

Fil-Am Community Church

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HE CAME, HE SOARED, HE CONQUERED

(On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father)

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.” (Acts 2:32-33 NIV)

Let me read to you the passage on which this message is based this morning.

As we continue our series in The Apostles' Creed I would like to examine today why we can believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended into hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

It was late Thursday afternoon three years ago. The phone rang. I picked it up and heard the voice of my mom. She said, “Hello, Rolly. I have some bad news. Your Tita Auring in Chicago just died about an hour ago.”

All of us have had similar news at one time or another. We have all received news of the death of someone we knew personally or at least knew about. Some of us have had a close relative who has died. And for the past several weeks we have heard and read the news about the devastation brought about by the Ebola virus in West Africa killing more than 4000 people and one here in the States. And we also saw on TV pictures and videos of thousands of people who have been killed by the ISIS terrorist group.

We have all felt the sting of death. But for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, there is a balm. A sweet balm. And that sweet balm is. . . the resurrection.

The resurrection is all we have to cling to when death has stripped a loved one from our arms. Without the resurrection, our lives would have no meaning. And yet, there are times we act like we don’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Like we’re not totally convinced of its reality.

In one of the great novels by George MacDonald, a Scottish writer from the 1800’s, an agnostic questions a young clergyman and asks, “Tell me honestly, do you really believe one word of all that? Did you ever notice how these Christian people, who profess to believe that their great man has conquered death, and all that rubbish—did you never observe the way they talk about death, or the eternity

they say they expect beyond it? They talk about it in the abstract at one moment, but when it comes down to real life, in their hearts they have no hope, and in their minds they have no courage to face the facts of existence . . . They don't really believe everything they say, or what they hear from the pulpit.”

The problem with the young agnostic, and the problem with many like him today is: they hear Christians talking about the resurrection, heaven, eternal life, and all of the other wonderful tenets of the Christian faith, but they do not see those same people living out that hope in their day to day lives. They talk about these things as though they are realities, but when faced with a threatening situation there are some who fall apart as though Jesus' victory over death were not true.

This morning, I'd like to present the case that Jesus Christ truly rose from the dead. And that his resurrection that occurred more than 2000 years ago means a lot to us today.

The first point I want to make about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is:

1. **IT IS AS REAL AS THE HEADLINES OF TODAY.**

I read the story of this pastor who recounted the time he spoke one Sunday morning on the resurrection and after church a young woman came up to him and said, “Pastor, I sat there with tears in my eyes this morning thinking how wonderful it would be if what you said were true.” Of course, he was surprised.

You see, the resurrection is more than symbolism for a beautiful thought, it is reality. Someone has said, “The real problem of advancing the kingdom of God is not the unbelief of the world, but the half-belief of the church.”

How we view the reality of the resurrection is extremely important, for the resurrection is at the center of our faith. You see, we all understand that Christ's death on the cross is very important, but it cannot be the end of our faith, the resurrection must be where our faith ultimately ends. If Christ merely died for us,

he would be no more or less than any other great man, but he did more: he rose from the dead. He conquered hell and the grave, and made eternity possible. If Christ only died, then he is only a dead prophet. But if he did conquer death, he is the giver of resurrection life which is eternal. Amen?

The thing which completely confounded the people living during the time of the early church was the tremendous courage and boldness with which the apostles and early believers defied the threats of punishment and death. The fear of death no longer dominated them. They were not intimidated by the kingdom of the world, for something very profound had happened to them.

They had witnessed a living Christ — after an awful death. People who saw their courage they themselves began to put their trust in Christ. In our day, however, seeing the lack of that kind of courage and faith has led many to disbelieve the reality of it all. When they look at people who cannot witness to the goodness of God in their lives, then their skepticism is justified. People, you see, are attracted to a faith that is worth dying for, a faith that overcomes the fear of people and the fear of death, but they are repulsed by a faith that is so weak it falls apart in adversity, or dares not speak of God for fear of rejection.

The early believers baffled, and even enraged, the world of their day with their defiant courage. They couldn't understand why Christians would rather fall to the sword or be eaten alive by lions than renounce their faith. What they didn't know was that the early Christian martyrs did not fear death because of the hope in the resurrection. In contrast, the world of our day often laughs at Christians who are afraid of life, let alone death.

The reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ should be the single most challenging and motivating principle of our lives. For it is the resurrection that gives us the promise of life beyond the grave and a purpose beyond this world. If it is true, then there can be no event in history, no technological achievement, no

philosophical idea, or religious teaching as important as the fact of the resurrection. Nothing else has the potential to give us hope and purpose, to make our lives worth living, to change us entirely, as the power of Christ to overcome the power of death.

In 1876, a band of thieves tried to steal Lincoln's corpse and hold it for ransom but they were caught by the secret service. Grave-robbers were becoming more prevalent at that time. In 1901, 36 years after Lincoln's assassination, it was decided to reconstruct his grave in Springfield so that it could never be disturbed again. The plan was to bury the coffin in a huge cage ten feet deep and then encased in concrete. While the repair and reconstruction was going on, Lincoln's coffin lay temporarily in a grave a few feet away. Finally, on September 26, 1901, all was ready. Because of the permanency of this burial, a discussion arose among those present as to whether the coffin should be opened. Some people argued that the remains should be identified due to rumors around the country that Mr. Lincoln was not the body in the box. Other people thought opening the casket would be a violation of privacy. In the end, it was decided to open the coffin. So the body was exhumed and checked to make sure that it was him. It was.

Three days after the death of Christ, rumors began to spread throughout the land of Israel that the body of Jesus was not in the grave. Only this time, there were no witnesses who could say they had seen his body. To the contrary, many witnesses claimed to have seen him out of his grave, and talked with him after his resurrection. As great a man as Lincoln was, there were witnesses to prove he was still in his grave many years after his death. And so, if a member of our government were to cry out for help to Lincoln, there would be no answer. If someone calls to Einstein for knowledge and wisdom there will only be empty silence. If someone calls to Ghandi for justice, no help will come. But if someone calls upon Jesus Christ, there is instantly available a power that can change life,

influence destiny, and open eternity — all because he lives. The Bible says, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* (Romans 10:13)

It is unthinkable to only accept the resurrection as a nice idea, or a wonderful symbolic story. It is not a symbol, it is a reality.

If it is not true the whole Christian faith is a farce. But if it is true, then it is the single most important event in history, for on the day of the resurrection death died, hell was robbed, paradise was opened, true life began with new purpose and meaning, and hope dawned upon the human soul.

The second point I want to make about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is:

2. IT IS THE CORE DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

I heard about a grandfather who wanted to see how much his four-year-old granddaughter knew about the resurrection of Jesus. He put her on his lap and asked, “Julie, why do we celebrate Easter?” Without hesitating, she said, “Jesus was crucified. After He died, His body was put into a grave. They rolled a big stone in front of the opening. A bunch of soldiers guarded the tomb. On the third day, there was a big earthquake and the stone rolled away.”

Grandpa was pleased with how much his granddaughter knew about the Easter story but then she continued, “When the earthquake happened, the entire town came out by the grave. And if Jesus came out and saw His shadow, they knew there would be six more weeks of winter!” At least she had part of the story right.

But we as Christians should have the whole story right and believe it to be true. And, in fact, can defend it against those who claim otherwise. Theologian Gerald O’Collins put it like this: “In a profound sense, Christianity without the resurrection is not simply Christianity without its final chapter. It is not Christianity at all.” That is just how essential it is. In fact, our faith stands and falls on this very important doctrine of our faith.

Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:17-18, “ *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* ”

Paul is right. We are to be the most pitied of all people in the world because we are putting our hope on something that is maybe just a fantasy. Paul wrote this at a time when Christians were being persecuted left and right and murdered for their belief in a Savior who rose from the dead. How about us? We come here every Sunday to worship Jesus who we believe is alive just like that banner says and I prepare sermons because I believe Jesus is alive. If Jesus did not really rise from the dead, then this is all an exercise in futility. What in the world are we doing here then?

Because we believe that Jesus is alive. Amen? And this belief has persisted through the centuries although people of different persuasions – Kings, Lords, religious leaders, atheists, anti-Christians, cults, occults, New Agers, etc. – have sought to discredit the Christian faith. This just shows us the power of the resurrection. It is able to withstand the test of time and the arguments of the unbelievers.

Jesus saw his resurrection as the reason for his coming and the sign of the validity of his claims to be the promised Messiah and Son of God. To those who wanted to take his life he said, “*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days*” (John 2:19). When asked by the Pharisees to show them a sign to validate his claims, he foretold his resurrection by saying,

“*A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign. But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matthew 12:39,40). He promised his

disciples he would rise from the dead when he said to them, *“The Son of Man will be betrayed. . . and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life ”* (Matthew 20:18,19). Jesus saw the resurrection as his mission, for it was in the resurrection that he would overcome sin, conquer death, and offer eternal life.

He said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”* (John 11:25).

The third thing I want to say about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is:

3. IT IS THE DISTINGUISHING MARK OF CHRISTIANITY.

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher and skeptic, was once belittling English writer, Thomas Carlyle, for his faith in Jesus Christ. Comte suggested that he might start a religion of his own to replace Christianity.

"Very good," responded Carlyle. "All you need to do is to be crucified, rise again the third day and get the world to believe that you are still alive. Then your new religion just might have a chance." Obviously Mr. Comte never followed through with the suggestion. He realized its impossibility. But the Christian faith is built on the fact that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead, and that he is still alive changing people's lives today.

When modern minds try to explain away the resurrection, one of the means they use is to say that what really happened on Easter was that the disciples devised a "Passover Plot."

That is to say, they secretly stole the body of Christ out of the tomb and hid it so well that no one has ever been able to find it. According to the theory, the disciples never breathed a word, to their dying day, about what they had really done, and deceived the whole world into believing Jesus had risen from the dead. But Chuck Colson, in his book "Loving God", tells how impossible this would be from his own experience. Colson, as you remember, was Special Counsel to the

President during the Nixon administration. He and the other members of the Nixon cabinet were a highly committed group of men with a sense of destiny concerning Nixon's term as President. They had each attained positions of tremendous power and privilege. But after the Watergate scandal things began to fall apart.

Colson describes the scene in his book, and I quote "...even the prospect of jeopardizing the President we'd worked so hard to elect, of losing the prestige, power, and personal luxury of our offices was not enough incentive to make this group of men contain a lie...after just a few weeks the natural human instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one by one, deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, turned their backs on the power, prestige, and privileges", unquote (p.67).

What does this have to do with the resurrection? Just this, as Colson states it and I quote him again: "If one is to assail the historicity of the Resurrection and therefore the deity of Christ, one must conclude that there was a conspiracy — a cover-up if you will — by eleven men with the complicity of up to five hundred others. To subscribe to this argument, one must also be ready to believe that each disciple was willing to be ostracized by friends and family, live in daily fear of death, endure prisons, live penniless and hungry, sacrifice family, be tortured without mercy, and ultimately die — all without ever once renouncing that Jesus had risen from the dead ". Colson continues by saying, and I quote "This is why the Watergate experience is so instructive for me.

If John Dean and the rest of us were so panic-stricken, not by the prospect of beatings and execution, but by political disgrace and a possible prison term, one can only speculate about the emotions of the disciples. . . . Yet they clung tenaciously to their enormously offensive story that their leader had risen from his ignoble death and was alive — and was the Lord" (p.68), unquote.

If the disciples were involved in a lie they pulled off the biggest cover-up in history. But look at them before the resurrection. One of the loyal twelve betrayed Him. The strongest of the disciples, and their natural leader, denied Him. The rest simply deserted Him. But after the resurrection there is an amazing transformation.

They are, without exception, willing to endure every form of hardship, suffering, imprisonment, and even death. Only one thing can explain the change in their lives: the resurrection of their living Lord.

Folks, one final thought about the resurrection of Christ is that it assures us God has accepted Christ's sacrifice for our sins. The resurrection is proof that Jesus is who he claimed to be – the Messiah – the Savior of mankind – and that his sacrifice on the cross was pleasing to God. As long as Jesus lay in the tomb he was just another tragic religious figure who suffered a martyr's death. But when God raised Jesus from the dead, it was His stamp of "paid in full" on the invoice of our sin debt. Now, believing sinners can be certain that in Christ they are justified, that they are declared “not guilty”.

The Bible says, "*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification*" (Rom. 4:25).

I want to ask you a very important question this morning. Do you know Jesus Christ? I don't mean, “do you know about him?” Do you truly know Jesus Christ?

You see, we can know about someone, and not truly know them. Barack Obama, Michael Jordan, Jennifer Lawrence, LeBron James, Bill Gates.

These are people that we know something about, but do any of us really know them? You can know Jesus Christ. You can know his love, his care, his healing, and his forgiveness. He says; “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*” (Rev. 3:20 NKJV).