

The Resurrection: Do you believe it?

The King and the Kingdom

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Easter is a celebration. It is a celebration of Christ's victory once and for all over death and evil and darkness and over everything that would oppress us. On the Thursday before his death, Jesus was eating his last meal with his disciples and the disciple whom he loved whispered to him and said, "Who is it that is going to betray you?" And he said, "The person that I give this piece of bread to is going to be the person," and he dipped bread into a cup and he handed that bread to Judas and when Judas took it, we're told that Satan entered into Judas and Jesus then looked at him and said, "What you do, do quickly." Isn't that great? Isn't that stirring? Do you understand what is happening there? Probably not. What is happening there is Satan has entered into Judas and Jesus looks at him and says, "Bring it on. Right now. Everything you've got. Hit me with it, I'm ready. Let's stop waiting."

So Judas went out into the darkness and he hit Jesus. Satan came at Jesus with all of his fear, with all terror, with all doubt, with all anxiety, and when that could not break him, Satan came back with power and had him arrested. He came with lies. He came with accusations and injustice and when that could not break him, Satan hit him with torture and cruelty and shame and mockery and when that could not break him, Satan poured out death upon him and Jesus swallowed that death. He took it and he went inside the tomb. He went inside the grave and when the grave tried to enclose Jesus, it was like the power of one single lightbulb trying to enclose the power of an entire nuclear facility. It was too great and Jesus exploded the grave from within and when he did that, he put an end to evil as the last word. Evil would not be the last word. Darkness would not be the last word. Sickness would not be the last word. Death would not be the last word. Life and hope would go forever and eternal because he has won. Because he had won.

That's what Easter is. Easter is the message that our shame and our guilt and our sin has been paid for. Jesus is not paying for it anymore. He has got the receipt and it is all 100% paid for and it is our message of victory and it is a message that I, frankly, did not believe for many years. I just didn't. It wasn't that I actively disbelieved it, it's just that I didn't think it was that important. I thought the crucifixion was what it was all about and the incarnation and Jesus coming and living our life for us and being punished for us. Those were the things I thought mattered. I kind of believed the resurrection, more or less, if you asked me I would've said yes, but it just didn't seem that important. It didn't seem

important until August 6, 2008 when my brother called me and told me our middle brother had not survived his car wreck and at that turning point moment in my life when I watched my brother lowered into a grave, I had to ask myself, "Do I really believe I will see him again or not? Do I really believe this is the end or not?" And I had to face my own fears and I had to face my own doubts and my weak faith, and I had to come to Jesus and come to his word and ask him to convince me that he was real and I found out that Jesus was just as gentle and just as gracious with me as he was with his first disciples and I want to encourage you today, I want to encourage you, first of all, to ask yourself the question: do you really believe this? Do you really?

I read an article in Time Magazine a couple of years ago about this couple that work together in a Children's Hospital trying to cure cancer and they would have a different child die on them every week because they worked with these very sick children. And there was this little throwaway sentence in there, "We tell them that they're all going to heaven. We don't believe it but it seems to make them feel better." Is that just kind of what you believe? I think a lot of Christians, it's not so much that they disbelieve the resurrection as they just never really think about it. I say that because I interview people all the time to come and join our church and I ask them what they believe and they say they believe in Jesus. I say, "Great, what about him?" He's the Son of God. "Good, what else?" He died for our sins. "Great, so far so good. What else?" And that's when I get the "Uh, um, he likes us?" "Great answer, what else?" Um, he hears our prayers? "Good answer, what else?" Um, you pray to him? I start to really try to fish the answers out. "Yeah, I thought you said he was dead? Why do you talk to somebody who's dead?" Oh yeah, because he was raised from the dead. "Right. Good. You believe it."

It's a tag on for us. It's kind of the last of the holidays, you know, Good Friday; we've got Christmas; we've got all the big ones; St. Patrick's day, so important for us non-Irish people; and then Easter when we break out the white shoes and the pink ties and spring fashions and the Masters and the Final Four. It's all right there together. It's all great and all equal and we just don't believe but this is the event and I want you to understand that the resurrection is what gives our life meaning and it's what gives our life hope and it is what separates Jesus from all the other people who have ever lived. It's what separates Jesus from all other religious leaders. It's what separates Jesus and Christianity from all other faiths. It is ultimately the only thing that matters and most importantly, I want you to understand: it is true. It really happened. Jesus really got up from the grave and he is really still alive. It's true.

Please stand as we read from Acts 1. I'm reading from the New Living Translation which I really like. I just find it so pastoral and I think you'll see why in this particular translation. In Acts 1 we're told this,

1 In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. 3 During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to

time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

Thus far the reading of God's word. Please be seated.

Isn't this perfect, this text, it just rings so true. Doesn't it just ring true? He proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. The first thing I want you to see is that the resurrection is believable. It is written for us. It is described for us by these authors who really believed it and they wanted us to know that it was believable. Luke hired a man named Theophilus, sent from Macedonia to examine this truth. He met up with Paul in Macedonia. You can see that if you'll read through the book of Acts; all of a sudden all the pronouns in Acts change from "he" and "they" to "we" because Luke is traveling with them now. And he is not just going to settle for anybody else's secondhand or thirdhand stories. He's going to find out for himself what is true and the way he does that is he goes and he gets the eyewitnesses and he talks to them, and he talks to Mary. He finds Jesus' mother and talks to her and he gets these stories from Jesus' childhood that no one else has. He talks to the apostles who walked with Jesus and he gets these stories and he puts them down in great detail.

Then he writes for us this, he says, "After the crucifixion, in those 40 days, Jesus kept appearing to the apostles." He kept coming back and he kept proving to them in many ways that he really was alive. Doesn't that sound real? That sounds real to me because I just think if I were there, okay, I've seen him crucified. He's dead. He's been declared dead. He's dead. I think if I saw him once I would think to myself, "Was that a practical joke? Was I on Candid Camera?" You see him again you think, "Man, am I having a recurring nightmare? Did that really happen? Am I seeing dead people?"

And Jesus kept appearing and he kept doing very concrete things with them. He cooked meals for them. He broke bread with them. He ate with them. He looked at them and said, "Don't be afraid." He said, "A spirit doesn't have flesh and blood even as I have." And he was gracious to them. They would doubt him and he would listen to their doubts and he would say to Thomas, "Thomas, come and touch me. Just touch me. Feel me. Don't doubt. Believe. I'm real."

Jesus is believable. This resurrection is real. It happened. It's not a myth. This is not the way you describe a myth. If you wanted to describe a myth, you describe it with...like the Velveteen Rabbit where the rabbit cries a tear and out of the tear comes a fairy and out of the fairy comes newness of life and that's beautiful and pretty but you don't believe that happened, right? I mean, teddy bears don't come to life, sorry. But if you wanted to describe reality, you're going to describe a lot of flustered, shocked, unbelieving people that weren't trying to make themselves look good, they were reporting for us something that happened.

It's believable. It's believable because not even they expected it. We tend to have his kind of chronological snobbery. We look back on people in history and we think, "Ah, they just believed in things like that back then." Nobody was at the tomb. Nobody was waiting

on Jesus to get out of the grave. Not a single person. If they were just kind of expecting it, that was the kind of thing that happened then, then we would expect to see this description of 100 people around the tomb and then they saw this earthquake and they saw the whole light. They didn't believe it was going to happen so why would they go? The first people who found him didn't believe he had been raised from the dead.

It's real. It wasn't expected. It wasn't made up and honestly, if you want to come to the resurrection doubting it, which I think is the only honest way to come for the first time, if you want to doubt the resurrection, you only have two options: either it was some kind of group hallucination or it was a lie. And a lot of people, I'm sure, just thought, "These people are so sad. They're just so traumatized by what they've seen. They're having some kind of group hallucination." But their response to that was, "Then why is the tomb empty?" They pointed to the empty tomb. They had the proof right there. Peter stood up in the middle of 1,000 people on Pentecost, people who had put Jesus to death, people who did not believe, and he said, "Go and look at the tomb. It's empty. He's not there." So there can't be a physical piece of evidence for a hallucination.

Well, you could then say, "Well, if it's not a hallucination, it must be a lie. They must've just made it up." It's possible, right? It's possible they would lie about this but let me ask you something, think about the last time you told a lie. I don't want to besmirch you. I forget, I'm surrounded by perfect people. Let me tell you about the last time I told a lie. Let me tell you about the last lie I planned. I have an email in my box right now that is from somebody I'm really angry at, sorry, that's also true about me. And I have ignored it for four days and then I had planned on lying about it on Monday but now I told y'all so I'm not going to lie. I'm going to say, "Yes I did see it and I didn't want to answer it." But when you lie, typically it's to get out of trouble. Generally speaking when you lie, it's to make yourself look better. I have bent the truth. I have shaded the truth often in my life which I should not do, but I have never lied in order to get myself tortured. I have never lied in order to get myself cast out from my family, kicked out from all of my friends, stoned and martyred. That's not the kind of lie I tell. As a matter of fact, we're told, John McCain, Senator John McCain tells us that torture doesn't work because if you're torturing somebody, they will lie just to get out of it and yet these apostles were tortured and all they ever had to do was say, "It's not true." The Apostle Peter was crucified. All he had to do was say, "We made it up." But they didn't because it was true. It's not a lie. It's not a hallucination. It's real and it completely changed lives. It made them into different people.

Jesus took time with them to demonstrate to them the truth of the resurrection and I want you to know that truth is still being demonstrated today. That truth is still being demonstrated today. When I was a campus minister, the director, James Cameron who did, what did he do? He did "Titanic" and that other one with the blue people, "Avatar," and a couple of other things. He came out in the 90s and he said it was going to be the most earth shattering discovery, the biggest event in the history of television and on National Geographic television he unveiled a sarcophagus that he had found and on the sarcophagus it was engraved, "Here lies Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph." He said, "I found it. Here's the body." The supposed resurrected body of Jesus. Here it is and the

Christian faith did not crumble much to his dismay. And I had students come and ask me about it and my response was, "It can't be the real Jesus." They said, "Why?" I say, "Because dead people don't do what I've seen done." He's still alive and he's still at work and he is still healing people and he is still doing things and dead people don't do that.

And you'll need to understand that Jesus is still alive. We've had him demonstrate his presence with us. Years ago, just two years ago, we had a girl come to us and her doctor told her she had never ovulated once in her entire life and there would never be a chance for her to get pregnant and we anointed her and we prayed for her. She was going to go and get fertility treatments and before you get fertility treatments, I didn't know this but evidently you have to take a pregnancy test, and so she went in to take the perfunctory pregnant test and lo and behold she was pregnant. Jesus visited her.

We had a mom and a dad bring a daughter up here who was over two years old and wasn't walking. They had her in physical therapy and they didn't know if she was going to walk. We anointed her and prayed for her. The dad had to leave on a plane that afternoon. He got a phone call two days later from the physical therapist. The therapist said, "I've got bad news for you," and he's thinking, "Oh no, health insurance didn't go through. What is it?" "Well, you're going to have to be a lot more vigilant as a parent because your daughter is walking all over the place today. And he didn't even believe it. Jesus showing up and he's healing people.

John Moss has a friend who does missions to Muslims in Islamic countries and he goes to them and he says, "Your own holy book, the Koran, what does it say? Only God can work miracles so what we're going to do is we're going to pray for a miracle in the name of Jesus and when you see that miracle happen, that means that Jesus has to be God." And he has seen people converted through this. He has seen miracle after miracle because Jesus is alive and you need to believe that he is alive. He's alive today. He's healing marriages. He's healing people after divorces.

Last Monday I had breakfast with a man who when he was two years old, I think, he witnessed with his own eyes his father kill his mother with a hammer, beat her to death. He was taken by the courts and put into foster homes. He lived in 8 different foster homes. He was sexually abused. He was harassed and was humbled and shamed. He wet the bed every night of his life. His foster parents couldn't get him to stop. They would wrap the soiled sheets around his neck and made him sit out by the busstop and be mocked and shamed by the other kids with a sign around his neck saying, "I wet the bed." He was put back into institutionalized care and the doctor there pronounce that he would never be socially acceptable. He never would be socially adjusted. He would never be able to live in society.

A couple came and wanted to adopt. They were told not to adopt. They were too old. They wouldn't be able to get a young baby. They'd have to adopt an older child. It would be nothing but misery. They looked through a book of 500 pictures and they found his picture and they said, "I want him." They took him out to eat at a Chinese restaurant. The boy looks around and he sees everybody eating with sticks; he had never seen chopsticks

in his life. It was only the second time he had ever been in a restaurant. He thinks, "I've got to eat with sticks. If I don't eat with sticks, they're not going to want me as their son." So he takes one chopstick in each hand and he plunges them into his soup and the soup goes all over the man. He's thinking, "Oh gosh, I'm done. They're going to send me back. They're going to send me back." He starts crying at the table. The man reaches under the table and grabs a toy boat that he had carved out of balsa wood, he puts it in his hand and he says, "Would you like to be my son?"

They took him home that night, put him on brand-new sheets, Roy Rogers sheets. He looked at the lady and said, "Mom, I wet the bed every night. I'm going to soil these sheets," and she said, "Honey, if you do, we'll get up and wash them but you're still going to be my son." He never wet the bed again and last Sunday he stood in front of 1,000 of you and preached the Gospel. Did he seem socially awkward to you? Did he seem like someone who would never be able to function in society to you? He didn't, did he? He looked healthy and whole and complete because Jesus is alive and he is at work and he is healing people today.

He is alive and you can believe that. As for you, he is alive and he heals some people of infertility and he heals some people through adoption. He's not going to do what you want him to do but he is at work and he will show you that he is alive and if you believe that, it changes everything. It changes everything and I want you to believe it. Not believe it with kind of a legendary faith. Not believe it with a traditional faith. Do you know what a traditional faith is? A traditional faith is something that got shattered last night for tens of thousands of Kentucky fans, right? Some may even be in this room. They are just absolutely convinced that the Kentucky Wildcats are the best basketball team to ever play. Why do they believe that? Because they are from Kentucky, that's why they believe that. Some of you are pro-Oklahoma and you probably believe the Oklahoma Sooners are the greatest football team to ever take the field and why do you believe that? Because you're from Oklahoma. If you're from Ohio State, you believe that.

That's a traditional faith. That is a faith you grow up with but it is not a faith rooted in reality and that's the kind of faith a lot of people have in the resurrection. Why do you believe the resurrection? Because you grew up in a Christian family. Why do you believe in the Sooners? You grew up in a Sooner family. Why do you believe in Wildcat basketball? You grew up in a Wildcat family. What do you believe in the resurrection? You grew up in a Christian family. There is nothing real to it. There is nothing weighty to it. There is nothing life transforming about it and that's not the faith Jesus calls you to have and I want you to press into it. I want you to press into the faith that is life changing, that is healing, that is hope giving. But it's got to be a faith, you see, you have to believe in a faith that made an actual person get out of an actual grave, if you want your actual life to be actually changed. A myth won't change you. A legend won't change you. A living Savior with a body will change you and if you believe that, it changes you from being hopeless to having a hope that cannot be extinguished. A hope that can't be extinguished despite depression. It can't be extinguished despite loneliness. It can't be extinguished despite pain, despite suffering, long suffering. It's a hope that always finds life in the midst of death, even in funeral homes where you cry your eyes out because

you're truly sad and you don't have to fake it. You find hope because you believe in a true resurrection and you don't have to fake that either.

That is the resurrection I'm calling you to believe in. That's the resurrection I want you to press into, a resurrection that's real. A resurrection I can honestly tell you that I believe in and I think I am an otherwise rational human. It's a resurrection that gives you the confidence of knowing that nothing you do is in vain because everybody you see is eternal, and they have dignity, and they have value, and they're going to spend all of their lives, they are going to spend all of eternity either with their Lord or separated from him. Either in glory or in darkness and your actions because of the resurrection, because of the permanence of life that it promises, every action you take will move somebody in one of those two directions. Jesus says to us, "Even a cup of cold water given to a child in my name will be rewarded in the life to come." Nothing is in vain because Jesus is raised from the dead. No sickness is forever because Jesus is raised from the dead. No sadness is forever because Jesus is raised from the dead. Not even darkness or death is forever because Jesus is raised from the dead.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, I pray that you will re-create miracles right now. Father, it is impossible for someone who is dead to get out of the grave and walk around and it is no less impossible for us to believe that 2,000 years later. You worked a miracle on that day and we ask you to work more miracles today. Would you give us the faith to believe that you raise the dead? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.