

A story is told of four friends who were talking together at a funeral. One of them asked the other three, "When you are finally in your casket and people are mourning you, what would you like to hear them say about you?" The first man said, "I'd like to hear them say that in my time I was a great family man and a good businessman." The second one said, "I'd like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and a great teacher who made a difference in the lives of children." The third man replied, "I'd just like to hear them say, 'Hey look - he's moving!'" This morning we celebrate that reality: the fulfilled promise of God, the secured hope of life beyond this life, the empty tomb, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. Jesus has risen from the dead! Our faith in Christ begins and ends with his resurrection. True Christian faith is not a religion, not an affirmation of a church, not belief in a set of ideas - but a dynamic, personal, intimate and passionate relationship with Jesus Christ which reflects the power of the resurrection, the power of life over death. Such is the sovereign gift of grace, the life giving glory of God, the great and glorious joy that is produced in the heart, mind, and soul of those who passionately embrace and abundantly receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

As we celebrate our faith in Jesus Christ through the reality of the resurrection, we must take note that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is not held by the majority in our world. The second most prevalent *religious belief* on earth is Islam, which does not believe Jesus rose from the dead. The *growing* modern *belief* today is “no belief” or “believe what you want to believe” which is termed either being atheist or agnostic. The god of the atheist and agnostic is *relativism* which simply means – two plus two equals four, *IF* the answer “four” is politically correct, gender inclusive, affirming, tolerant, open, non-absolute, non-restrictive, non-judgmental, and sensitive to the feelings of all people groups, animals, plants and inanimate objects, regardless of their race, creed, color, or sexual orientation.

The truth of Jesus' resurrection today is seen through that filter of *relativism*, which believes that the Bible is just a collection of stories; that there's no proof that what the Bible says is true; that belief in God is a human idea made up by those who are unable to deal with real life; and that faith in Jesus Christ is one religion among all the other religions of the world like Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Much of the world stumbles over the idea that Jesus actually did rise from the dead. Many people see the resurrection as a legend like Santa Claus: it's something fun to pretend; that it gives life a little more color and zest, but that you can't really take it too seriously. And so they ask us: "What difference does the resurrection make?" Perhaps we have failed in that regard; the community of faith needs to start living the joyful and glorious difference it makes to believe in the risen Christ.

The resurrection makes a great deal of difference; it isn't a legend, isn't a myth, it isn't a good idea. The resurrection is a historical fact, a divine reality that produces dramatic and eternal change. Everyone in the world is affected by Jesus' resurrection. Nobody lives unchanged by that reality. If hadn't happened, our lives would be dramatically different. And because it did happen, our lives *can be* dramatically different. The Bible says that the resurrection *thee* central fact of history, the central fact of our lives. Nothing, nothing is more important. What difference does the resurrection make? In our text for this morning we first see that the resurrection will make a difference in *what we believe*.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

These words are from a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church that had been established in the city of Corinth which was known for its wealth, paganism, immorality, idolatry and relativism – which is not much different from our culture today. The foundational principle of the apostle Paul's life was based on the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. *"In accordance with the Scriptures"* the Old Testament foretold that the Son of God would be killed and *"buried"* and that he would be *"raised"* back to life after three days. The risen Christ appeared to *"Cephas"* (Peter), then to the rest of the apostles; and after that he appeared to a crowd of over 500 people, then appeared to James, and then to apostles again. And then ultimately the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul himself. What Paul saw with his own eyes, he *believed*. And what he *believed* was affirmed by at least 512 other people. Paul's encounter with the risen Savior was life changing and heart transforming; everything he *believed* was *changed* and *transformed* when he met the One who was changed and transformed from death to life. Paul was never the same after that; his *belief* in the resurrection of Jesus changed and transformed his life from that moment on. And it changed his life forever and it changed our lives forever. Praise God!

The apostles' lives were changed and transformed forever by that same *belief* as they watched Jesus being nailed to a cross; witnessed his pain as he cried out, *"I thirst!"* and *"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"*; and as they heard him as he finally bowed his head and said, *"It is finished! . . . Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit."* They watched as his body was taken from the cross and buried; all their hopes and dreams buried with him. Friday and all day Saturday they mourned, until finally, on Sunday morning some of the women who had been following Jesus made their way along a path that led to his tomb, wondering who would roll away the stone for them. But when they arrived, they discovered that the stone had already been rolled away; an angel there told them, *"Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. . . he is not here . . . He has risen!"* (Mark 16:6)

That is what we celebrate this morning. We *celebrate* the resurrection of Jesus *because we believe* that the cross was an instrument of horrible death; the roughness of wood soaked with human blood. So terrible was this form of execution that the Roman Empire prohibited the crucifixion of Roman citizens; it was reserved only for slaves, the worst of criminals, and the most dangerous enemies of the empire. We *celebrate* the resurrection of Jesus *because* even though the grave is the final chapter, the closing of the great door, the end of life on earth- we *believe* that the risen Christ possesses a greater power than the cross, and that the grave cannot hold him, and the empty tomb is proof that he has risen. We *celebrate* today *because* Jesus rose from the dead – and we now know that real life begins after death, and it is a life which will never end. Dale Evans once said, "I spent most of my life searching for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Then I finally found it at the foot of the cross." We *believe* that we have found the gold of God's mercy and grace and love in the resurrected Jesus.

What we *believe* about the resurrection makes a difference – it makes a difference in how we order our lives, what our priorities are, who we love, who we don't like, how we raise our children, what we do for a living, what we do for fun, what we spend our money on, what kind of car we drive, what kind of house we live in, what kind of clothes we wear, what we are willing to do, what we are not willing to do, what we throw away, what we keep, what makes us laugh, what makes us cry. Contrary to what the pundits of our day say - *"belief"* is not an intellectual exercise but rather an act of the human will. What we *believe* defines, develops and determines our passions, our desires, our levels of commitment, our loves, our irritations, our appetites, our lusts, our joys and our heartaches. Belief determines what we are willing to live for, what we are willing to sacrifice, what we are willing to die for.

Do you *believe* Jesus rose from the dead? In John 20:29 the Word of God tells us that the resurrected Jesus asked a room full of disciples: *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* The course of history, the course of our world, the course of each one of our own lives was dramatically changed and transformed by what the men in that room *believed* about the risen Jesus Christ. The resurrection makes a difference in what we *believe*.

We *believe* that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. But we are not *believers* simply because it gives us something to hang onto when we are about to die. We believe also because the resurrection changes and transforms hearts and lives. It changed the apostle Paul's. It changed yours. It changed mine. Praise God! What difference does the resurrection make? Because the resurrection will make a difference in what we believe – so the resurrection will *also* make a difference *in how we live*.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . 1 Corinthians 15:20-26

Paul's words here regarding the origin of sin through Adam reminds me of a BC comic that Johnny Hart ran one Easter Sunday some years ago. The first panel shows a tomb; it's night and a large stone covers the opening of the tomb. In the second frame you see light shining around the edges of the stone. In the next frame you're in Peter's cave (comic strip character). There's a rumble as the stone from the resurrection tomb comes rolling through the door into Peter's cave - only to crash with a loud "bang" which startles and wakes Peter up. We then see Peter step out of his cave, look up the hill and he sees the tomb. A cross-shaped star is shining overhead and you can see the trail that the rolling stone left. Peter follows the trail, which leads up to the tomb. When he gets there he sees footprints in the dirt and begins to follow them as the sun is starting to rise. Peter follows the footprints down the hill right up to a small lake. The sun is fully risen and the footprints go right across the water. When Peter looks across the lake he sees a snake obviously mad and recovering from some sort of trauma. The snake looks up and says to Peter, "Well, that was rude! Some guy just stepped on my head!"

Paul writes: "*By a man came death.*" Death came into the world, into our lives, when Adam and Eve sinned against God in Eden. The resurrection of Jesus was the fulfilled promise of Genesis 3:16 that God would send a Messiah into the world to "*crush*" the head of Satan, the deceiver and purveyor of all evil. In the words we just read Paul was telling us that if we truly do believe in the resurrection – if we are truly changed and transformed by the reality that Jesus rose from the dead – then we should live like a people who believe in the resurrection. A life which reflects victory over death should be our "*firstfruits*" – the produce, the result of our belief, our faith in the risen Savior. If Jesus rising from the dead was the "*first fruits*" of the resurrection so "*then at his coming those who belong to Christ*" will also know the resurrection. Since Jesus "*delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.*" and "*has put all his enemies under his feet*" and "*the last enemy to be destroyed is death..*" and "*the last enemy to be destroyed is death*" so also are we to be conquerors and a people of victory in the battles and war of life just as our Lord Jesus was and is.

The author W. P. Lemon once wrote "Easter is not a passport to another world; it is a quality of perception for this one. *It is time* for those who us who claim to believe in the resurrection of Jesus to quit living defeated lives of personal sin that have been polluted by the influence of this world. *It is time* to start embracing and living out the victory over life and death that Jesus went to the cross for. In John 10:10 Jesus said, "*I came that that you may have life and have it abundantly.*" The resurrection should make a difference *in how we live our lives*. We need to do that and the world needs to see that. You don't have to look very far into this world to see the hopelessness and despair that surrounds us every day. The media is saturated with reports of human depravity, the darkness of evil, the deceit of Satan are at hand. Countries continue to war against one another in the heart of the birthplace of Christ. Selfishness and cynicism have infected our communities, our families and our churches.

If you watch and listen to that stuff very long, you either fall under the influence of its power or you become discouraged and depressed – and the only hope our culture and world can offer us from that discouragement and depression is the pursuit or the distraction of decadent pleasure. We live in a society that puts all its hope in life on earth and no hope in the life beyond; the grave is seen as the dark end of the tunnel. A lot of people believe that today, and many of those who claim Jesus live that way – defeated and without victory - in spite of their professed belief in the risen Christ. Bertrand Russell spoke for those around us who do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus when he wrote:

The life of a man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal which few can hope to reach and where none may tarry long. One by one as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him, and all his race, the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

How sad it is to live out one's life with no purpose but to simply exist for the self in the moment that is inescapably locked into the past. No power outside the risen Christ can deliver us from the fatal, fallen, aimless tendency within each one of us to do what we don't want to do - and to repeat again and again the sad history of our lives. But Jesus rose from the dead, and the value of your life, the value of my life, the value of our lives will be determined by our relationship to his resurrection. We are a risen people who proclaim "Glory" and "Praise" to the King of King and Lord of Lords! In Christ we are people who are called to embrace the reality of the cross and the victory of the empty tomb. Jesus is Lord over of all life and Lord over all things in life – yesterday, today and tomorrow. Jesus has risen!

Jesus came in to the world and sacrificed his life for our sins on the cross and rose from the death to give us a new life, an abundant life, a life beyond the battles of the struggles of life - a life filled not with comfort and happiness and worldly success but a life filled with hope and peace and love and joy and of glory. The resurrection should make a difference *in how we live* our lives. What difference does the resurrection make? The resurrection will make a difference in what we believe, which will make a difference in how we live – which will then ultimately make a difference *in how we die*.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Paul is describing here what will happen to us when we die and when we are then resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the grave is not the end of life. When we are in Christ, death does not have the last word. We celebrate the resurrection today affirming Paul's words from Philippians 1:23: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." The apostle was not saying that the resurrection is a faint and glimmering hope, not just something nice we want to believe in – but rather as we get ever closer to death, the resurrection is the reality that after death those who have given their hearts and lives to Jesus, will know life everlasting with God in the glory of heaven.

In John 14:19 Jesus said: *"Because I live, you also will live."* This is the sure confidence we have as we face the last issue of life, the last conflict in life, the last battle of life – which is death. *Before the resurrection, death was the end. Before the resurrection, death was the final curtain call. Before the resurrection, all we could do is mourn as those who have no hope: "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). *But Jesus has risen and it has made a difference in how we die.* Now when someone dies who has surrendered their hearts and lives to Christ, while we may mourn for ourselves over our loss, we need not mourn for them. Jesus has redeemed them; he has paid the *"penalty of eternal destruction"* – and they are now in the presence of God and in the glory of His power forever and ever!

This is the assured hope we have in the resurrected and risen Jesus Christ. In the beginning we were created for a personal, intimate, glorious, eternal relationship with God. But soon after we came to be we pridefully rejected God's presence and rebelled against God's authority – which caused us to be separated from God and condemned by God's standards of life, which casted the cloud of death over all humanity *"away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."* The Bible speaks of this truth when it says we *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23) – which means we have not trusted and treasured God the way we ought; we have not found satisfaction with his greatness nor walked in his ways. God's Word calls this *"sin"* and tells us *"the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). If the Word of God stopped here, we all would be doomed to a hopeless future of pain and despair: *"away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."*

But God. But God. *"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8). The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died for sinners like us and *he physically rose from the dead on this day* to validate the saving power of His death, re-opening the gates of eternal life so that we might once again enjoy the glory we were created for. 1 Peter 3:18: *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."* We were created by God to live with God and for God. Coming back home *"to God"* is the only place where we will find deep and lasting satisfaction and joy, and ultimately an eternal life of glory beyond death on this earth.

Acts 16:31 tells us that if you *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."* To *"believe"* in Jesus means to invite Jesus into your heart, to surrender the control of your life into his Jesus' hands, to trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Perhaps you are here today and you have not yet given your heart and life to Jesus. I pray you would do so today. Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you. Jesus is calling for you. Acts 17:30-31 tells us: *"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

Had not the stone been rolled away; had Jesus been left in the tomb to rot; had Jesus not risen from the dead, then sin and death would still have it's hold on us. But the stone has been rolled away. Jesus did step on the head of the snake. He not only stepped on it but he crushed the life out of it. Jesus has risen! Sin no longer rules our lives. Death has been defeated. Jesus has risen! He is still in the business of rolling away stones. He is still in the business of eternally changing and transforming hearts and lives. Jesus has risen! I pray this morning if you do not clearly know the hope of eternal life, I pray you would respond to the call of the Savior. Jesus is alive and seeks to give you eternal life beyond death!

On Feb. 27, 1991, just two hours before the cease-fire was declared in the Persian Gulf war, Ruth Dillow received a phone call from the United States Pentagon informing her that her son, Private 1st Class Clayton Carpenter, a tank mechanic with the 1st Cavalry Division serving near the border of Kuwait, had been killed by a cluster bomb. At the time Ruth Dillow wrote, "I can't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. I wept and I expressed anger and I grieved loss. People tried to comfort me, but to no avail because my loss was too deep, too great."

The next day, as friends and relatives began to gather in her home, Ruth received another phone call late in the evening which she wasn't quite prepared for either, as the far-off voice on the other end said, "Hi, Mom, it's me. Clayton. I'm alive." Ruth Dillow said, "I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice, and he really was alive." She said, "I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels, because my son whom I had thought was dead, was really alive. I'm sure none of you can even begin to understand how I felt." We who truly know Jesus as Lord and Savior know how Ruth Dillow felt. Without Jesus, we are so lost in our sin, that we are for sure absolutely stone cold dead – spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically dead. But Jesus rose from the dead! His resurrected life has brought us back to life and given us new life and promises us eternal life. He has risen! Amen!

The words we have read together today were written to a people who lived in a culture that believed that death completely extinguished life or at the very least death led to a permanent but shadowy existence in some kind of underworld. The concept of a physical, resurrected existence after death was known mainly from popular fables and was thought to be ridiculous by the educated. Paul wrote these words to correct those who denied the resurrection and to clear up confusion about the resurrection. These words are clearly relevant for us as we live in a day when spirituality is popular and the culture is hard a work defining our faith in Jesus Christ for us – which is being done most prominently right now in the media of books and movies and television. One of the issues at the forefront right now are the issues of life after death: resurrection, heaven, and hell. Over the past few years eight books have been published by people who claim to have had a resurrection experience and visited heaven or hell. And sadly these books have become so popular not only in the secular world but also among many of us claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - that they are now being made into movies.

This is the kind of stuff that Paul was always addressing in his letters. We who claim Christ must get our truth from the Word of God and not from extracurricular sources. Recently Pastor David Platt asked the question: "Why are we buying this stuff when we have the Word of God? Let's minimize the thoughts of man and let's bank our lives and our understanding of the future on the truth of God." Outside of Jesus, no one in the Bible ever spent time in heaven and wrote about it. Only four biblical authors had visions of heaven and wrote about what they saw -- Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul and John. All the biblical descriptions of heaven are focused on Jesus and the glory of God rather than friends, relatives or activities. In Revelation 22:18-19 God warns us of the fatal consequences of trying add to what God has written in His Holy Word. Heaven is for real for us, not because someone claims to have been there, but because the One who came from heaven said it was real. Jesus said: *"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. . . For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day"* (John 6:38, 40). The resurrection is not real for us because of a book, movie or television program but because God's Word tells us the resurrected One said: *"Because I live, you also will live."*

Jesus came to earth, gave his life, and rose from the dead because there is a deep and deadly sickness of sin that is loose in humanity - which tears people up, eats out their hearts, and destroys them from the inside, even though everything might look great on the outside. Sin and death are ugly and deadly. But when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus we are then intimately and eternally connected to the One who has the power over sin and death. Jesus has risen back to life from the dead! Embracing the resurrection of Jesus Christ will make a difference in what you believe, in how you live your life, in how you will leave this life and where you will go after this life. The apostle Paul wrote: *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"* Jesus has risen! Jesus is our new life! Jesus is our promised resurrection after this life! And all God's people said – Amen!