



The Heart of Easter

Text: John 19 - 21; Selected Scriptures
Series: Gospel of John [#24; Easter Sunday]
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Theme: Jesus' resurrection is the heart of Easter.

Introduction

Today we are going to think about the heart of Easter. What is at the center, at the core of Easter? There are many different answers to this question. Some think of a long weekend and the beginning of spring-like weather. And of course, there are Easter eggs, candy, a special time for children and families, and favorite foods of the season.

Many people have memories of past Easter celebrations. One church has a special Easter memory. Their Easter Sunday service began with the choir at the back, marching up to the front, single file, singing *Up From The Grave He Arose*. The first lady in the procession was wearing shoes with very slender heels. As she marched down the aisle, looking straight ahead, she stepped onto a large air vent in the middle of the aisle, and the heel on one shoe got stuck in the grate. Without missing a beat she slipped out of the shoe and continued straight ahead. *So far so good!*

The man following her noticed this and, without losing a step, reached down and pulled up her shoe. *Quick thinking! But* the large grate came up with the shoe! He kept going, somehow holding the shoe and grate in one hand and his music in the other. The next man, who hadn't noticed any of this as he was looking at his music, marched right into the now open vent and disappeared from sight.

The rest of the choir, fortunately, avoided this pitfall. When the entire choir was up at the front and everyone had sung *Hallelujah! Christ Arose!* a voice was heard shouting, "I hope you all are out of the way, 'cause I'm coming out now." A little girl, close to the aisle, shouted excitedly, "Come on Jesus! We'll stay out of the way!"¹

What an Easter memory!

We have our own memories of Easter. But what really is the heart of Easter? What is it really about? Beyond the special times, the embarrassing times, the memories and the traditions, Jesus' resurrection is the heart of Easter. That is what we are looking at today.

The reality of the resurrection.

We accept Christ's resurrection by faith and by facts. Let's start with the facts. There are all kinds of sweeping, wrong and ridiculous statements that are made about Jesus' resurrection. A survey carried out in 2006 reported that 22% of Albertans believed the hoax of *The Da Vinci Code* that the Jesus' death was faked and that he married and had a family. That was the highest percentage of all the provinces in Canada.² I don't know what that says about us here in Alberta.

Many people have seriously studied the historical records of Jesus' resurrection. 165 years ago a scholar wrote,

“I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God [has] given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.”⁴

Today I want to just outline a few important facts. Let's start with the reality of Jesus' death. Some, again, have suggested Jesus did not really die. The records and common sense refute this idea. John's gospel tells us that right after Jesus cried out “It is finished,” He “gave up His spirit,” or died.⁴ The Roman soldiers overseeing Jesus' crucifixion recognized that Jesus died.⁵ Jesus' body was prepared and placed in a tomb.⁶

Now we go to the reality of the resurrection. The religious leaders feared Jesus' disciples might steal His body and claim a resurrection. So the tomb was secured with a seal and guards.⁷ But in the morning, on Easter morning, the stone was moved away. Matthew 28 tell us that “There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it” (2, NIV). The tomb was empty. The angel moved the stone not to let Jesus out—He was already gone—but to let people in, to let them see the evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus then appeared to many people. He appeared to the disciples a number of times, as we see here in John's gospel.⁸ In Acts 1:3 Luke tells us that Jesus “presented Himself alive” to the apostles “... appearing to them over a period of forty days...” The apostle Paul wrote that after His resurrection Jesus once appeared to 500 of His followers at one time.⁹ This is just the beginning of evidence. Read, think. Ask the hard questions. Search fully. The resurrection of Jesus is *established by the facts*.

The reality of Jesus' resurrection is also established by faith. Both facts and faith are critically important. There is a good example of this combination from Easter morning here in John's gospel in chapter 20, beginning at verse 8, as we read earlier. That's page 880 in the pew Bibles.

“Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. *He saw and believed.* (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)” (8-9, NIV).

There was much John, “this other disciple,” did not understand when this took place, but he saw the *evidence*, recalled the Scriptures, Jesus’ teaching, and he *believed*. And that is still the critical issue today for every one of us: do we see, look at the *facts*, and then do we *believe*?

Some responses to Jesus’ resurrection.

Now let’s look at some responses to Jesus’ resurrection. We can start with the religious leaders. Back up to Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified. The religious leaders, I am sure, breathed a collective sigh of relief. Smiles and high-fives all around. “Finally he’s out of the way! Now we can get back to normal!” But that was short-lived. It seemed that they had haunting questions, fears and doubts. So, as we noted earlier, they went to Pilate and asked for a seal on the tomb, and guards.

But seals and soldiers could not hold Jesus in that tomb. He rose from the dead, quietly passing through the stone, past the soldiers, invisible to them. The guards told the religious leaders the truth, that a great earthquake struck, an angel appeared and rolled the stone away, the tomb was empty and they were knocked unconscious.

Now what? What were these leaders to do? They bribed the guards to say that Jesus’ disciples stole the body while they were asleep.¹⁰

Even the reality of Jesus’ resurrection attested to by this group of career soldiers did not break through the hard hearts of these religious leaders. They rejected Jesus. They rejected His resurrection conquering death and sin.

Now we turn to the followers of Jesus. Some women who came to the tomb were the first to see Jesus after His resurrection.¹¹ They came to the tomb early that morning and saw the stone had been rolled away. On their way to report this to the disciples Jesus met them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my followers to go on to Galilee, and they will see me there” (NCV).¹² They responded with a mix of “fear and great joy.”¹³

Then, let’s think about the disciples. They had more questions than answers. When Jesus appeared to the two on the road to Emmaus, then 10 of them, and next to the 11, they saw... and they believed,¹⁴ they *knew* He is Messiah, the Savior, God! They dedicated themselves to Him in a new way and were used by Him to turn their world upside down.

The importance of the resurrection.

Jesus’ resurrection is the heart of Easter. There are literally dozens of reasons from the Bible why it is important. I will briefly point us to just four today, noting some key texts. First, the resurrection is important because it declares Jesus Christ is God the Son, the Savior, the Lord. In the first sermon of the church the apostle Peter declared that God raised Jesus from the dead, that Jesus is the Lord King David wrote about, that He has ascended

to heaven and is both Lord and Savior.¹⁵ The apostle Paul writes in the opening lines of Romans that Christ Jesus was declared the Son of God by God raising Him from the dead and it is through the risen Christ that we have received God's grace.¹⁶ Without the resurrection Jesus would have been the victim of death rather than the Victor over it. His resurrection tells us that Jesus is God the Son, the Savior, the Lord.

Secondly, the resurrection of Jesus is essential to our salvation. Paul preached that through the resurrected Jesus there is forgiveness of sins.¹⁷ Then he wrote "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."¹⁸ If Christ was not raised we are following a lie, still in our sins and wasting our time.

A third key point about the importance of the resurrection is that it gives us new life and a new way of life. Many of us know John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." There is no other way to new, God-pleasing life. As John wrote, "... God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."¹⁹ In Romans 6 Paul tells us that believers have been raised spiritually with Christ so that we "now may also live new lives" (4, NLT). Sin no longer has to dominate us (8-11).

And the fourth key point for today is that the resurrection is important because it gives us a glorious future with Christ. Here we probably start thinking about heaven, being forever with Christ, family, friends and believers from the ages. There's much we don't know about that, but what we know is exciting, mind-riveting. Romans chapter 8 tells us we are God's children, *heirs* of God with Christ, and that we will be *glorified* with Him (17-18). Paul wrote to Timothy that we will live with Christ and "also *reign* with Him."²⁰

Your response to Jesus' resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is real and critically important. People have responded in many different ways. Now all these years later, today on this Easter Sunday, what is *your* response to the resurrected, living Jesus? Do you *know* that Christ is risen? That He is alive? Do you *know* that He offers to forgive your sins through His death and resurrection? Do you *know* He wants to have a relationship with you—for all of your life on earth, and then forever in heaven?

Then, beyond knowing the truth, what have you *done* with this truth? What are you *going to do* with this truth, not someday, not maybe, but *now, today*. The religious establishment on the original Easter knew the truth; they rejected it, and died in their sins. Jesus did not want that for them, but they refused to step out in faith and believe. He does not want that for you either. What is your response today?

Jesus' promise to you is clear. In John 20 Jesus appeared to ten of the eleven disciples, Thomas being absent. When they told Thomas, he said, "I'll believe it's true when I see it!

When I see Him, see and touch the scars from the nails and spear, then, and only then will I believe!” Later Jesus appeared to the eleven, Thomas now present. Without Thomas saying a word, Jesus invited him to inspect his scars, and to believe. Thomas, seeing, said, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus then asked him, “Because you see, is that why you now believe?”

Then Jesus made a statement which is addressed directly to every generation, to every person from that day on—a statement directly to everyone of us here today. He said, “Blessed are they who do not see, and yet believe.” There is a blessing of God upon everyone who hears the good news of Jesus dying for our sin, of being raised from the dead in victory over sin and death, and who, without seeing the resurrected Jesus, believes.

It all comes down to your response to Jesus. *What is it?* There are only two options. To believe or not believe. To be forgiven or not be forgiven. To have everlasting life with God or not have everlasting life with God.

This is the most important decision you will ever make. You may have tried to ignore it or postpone it for any one of a million different reasons. Enough of that. Come to God now, tell Him,

“I believe that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead for me. I put my trust in Him. Forgive me of my sins. Give me life with you now and forever.”

And then Easter will be your *birthday*—your spiritual birthday. The Bible tells us the angels of heaven will rejoice with you, as will God’s people here.

Conclusion

Jesus’ resurrection is the heart of Easter. In the next quiet moments, reflect and respond to God. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, thank God again for His matchless grace, His immeasurable love for you in Jesus. Reaffirm your commitment to live all of your life in light of what God has done for You, and to truly be a bright light for Him in this dark world.

If you have not yet said yes to Jesus, do so now. You can do that where you are. You can talk with a believer next to you and ask him or her to talk and pray with you. You can talk with me. The important thing is to make your decision as God is speaking to you now. Let’s bow our heads.

¹ Old story. Original source not known.

² “Many Canadians believe Da Vinci theory.” *National Post*. <<http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=f97e6516-8ffe-48f6-8d81-81a5f607e2de&k=79724>>. 16 April 2006. Accessed 17 April 2014.

³ Thomas Arnold, *Christian Life, Its Hopes, Its Fears, and Its Close*, 6th ed. London: T. Fellowes, 1859, pp. 15-16.

⁴ John 19:30.

⁵ John 19:32-34.

⁶ John 19:38-42.

⁷ Matthew 27:62-66.

⁸ See, for example John chapter 20 - 21.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NLT.

¹⁰ Matthew 28:11-15.

¹¹ Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18.

¹² Matthew 28:10, NCV.

¹³ Matthew 28:8.

¹⁴ Luke 24:13-35, 36-43; John 20:19 - 21:23.

¹⁵ Acts 2:22-36.

¹⁶ Romans 1:1-6.

¹⁷ Acts 13:37-38.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:17.

¹⁹ 1 John 5:11-12.

²⁰ 2 Timothy 2:12.

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