

## I. Introduction

A. Happy Easter. I hope and pray that today is a good day for you. I hope and pray that some of the joy traditionally associated with today – some of the energy associated with Easter, or family, or the start of Spring, or that great and really fun version of Christ the Lord is Risen Today that our musicians produced – while practicing social distancing - I hope that some of that positive energy comes through for you, even on this odd Easter Sunday.

B. Which it is.

1. I know that some of you are struggling right now for any of 100 reasons. We heard Scott reflecting on his business going through a dramatic downturn because of the Coronavirus, and his experience of processing that and wrestling with God.

2. Some of you are going through that. I know there is a lot of job loss out there, and we have a number of people from the church in the hospital. And I know that we do not really know what is going on.

C. I suspect that for some of you, today seems weird because it's your first Easter not in a church. After all, because Easter has a certain cultural gravitas about it. Even those who do not believe in Jesus or the resurrection, or who have no final opinion about it - still attend Easter services.

D. And I must confess that it's a bit weird to speak about an empty tomb to an empty church.

E. But I am glad you are here.

F. Let me pause to acknowledge, as I almost always do at Easter – that some of you are listening to me against your will. This year you were not drug to church, but you are watching and you'd rather not.

1. You are doing so to placate someone, promote family peace. You are taking one for the team. You know that Easter brunch will be easier to navigate if you go along on this.

G. I often make jokes directed at the CEOs in the group – the Christmas and Easter Onlys, also called Creasters about all of this, noting that: 1) you can be easy to spot (Not today, but when you are in church and (fold arms) you are giving off a certain vibe; and 2) noting that it's only an hour, I am pretty sure you will survive.

## II. Let me start by saying, I am glad you have tuned in and I consider talking at an Easter service a sacred opportunity

A. Always:

1. For starters, it's Victory Day. For those who believe in Christ, this is a celebration of a big comeback win. The Super Bowl. The crescendo of the symphony, the climax of the play. It is the triumph of good over evil – life over death. And I gain eternity because of it.

2. And secondly, because it's a chance to say, you do not understand what this is about. You are looking at the wrong thing. You need to understand the amazing offer God is extending to you. Easter is always a big day.

B. And maybe this Easter is more important than others, because COVID has changed things a bit – it has resurfaced some questions for you.

1. Perhaps what this virus has done is highlighted some weaknesses in your understanding of things. Not only forced you inside, but forced you to realize that the Enlightenment mindset you have unconsciously absorbed from culture – the belief that we have everything under control and that things will just keep getting better – it's forced you to realize that there are some problems with that.
2. And, as it turns out, we are mortal. Death is still an issue. Who knew? Death is something 21<sup>st</sup> century Western people largely ignore.

III. There are a few reasons why I think speaking at Easter is a privilege. And I really am excited about setting the story and the offer in front of you.

- A. I briefly thought about speaking about hope, or the coming of spring and all of the new life themes that some highlight this time of year.
- B. I also thought about going the other way and noting that this Easter Sunday feels more like Easter Saturday – like we are still in the dark waiting for some good news, but hang in there because “Sunday’s coming.”
- C. I considered a few unconventional, more COVID related angles. But I am going to stay in my lane. I want to be sure you understand the claim, why it matters and why there is good reason to think it's true.

IV. The Luke 24 passage that you saw a minute ago, talks about the empty tomb and then the appearances of Christ after his death on the cross. This is the Easter story.

- A. Christianity doesn't principally make religious or philosophical or cultural claims, it makes historical claims. We are not asked to believe because philosophers have reasoned their way to Jesus as the path to moral clarity, or mystics have found God deep within or because scientists have found God in a lab. The reasons that are given to believe in the Easter story are based on a set of historical claims found in the Bible.
- B. As Luke 24 reports, the women showed up at the place where the body of Christ had been placed after he was crucified. And what they found was that: the guard had left, the stone was rolled away and the body was gone. They then bump into some angels, and then they meet Jesus – back from the dead.
- C. And this is the start of the Christian faith. Even those who do not believe Jesus is God and rose from the dead agree:
  1. The disciples and other early Christians believe Jesus came back from the dead.
  2. And this belief is what launches the church, which grows like a brush fire, overtakes the Roman Empire and spreads around the world, even to the point that it is impacting your day today.
- D. And it makes Christianity a bit unique in that it can be disproven. It's not a philosophy whose merits are discussed and debated – if Jesus defeated death then we have really good reason to pay attention to all of the other things he said and did – to all of the claims he made. But if he didn't, then all bets are off. Nothing else matters. And that is not me talking, that is what the Bible itself states. At the end of I Corinthians, which is one of the letters Paul wrote that make up the New Testament, Paul said, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is a lie. Don't waste your time. Run away. It's a cruel joke that you want nothing to do with.

- V. But, and here I am talking to those of you who have some doubts about the path you're on.
- A. One of the things you cannot shake is a sense that there is more. That there is a God.
1. The Bible doesn't really set out to prove God, but it does note that there are good reasons to believe he is true, and it also notes that God has made himself known to us. He has "written some things on our heart." In Romans 1 we are told that while we can deny God's existence, we have to work at it, because there is a sense that He does exist. Some of you – who do not "believe" in God, are really mad at him right now.
- B. So, I want to make sure you understand the claim in its context. Because someone defeating death is worth paying attention to, but that claim needs more context. It happens most of the way through the Book, and you really can't pick it up there.
- VI. First: you need the story – the context.
- A. The Bible is a collection of 66 books that were written over 1,500 years by 40 different authors writing in three different languages and on three different continents. And it tells a big story that reaches its zenith during the last days of Holy Week.
1. It also points ahead to a big celebration. To a restored world – I am going to talk about that next week. (Most people have very misguided ideas about heaven. And so they worry because it sounds boring. Heaven will not be boring. But that's next week).
- B. My point now is that, in spite of popular opinion, the Bible is not a list of rules or morality lessons. It is not a collection of inspirational stories. It is a big story. It is the story, our story, God's story. It is the story of the efforts God goes to in order to restore what he made, defeat evil and redeem us.
- C. It's a big book, not quickly summarized, but in brief:
1. A good God created a good world. But there was a rebellion and a fall – a collapse – and as a result we live as broken people in a broken world.
    - a) Which if we slow down long enough – if we turn off Tiger King long enough and think about things - we can see. On days like today it is pretty obvious that the world is broken.
    - b) And if you have tried really hard to be good – like I have – and failed. You know that you are broken as well. It turns out to be very hard to be very good for very long.
- D. One of the big themes developed in the Bible is that we cannot reach up, God has to reach down. And he does this by sending someone to rescue us.
- E. It turns out that the Old Testament is a long introduction to the arrival of the rescuer – Jesus.
- VII. And the background of Jesus is the second thing you need to know more about. The first is the Bible, the second is Jesus, who is the focus of the Bible.
- A. The first 11 chapters of Genesis give us the backdrop – some context – to the big story.
1. It's in Genesis 1 where we are told that a good God creates a good world.

2. It's in Genesis 3 where we read about things falling apart – sin and rebellion, death and mayhem. And it is where we get the first hint of the rescue plan – which is about Jesus. We are told that God is going to send a rescuer to redeem and restore.
- B. The rest of the story, which begins in Genesis 12, where God calls Abraham – follows the plan as it develops.
1. God offers Abraham – this nomadic shepherd living in the fertile crescent about 4,000 years ago – a deal. Follow me, and I will give you land, descendants and send the rescuer through your blood line.
  2. We then follow Abraham's descendants, the Jews as they start small, grow, become very powerful – and then fall – and in the process we learn a lot about:
    - a) Ourselves; God; His plan and we learn more about Jesus – because he keeps talking more about the rescuer he would send.
    - b) There are lots of sub stories and other characters; Lots about love, justice, the law, sacrifices.
- C. We get lots of things. What we do not get is the Messiah – the rescuer. That is where the New Testament picks up. It continues the story
1. Matthew – one of the four Gospels (which are like biographies of Jesus) opens with a genealogy to show how Jesus connects back to Abraham and all the promises and prophecies
    - a) The other three Gospels also tell the story of Jesus – they are all written to persuade us to embrace Christ – but they are written to different people so they highlight different things.
  2. The key point is, in all kinds of ways, they report on Jesus, making it clear that: he is God and He is there to show us how to live and he is there to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – to teach and love but also to die in our place, paying our moral debt.
- D. As you know if you have read the Gospels:
1. We get a bit about Christ's birth – because that is special. After all, He is God who has existed before he becomes a human. Our life begins at conception, his did not. That is why you have the virgin birth and all the things behind Christmas.
  2. Then we get a few additional bits and pieces that show how he is unique.
  3. Then we pick up as he begins his public ministry. This happens when he is thirty and has just been baptized. God speaks about him from heaven. He heads into the desert to pray and fast and prepare for what lies ahead – including a period of temptation.
  4. And then we track him over three years as he reveals more and more to his followers.
    - a) He demonstrates his power over sickness, nature, evil, death.
    - b) He teaches with a power no one else has.
    - c) He perfectly fulfills all of the Old Testament prophecies set out about him.

5. And then, bringing this all to today – after telling them that he is going to die and come back to life, he marches into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover – a Jewish celebration that has been going on for a thousand years. Doing so because he claims to be the real Passover lamb – the perfect sacrifice sent to take away our sins.
- E. And then... three days later, he defeats death and comes back as the first born of the dead.
    1. As a prototype of what will happen for his followers.
    2. And then, during the next forty days, he explains to his followers what he was up to – he helps them connect the dots. And then, just before ascending into heaven, he commissions them to recruit more followers .
  - F. In all of this, Jesus is very different from other religious leaders.
    1. He lives very simply – as many of them do. And he prioritizes the needs of others. He has a reputation for humility.
    2. But he makes the biggest claims of all.
    3. He doesn't claim to point to the truth. He claims to be the truth. He isn't teaching them a way to God. He claims He is the Way and that He is God.
  - G. And in all of this, it is somewhat objective. Either it happened or it didn't.
    1. This is not a point I am making – this is the point of Paul in I Cor. 15.

VIII. So let me go back to my two points. I started by saying, there are a couple things I think people miss.

- A. First, many misunderstand the main point. Many equate Christianity with the standard line that I need to be good in order to placate God so I can go to heaven when I die. Christianity says – that is impossible. God is too holy. We are too broken. We cannot be good enough to earn. We can not reach up; God must reach down.
  1. Jesus is the rescuer. He is fully God. At Christmas, he shows up as one of us. While remaining fully God he becomes fully human. He lives, loves, serves, teaches. He reveals God and says He is coming to defeat evil and make things right. And then, in a surprise move, he wins by losing. He takes sin upon himself, pays the penalty and dies. But He doesn't stay dead.
  2. From this position he offers us a chance to join His team. To become a follower, a disciple. To accept his payment for our sin and the gift of eternal life he offers.
- B. What this means is:
  1. Christianity is not about you being good enough to earn heaven.
  2. Christianity is not about you or me doing more good than bad.
  3. Christianity is not about following a list of rules that will help us win God's favor.
  4. Christianity is about embracing Christ. Being born again. Accepting a free gift.
- C. One of the passages I turn to often is Ephesians 2:8 & 9, because it is a succinct counter to the popular notion. There we are told that we are saved – rescued, given eternal life, forgiven, adopted by God – we are saved by grace through faith. It is a gift of God, not a result of works (of doing good).

1. I am guessing that many of you do not get this because I sure didn't. And because I talk to lots of people who do not. Just this week I was talking with a young woman about Christ, and I asked, "Are you a Christian?" And she said, "I'm trying to be."

a) That is code for: I don't really get it. I think it's about me being better than I am.

b) We became a Christ follower by admitting we are broken and asking to be forgiven. To be sure that is not the place where it ends. That is a starting point. And being changed and becoming more like Christ is what happens as God works in our heart. Do not try to do this on your own – clean up your act and then come to God.

IX. The second thing I am not sure people get is, that Jesus either is who he claimed to be or he is not. And the resurrection is put forward as a key piece of proof.

A. We are not asked to believe on the basis of nothing. It's not blind faith. We have four big pieces of data – four arguments about Christ:

1. There is the way he fits into the story. The way he perfectly fulfills all of these promises made hundreds and thousands of years earlier. You need to know the Old Testament well to appreciate this. Most of us miss all of this, but it's powerful.

2. There is the wisdom with which he lived. He was perfect. Read the Gospels. See the way he navigates all of these moral issues. Listen to the brilliance with which he taught.

3. Third, there are the miracles. Some of you are predisposed to write them off without looking at them. But:

a) They are not gaudy or flashy. They are not self-aggrandizing. They are the kind of things you would expect a loving God to do – and he does most of them very quietly;

b) And it's not like I am claiming to do miracles or you are claiming to do miracles – it's the one who changed the world more than anyone else, the one who gave us the ethic of love and one who lived a perfect life..

4. And then there is the resurrection itself. The fact that he said he was going to defeat death and he did.

B. Hey, I do not have enough time to make every point I'd like to make. But here is the point I am trying to make here. You need to figure out what you are going to do with Jesus.

1. He is the most significant person who ever lived – of the 60B of us who have walked around, he has changed the world more than anyone else.

2. He gave us the greatest ethical system we have. He loved. He served. In so many ways he was humble and modeled this idea about the needs of others ahead of our own.

3. But, while doing all of this, he claimed to be God.

4. And there is a strong case to be made that He rose from the dead.

- a) Look into it. Many who do end up trying to disprove it end up becoming thoroughly convinced that it happened. There are only a few viable options.
- b) Everyone agrees the tomb was empty. The choices are:
  - (1) He didn't die – unlikely. Comical really
  - (2) Someone stole the body – like the disciples or the Jewish leaders. But neither view makes any sense.
  - (3) Wrong tomb
  - (4) He rose

C. Either he did or he did not. Either way, a lot rests on this. I am persuaded it's true – and I want you to take a look. And I want to do all I can to stop you from saying something silly. And when it comes to Jesus there are two very silly things being said:

- 1. Jesus might be true for you, but he it's not true for me. I am claiming that Jesus lives above our narratives or social constructs. He either is God or he is not. I am not suggesting you believe in Jesus because believing works or makes you less anxious or whatever. I am claiming it is true and you need to own the fact that your belief is no better than what you are investing it in. No. our belief doesn't change things. Jesus either is God or He is not.
- 2. The second silly thing that gets said is, "He was a great moral teacher, but he is not God." Slow down and think that through.

X. If you are auditing Easter – you are not here is awe and in worship, blown away by Jesus and his victory and the grace he extends to you - then I can only guess you in one of four other camps.

A. You do not buy it – and are not willing to look further. OK, I hope you will reconsider next year when we meet again. Thanks for tuning in. Really. You listened. I am humbled.

B. You do not buy it but you are open to talking more. Great. Here is my offer, tonight I am hosting an online discussion to talk more.

1. I wrote a book to lay out the claims about Christ as clearly as I know how, and I often hold six week discussion groups for skeptics – these are groups where you can ask questions and raise objections and where your opinion is respected. Now, because of COVID we cannot met right now, but I started offering these discussions online. So, if you want to attend the first one – it's free and it's tonight at 7 - click the box and we'll send you a zoom link. The format will depend a bit on how many tune in, but the goal will be around answering your questions. If you are a skeptic, I hope you'll invest another hour and show up tonight.

C. A third group – there are those who believe. And then there are others: some say – I am not interested in talking more. I did my time. I earned Easter brunch. Leave me alone. A second group is skeptical but willing to talk more. A third group is made up of those of you say: you know what, I have taken my eye off the ball. I do believe, and I used to be connected at a church and in a small group and serving others and, well, life sort of crowded those things out. But COVID – or Easter, or whatever – has persuaded

me that I need to make some adjustments. I do believe, but I need to get back to church or to serving or whatever. If this is you, click ....

D. The final group are those ready to sign up now. You are ready to step over the line. And so, I am going to end my sermon by giving you a chance to place your faith in Christ.

1. A while ago I had an ongoing dialogue with an older woman who occasionally attended church. .

XI. Heavenly Father, I am stepping over the line. I am reaching out. I am going to stop running. I hardly know what that means, but I know:

- A. I want to be forgiven of the bad I have done
- B. I want to gain eternal life
- C. I want you to shape and guide me to make me more like Christ
- D. Father, give me a new heart, a clean start, lead me forward.