

I. Set Up:

A. Good morning. Welcome. He is Risen.

B. In just a bit, Mike will be directing us to a classic Easter passage – it's from John 20 and it completes the series we have been doing on seven aspects of Jesus from the Gospel of John.

II. Good morning. Happy Easter. Greetings to those joining us online, and to those joining from Crossroads, Highland Park or Vernon Hills. And... my annual greeting to those who are here against your will. Who are here because someone – often a Mom, occasionally a dad, could also be a spouse or – but someone has made it clear that your life will be better if you take one for the team and show up. Special greetings to you. You will survive. Brunch is just around the corner.

III. I want to start by saying a few words about words. We live in a world of words. Billions and trillions of them.

A. Lots of words from lots of people.

1. Some are written. Some are spoken.

2. Some are bound in a book, some are tweeted.

3. Some are whispered, some are shouted.

4. Some are shared with a few. Some are shared with many.

5. Some are funny. Some are sad.

6. Some are important. Some are not.

7. Some are hopeful, some are devastating.

8. Some are helpful, some are destructive.

9. Some convey truth – they align with reality. Some do not, and it seems increasingly hard to know which are which.

B. You are surrounded by words. And so, one of your challenges is to figure out which words matter. Which ones to pay attention to. Which ones to think about. Which ones to meditate on. Which ones to base your life on.

C. My challenge today is to persuade you that a certain set of words – found in John 20 - are true and important. They are the words found in John 20. They are the words about Jesus defeating death. They are words from God and they change everything. They are words that speak to

D. To quote Jaroslav Pelikan, a prominent Yale historian of intellectual history. “If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen – nothing else matters.

E. That is, if Jesus rose from the dead, that changes everything. We have every reason to accept that he is who He claimed to be and we need to adjust our lives accordingly. And likewise, if he did not rise from the dead, nothing that he said matters.

F. I believe – like Tom who shared a bit of his story – that He did rise from the dead and that who He is and what he said is of greatest importance. I believe there is a way forward (one shaped by hope

IV. If you were here last week, you know I did a quick pass over most of the Bible.

A. My goal was to explain the story to you – to show you how everything fits together. To make it clear that the Bible is not a jumbled collection of words. It's not a grab bag of inspirational stories, morality lessons and rules. It is a message from God for you. It is God's revelation of himself and his directions to us. It's divine revelation about what is going on and how life works. The Bible is the revelation of God that unfolds in various stories and in different genre – but it is one big story. And it is about Jesus.

B. Over the last two months, we've been walking through the Gospel of John – which is one of the New Testament books that focus on the life of Jesus. There are four of them, and their stated goal is to help us understand who Jesus is and what He did so that we will follow Him. This is the seventh message in that series.

1. In the first, which was from John 1, we noted that Jesus existed as God before time began. Before he showed up as a baby.

2. In the second sermon, also from John 1, we noted that at a certain point – while remaining fully God, Jesus became fully human.

3. In the third we explored his work as a teacher – a Rabi. He spent his professional life explaining things to people, mostly he taught about himself. Which surprises people. He did teach about other things – He taught about his father; he taught about how to live; he taught about how to treat others; He taught about what happens when we die. It was all true and riveting and he drew big crowds and people were always amazed at his power and authority. But mostly he taught about himself.

4. From John 4 we saw that he was on a mission. He was very up front about what he was doing. About why He showed up. Why he left heaven to come down to this broken world. His assignment was to restore people with God. And to do that he would have to die.

5. In John 5 we saw that he was a rebel – He didn't fit neatly into the systems of his day. He challenged – indeed, he threatened - the ideas and power structures of his day. He wasn't just a nice guy. You generally do not crucify nice guys who are telling people to be nice and use their inside voice.

6. Finally, last week we jumped to John 19 – and I noted that in addition to being God and man and a teacher and a rebel, he was a sacrifice. That he died on a cross to pay our debt.

a) One of the big things people get wrong – maybe you? - is they think the message from Jesus is “try harder to be better. To be nicer and more religious.”

b) That is not what he taught. He was quite clear that we could try very hard to be very good and we would fail. Always. No exceptions. We are not going to be reconciled to God through our efforts. We are way too broken to fix ourselves. We can only be restored – rescued, redeemed, forgiven, adopted into the family of God - through the work of Christ. That is why he had showed up.

c) Our works count. Our efforts matter. The decisions you make to do the right thing. To care for others. To put the needs of others ahead of your own. Those do matter. But the equation is not Faith + Works = Salvation. The equation is: Faith = Salvation + Works. We need to put our faith in Jesus.

V. Today - in our seventh look at who Jesus is – we turn to John 20, where we read about Jesus defeating death. We read about the events of the first Easter Sunday.

A. Last Sunday we celebrated the fact that he had paraded into Jerusalem in advance of the Passover – that he had enjoyed a Triumphal entry. A lot happened during the next few days.

B. On Monday he marched to the temple, where he overturned the tables. On Tuesday and Wednesday, he set up shop next to the Temple, where he taught, healed people and offered forgiveness of sins – in other words, where he set himself up as a rival to Judaism. He would go so far as to claim to be the new Temple.

C. On Thursday night he celebrated the Passover with his disciples and then retreated to pray, while Judas betrayed him. He was then arrested and marched back and forth between Jewish religious and political leaders and the Roman governor.

D. He was eventually sentenced to death, beaten, whipped and marched to Golgotha, where He was stripped and then nailed to a cross.

1. This was all very standard Roman protocol, by the way. A very public and grimly efficient execution. One designed to inflict great pain, fear and humiliation. One designed to be so bad that it kept everyone else in line.

E. In Christ's case it worked. When they came to break his legs - so as to speed up his death – they discovered that He was already dead. Just to be sure, they thrust a spear in his side – and blood and water came out. (If you want to read the Journal of the American Medical Association's pathological report on this, you can. I'll save you time. The Mayo doctors who read the Gospel accounts and then wrote about it medically said, He was clearly dead).

F. At that point, a few of his followers – not any of the apostles, they seemed to be in various states of shock and hiding – a few others had his body removed from the cross and quickly attended to and placed it in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

1. They needed to be done with all of this before Sundown, which is when the Sabbath began. If they were in contact with a dead body on the Sabbath they they were deemed ritually unclean and could not go to the Temple that day. And since this was Passover weekend – one of the key days to go to the Temple – they needed to get Jesus into the tomb quickly.

2. So they rushed the process and quickly placed his body in a borrowed tomb.

3. It is worth noting that the Pharisees then asked Pilate to place a guard at the tomb to be sure nothing happened to the body.

4. A guard was placed there – either a unit of the Jewish Temple guard or a unit of Roman Praetorian soldiers. It's hard to tell who was placed there. But something happened all the same. Everyone agrees to this. It's not clear what – but we know that the tomb ends up empty.

VI. I am reading from John 20

A. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

B. Let me suggest that had they ever found the body – which the Roman and Jewish authorities clearly were motivated to find – we would not be here today. There would be no story to tell.

C. About a month ago I got an email from a friend I had not talked to in over forty years. We started spending time together around the time I started considering the claims of Christ. He was – and is - an atheist. And when I eventually made a decision to become a Christian, he was not happy. This did not end our friendship, which simply went in different directions over time.

1. By the way, my take is that most people today are less likely to be atheists than they are to be apathy-eist. That is, they are unlikely to take a hard look at things and decide – for intellectual reasons – that there isn’t a God. They are more likely to get busy with other things, or to be disappointed by the church, or confused by events and drift away.

2. An agnostic says, “I don’t know if there is a god. I’m not sure.”

- a) Some in this camp are trying to figure it out.

- b) Some are dogmatic agnostics – that is, they are absolutely convinced that no one can be absolutely certain of anything. These are among the people that make me want to require a course in philosophy for everyone.

- c) You cannot be absolutely certain that no one can be absolutely certain. But that is a different sermon.

3. Agnostics do not know. The Greek alpha – the “a” - negates the meaning of what follows. In this case, gnosis is the Greek term for knowledge. So an A-agnostic is someone who does not know.

4. An a-theist is – technically – someone who is certain that there is no god.

5. At the time my friend was a pretty hard-core atheist. I sense he is less strident in his atheism today. But he is clear that he does not believe in the God of the Bible and he suggested that when we get together we have a debate over values and morality, consciousness and free will.

6. I said, “I’m not your guy.” That is a collection of words I am exhausted by. And I have been in those discussions enough to know that neither of us will persuade the other.

7. When it comes to debates, I am little Johnny One Note. It’s all about Jesus. I am with Pelikan, “If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if he is not risen, nothing else matters.”

D. The big questions pivot around Jesus. Either he was God or he wasn’t. Either he was on a rescue mission from Heaven or He wasn’t. Either he rose from the dead or he didn’t.

1. If he did, discussions about values have to be shaped by what He says we should value. And if he didn’t, who cares what he says. He was either a liar or

crazy. After all, he claimed to be God and said he was going to defeat death. If he wasn't and he didn't, why care about anything else he said?

2. Men and women, please understand, I am not setting up this argument. This is the argument found in the Bible. This is the argument Paul makes in I Corinthians 15. It all pivots on Jesus – and Jesus pivots on the resurrection.

E. ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

1. This was likely John. He was the youngest. And he was writing this. He does so later. He's now older.

2. By the time he gets around to writing this, all of the other disciples have died – for the story. They were put to death for preaching and teaching that: 1) Jesus was God; and 2) that he defeated death.

3. Which means, it's clear they believed Jesus rose from the dead. This doesn't mean it's true. But it means they sure thought it was true. Those closest to the events – those who spent the most time with Jesus – believed he was God and that he rose from the dead.

F. So, Peter and John run to the tomb. John gets there first, but he stops. Verse 5 reads: He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

G. Then Peter shows up – verse 6: Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. Peter was not much for caution or reflection. As a younger man he was never one for being circumspect. He raced right in. He saw the strips of linen lying there,⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. They do not know what to think or what to do.

H. ¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. It's been a very emotional few days for her. And now this. Now, insult to injury. They have desecrated his body. The Jews were rigorous about protocol around a dead body. She is devastated.

I. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

J. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

K. "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

L. ¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

M. Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

N. ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

O. She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

P. ¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Q. ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

VII. So, I want to be sure you understand all of this:

A. What we are reading is one of four, first century accounts about the life and death of Jesus – a Jewish rabi who claimed to be God on a mission to redeem us.

B. He claimed that He had existed forever as the Son of God, and that He had been sent by his Father to rescue and redeem us. He taught that he went into Jerusalem to die for our sins and that he would rise again. This account claims that He did just that.

C. This is not a metaphorical passage. The claim is not that we can find hope and renewal in spring flowers and tomorrow’s sunrise. The claim is not that we will live on in the memories of friends. The claim is that Jesus defeated death and that He came back to life with a physical body – and that we can as well.

D. It is worth noting that everyone agrees that the tomb was empty – including the Jews and Romans, for whom this was bad news.

1. This is what historians consider rock solid information. It is information that they admit to their embarrassment.

2. The disciples were surprised. As Jews they were set up to be the last to believe that God could show up on earth. There was one God, he was in Heaven and he was unapproachable. But they began to boldly proclaim that Jesus was also God.

E. It is worth noting that there are several theories about what might have happened: 1) that someone stole the body; 2) that everyone went to the wrong tomb; and that 3) Jesus didn’t die. But these claims fall apart under simple cross-examination, not just because they were flimsy and nonsensical, but also because it wasn’t just that no one could find the body, Jesus showed up, was seen by hundreds of people and spent much of the next forty days with the disciples.

F. It is worth noting that the disciples were changed men and that the movement they started – the church – continues to this day.

G. It is worth noting the claim is not that you or I rose from the dead, but that Jesus – who claimed to be God and who taught with unmatched wisdom and power, and who perfectly fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and who said that He would rise from the dead – is the one who appears to have risen from the dead.

H. It is worth noting that Jesus has turned out to be the most influential person who ever lived.

I. It is worth noting that he sets out an offer to you: follow and gain eternal life. Be forgiven of your sins and start down a path towards a full and final reconciliation with God.

VIII. So let me bring this home. Men and women, let me be as clear as I can be. The claims of Christ needs your attention. Some of you are looking in all the wrong places.

- A. The reason you are working so hard – or cramming your days with entertainment, or looking for love in the wrong places, or drinking too much – is because you are trying the wrong things. Like Tom – who shared his story – you need Jesus.
- B. My story is different than Tom's. I had also walked away from the church, but I came back at an early age because I got captivated by Jesus, and the more I looked the better He got. You need to put your weight down on Jesus.
- IX. While I am here, let me say, it's possible that Christianity is not true.
- A. There may be no god. No life after death. No transcendent truth of any kind.
1. Your life may have no lasting meaning. You may be only a body. There may be no higher cause. No deeper meaning.
 2. We may be nothing more than the temporary pinnacle of the evolutionary process. Our children may be nothing more than little hairless apes.
- B. Maybe that is the decision you reach. I can respect that. It makes me sad. I think you are wrong. But if you walk away, at least you are being consistent. Or this account may be true.
- C. What it can't be, is only casually important. What makes no sense is the growing apathy-ism of this moment.
- D. If you believe, put your weight down. Move forward. Take the next steps. Get baptized. Join the church. Get into a Bible study. Be a Christ-follower. Live today in light of eternity.
- E. If you do not know if it's true, take a next step.
- X. Let me suggest, the secularism of the moment does not seem to be working. Many of you are a bit overwhelmed by all that is going on. Or underwhelmed by life in general. There is growing anxiety. The way forward is with Christ. I believe that as strongly as I believe anything.
- XI. John's account of Jesus life is where I turn to end. The last two verses of his book read:
- A. ³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**
- XII. I am going to turn things over to the Campus pastors now, who are going to share just a bit of their story.