stone has been rolled back from the entrance. Your initial reaction is more horror; someone has been here before you and stolen the body of your Lord! What does this mean? So you go into the tomb to see if the body is still there, and instead of a body you find two angels in white robes, and they say "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"

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And finally you remember Jesus' words, for example from Matthew 16:21, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (NIV)

So how would you feel? You have just experienced the most profound change in your outlook you have ever experienced! You have been surprised by joy, and your face is still streaked with tears, but now they are tears of joy rather than tears of grief.

And so of course you run back to town full of joy at the good news you have to tell the other disciples, who are probably just getting out of bed, and here you have your first discouragement, because they flat out don't believe you! Luke 24:11 "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."

Let us pause here and make some observations about the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. And it is really important that we understand and believe in this. As Paul puts it so clearly:

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1 Cor 15:14-19

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then

those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

As a sidebar, the fact that the gospels tell us that it was women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection tells us right away that this story is real; it was not made up. Why is this? Because in Jewish society at that time women were not considered to be reliable witnesses, and they could not testify in a court of law. This perhaps explains the male disciples' reaction to the news "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." No-one in that culture wanting to make up a convincing story would have had women as the first witnesses, which leads us to the conclusion that the gospel writers wrote down what actually happened, not what they might have preferred to have happened.

And in fact the resurrection of Christ, far from being a made-up story, is one of the best attested facts of history. Peter Kreeft, Professor of Philosophy at Boston College, has provided a helpful summary of the possible explanations of the resurrection, which is shown in modified form here:

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	First Event	Second Event	Explanation	Conclusion
1	Jesus died	Jesus rose	Witnesses and apostles told the truth	Christianity
2	Jesus died	Jesus did not rise	Witnesses and apostles were deceived	Hallucination
3	Jesus died	Jesus did not rise	Witnesses and apostles were myth-makers	Myth
4	Jesus died	Jesus did not rise	Witnesses and apostles were deceivers	Conspiracy
5	Jesus did not die	Jesus did not rise	Witnesses and apostles were deceived	Swoon

Let me share just a few of the reasons that we know Christ rose from the dead:

1. The tomb was empty. If it was not, why didn't the Jewish leaders simply take people to the body in the tomb and show them the body, to squash the highly embarrassing story the disciples were telling?
2. The hallucination explanation is unreasonable, because Jesus was seen alive by many people at several different times, and the hallucination theory would require a string of multiple hallucinations.
3. The disciples as myth-makers and the disciples as deliberate deceivers do not explain how they were changed from men who either denied that they knew Jesus or just ran away to avoid capture, into men who stood up and defied the authorities by preaching that Jesus was risen. Only a sure knowledge of Jesus' resurrection could have done this. Both of these explanations would require the highly unlikely theory that these men and women would willingly die for something they knew to be untrue.
4. Jesus really died; he did not just swoon and revive in the cool darkness of the tomb. Jesus had suffered the beatings and agony of the crucifixion, including a spear wound in his side. As one scholar put it "the Romans knew how to kill people". So the idea that he could then somehow walk out of a sealed tomb and convince the disciples that he had risen from the dead is little short of fantasy.

So this leaves option 1 "Jesus rose" as the only explanation that makes sense. Peter Kreeft has this to say about the evidence

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By analogy with any other historical event, the resurrection has eminently credible evidence behind it. To disbelieve it, you must deliberately make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. Now why would someone want to do that? Ask yourself that question if you dare, and take an honest look into your heart before you answer. (Peter Kreeft, Professor of Philosophy, Boston College)

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B. The present: the effects of Christ's resurrection

1. The Resurrection assures us of God's forgiveness
2. The Resurrection assures us of God's power
3. The Resurrection promises hope to those who doubt.

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1. The Resurrection assures us of God's forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of God's best gifts. As the late British preacher John Stott reminds us, we have all said or done things of which we are ashamed, and instead of being able to look God in the face or to look one another in the face we want to run away and hide when our conscience troubles us. It was Mark Twain who said, "Man is the only animal that blushes, or needs to." We are ashamed, are we not, of things we've done in the past. Nobody is free who is unforgiven. But Jesus Christ offers us something that no other religion and no other world view can offer, whether Islam or Buddhism or agnosticism or atheism or hedonism. Because Jesus offers us *forgiveness*. While he was on earth he said to a prostitute

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"Your sins are forgiven." (Luke 7:48), and at the Last Supper he said Matt 26:28 "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." So Jesus linked our forgiveness with his death.

But how do we know that Jesus' death on the cross really was effective for the forgiveness of our sins? Was he right? Was he telling the truth? If he had died and stayed dead we would never have known; we would probably be convinced that his death was a failure. But because he rose from the dead, we know that his offer of forgiveness is real.

If you still doubt that God can forgive your sins, ask Peter. Peter was one of Jesus disciples, who swore that he would never forsake his Lord. But after Jesus was arrested Peter also betrayed him by swearing that he did not know him and had in fact never known him. And so after his resurrection the angel tells the women at the tomb

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Mark 16:6-7 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples *and Peter*, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" And then later, in a beautiful scene by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and commissions him for further ministry.

Are you burdened by unforgiven sin? Are you longing for a new start in life? Are you seeking hope? The Resurrection welcomes you to a new life of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

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2. The Resurrection assures us of God's power

There are two ways to look at this. The first and obvious way is that the Resurrection assures us that our God is an awesome God. He is a God who can raise people from the dead, and if he can do that impossible thing then nothing is beyond his power and his authority.

But there is a second and more personal sense here, because the Resurrection assures us that God's power is available to us as we seek to live as Christians. Paul, writing to the Christians at Ephesus, writes

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Eph 1:18-21

18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms

Did you get that? Paul is saying that the same mighty strength that raised Jesus from the dead is available for us who believe. That is great news for all of us who are Christians, because it means that we are not left to live a life of forgiveness and faithful service and love and obedience to our Lord in our own strength. Far from it! God himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit given to all believers, enables us and empowers us to live as his sons and daughters. That is the same power that enabled the early Christians in Rome to face the threat of death at the hands of Nero's thugs with peace and even joy; it is the same power that enables Christians in places like North Korea and Egypt and China to live for Jesus in a society that rejects their right to do so.

And for anyone here who is saying "Is God really able to make alive people who are dead to spiritual reality?", this truth of God's power shown in the resurrection of Jesus is the answer. Perhaps you are thinking something like this "I believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead, and I know that he died so that my sins can be forgiven, but I could never live the Christian life; it is just too hard." If that is what you are thinking, I have great news for you. You are right; you cannot live the Christian life on your own, but God will empower you through the Holy Spirit to live for him.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, puts it this way Rom 8:9-11

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You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

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3. The resurrection promises assurance to those who doubt.

Are you here this morning with doubts about your faith? Perhaps you have been through or are going through the loss of a loved one, or the loss of divorce or of loss of a job, or perhaps of illness of yourself or someone close to you. Did he really rise from the dead? Is he really God? Does he know what I am going through? Can I trust him?

Now there is nothing wrong with these doubts. Anything worth believing has to be worth doubting. If your beliefs can't stand up to your doubts and to the questions that rise through difficult times, what value do your beliefs really have? Are they even true?

Let me tell you a story about a man who had these sorts of doubts. His name was Thomas. Thomas was a down to earth guy; the sort of chap you could trust with your life, and the sort of man who would only believe what he could touch and feel. He would probably have made a great scientist. His story is told in the gospel of John

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John 20:19-20, 24-29

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

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26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

So Thomas doubted the resurrection, and Jesus graciously came to him and made his doubts a thing of the past. In the same way, don't be afraid of telling God or Christian friends about your doubts – but then reflect on the resurrection of Jesus. Does he love you? Yes, because he died for you on the cross! Can he help you? Yes, because he rose again and now lives at God's right hand!

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C. The future: The Resurrection assures us of God's ultimate triumph

One of the great differences between the different religions of the world and the different ideologies of the world concerns their version of the future. The one thing that is certain is death; we do not know when it will come for us or how it will come, but the statistics of death are very precise; exactly 100% of those who are born will die. So the question thoughtful people ask is "Is there any future? Is there any hope in the future?" There are some philosophies that offer no hope. The great and brilliant man Bertrand Russell wrote

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"That all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." Bertrand Russell "A free man's worship"

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And that gifted and tortured man Woody Allen said "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. Death is absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone's accomplishment meaningless" (A Companion to Woody Allen edited by Peter J. Bailey, Sam B. Girgus)

But against this backdrop of unyielding despair and stupefying terror comes the clear call of the Christian gospel with its assurance that death has been defeated, and that the whole of creation is going to be liberated from death. And is there evidence for his hope? I am glad you asked! Because the Christian hope is founded on the sure and certain truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote

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1 Cor 15:20-27

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

And I love the hymn of Charles Wesley we sang a few minutes ago:

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Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia!
Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!

Conclusion

So the resurrection of Jesus Christ has enormous relevance for you and for me. It is an assured fact, with a lot of historical evidence to support it. It assures us of God's forgiveness and of God's power, it gives assurance to those who doubt, and it assures us of God's ultimate triumph in the future. For those of us who believe in the resurrection, it is the basis for our faith and ultimately of all that we are. And for any here who do not believe in the resurrection, let me quote Peter Kreeft again "The resurrection has eminently credible evidence behind it. To disbelieve it, you must deliberately make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. Now why would someone want to do that? Ask yourself that question if you dare, and take an honest look into your heart before you answer."

Hymn

Benediction

Before I give the benediction let me say that I will be in the parlor behind the middle doors of this auditorium after the service, and I and other church leaders would be glad to meet with anyone, whether you are a visitor who would like to know more about the church or you need prayer or you want know how to become a Christian. I just ask that you give me 30 seconds to get to the back before you move into the center aisle.

1 Peter 1:3-5

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.