

WHY NOW NEEDS THEN

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Well happy Easter, everyone. It's great to have you here this morning. I always like Sunday mornings, but Easter – that's the best Sunday. There's just a sense of anticipation and excitement in the air. Maybe it's all the starch in the new clothes, or all the sugar the kids have been eating.

When it comes right down to it, though, you can't deny that the excitement really reaches back to where it all started. The whole concept of somebody being killed and then coming back to life is so powerful and so hopeful that you can still feel it. It fills the air. It's like if you go for a walk on the BPA trail in Federal Way, you can sometimes hear the power lines crackling overhead. There's this electricity in the air about the resurrection that you can feel 2000 years later.

In churches all across America this morning, you can be sure that preachers are talking about Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. And there's a good reason to refer to it. It's one of the most stunning portrayals of the crucifixion that has ever been made.

But I'd prefer to talk with you this morning about a different Mel Gibson movie – another cultural landmark: *Mad Max 3, Beyond Thunderdome*. Probably no other movie did a better job epitomizing everything that was strange in the '80's. Isaac looked at this picture and said, "They have strange hairstyles." But that's beside the point.

For the few of you who may not have been enlightened enough to have seen *Mad Max 3*, I'll give you a brief synopsis. The movie was set in a world after a nuclear holocaust. People had reverted to barbarianism, and everything was reduced to survival of the fittest. In the story, our hero *Mad Max*, gets banished from a rough place called *Bartertown*. His punishment is being sent off on a horse into the desert, where he finally collapses in exhaustion.

Out of nowhere, this band of children finds him and takes him to their little village in an oasis in the desert. *Max* tries to figure out how these children got where they are, because their speech is broken like they've been poorly educated and there are no adults. He eventually pieces together that in "history back" as these children say, there was a plane crash out here in the desert. Some of the people survived but were stranded. After some years there without being rescued, they settled in and had children. But most of the adults had set off to find civilization, and the rest of the adults had died off, leaving these children to fend for themselves.

So they tried to keep the story of their parents alive through an oral tradition, but with no firsthand knowledge of the outside world, and no formal education, the words didn't have the same meaning. So the story they told had deteriorated over time. They had no understanding of what an airplane really was or a city. But they'd repeat the words over

and over. They called it “the tell.” “Every night we does the tell.” It became part of the fabric of their existence, but it had no real bearing on their lives until Max came along, who they interpreted to be the captain of the plane coming back to rescue them.

Where am I going with that? Christians have been doing “the tell” for over 2000 years. Every year, if you come back to church on Easter, you’ll hear more or less the same details of Jesus’ resurrection.

But the thought occurred to me how easy it is to become like those kids. We can go over what is the story of our heritage again and again and not have it connect in any meaningful way to our lives. We can use the words without understanding them.

So this morning, the question I’d like to explore with you is this: what difference does the resurrection make in your life and mine? Why does now need then? Even if we are willing to concede that it goes down as one of the most spectacular events in all of history, it happened a long time ago on the other side of the world. What does it have to do with me as an American in the 21st century?

The death of Jesus is so central to the teaching of the church. Even if you’re only vaguely familiar with Christianity, you have probably been exposed to the basics of what his death was about. Bits of the message are everywhere. I’ve been reading the latest John Grisham novel and two characters were talking about it. There are references to it all through movies and books and our whole culture.

The gist of it is this: God created the world and people. But the first people made choices other than God, and the rest of us have been naturally inclined that way ever since – to go away from God. There’s evil bound up inside each of our hearts that no matter how hard we try, we can’t erase. And evil carries with it the consequence of death because it cuts us off from our creator God, our source of life, because he is all that is good. Evil is the antithesis of good and can’t survive in its presence. So there’s a dilemma that exists between God and people. God wants to connect with us, but he can’t without his sheer goodness overpowering us. So God said, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll send my Son, who is my very self down to earth as a human. He’ll still be God, so he’ll live a perfect life. But he’ll suffer the consequences of evil. His death can then be a substitute, because nothing in him deserved it.

So Christians believe that when we accept Christ’s death on the cross as a substitute, paying the price of our sin -- our slate is wiped clean. We are forgiven. The debt is paid. Life is given back to us. We just put our faith in the fact that God did that for us.

But that’s all related to Christ’s DEATH. Easter is about the fact that he didn’t STAY dead. How does the resurrection change things? If Jesus had just died for us and not risen again, wouldn’t the price still have been paid?

The Bible seems to think the resurrection was a pretty important piece. Paul wrote these words:

1 Corinthians 15:17

And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever.

How does it make any difference? I think one of the best ways to answer that is to look at a few people who knew Jesus, who were there when he died, then saw him and talked to him after he rose again. We can see how the fact of the resurrection impacted their lives and draw some conclusions as to what that means for us as well.

We'll take our stories from one long narrative in the book of John. Just prior to this, the group of women who had followed Jesus had come to the tomb to put spices on his body as part of their burial customs, and when they got there the body was missing. Presuming it had been stolen, which would fit all the chaos that had been happening, they go get the disciples, who are stumped by it as well. That's where we pick it up.

John 20:10-18

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

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

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

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."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

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

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

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.

Mary Magdalene goes on record as being the very first person who saw Jesus alive again. That's somewhat gratifying, because she seems to have been hit really hard by his death. Everyone else came and saw that Jesus' body was missing then went back home. But

Mary is inconsolable. She stays and can't quite believe he's gone. Not only is Jesus dead, -- she can't even get the closure she wanted of properly preparing him for burial. So she's have a hard time dealing with it.

Mary had a hard life before she met Jesus. She had been plagued by seven demons and Jesus set her free. She knows what her life was like without him and she doesn't want to go back to it.

So for her, to see Jesus alive again meant discovering **a hopeful future** . When she recognized Jesus, she went from being held in one spot by her grief, she went running to tell other people what she had seen. Yes, Jesus had saved her from her past. But now he wasn't going to leave her alone for her future either. He would be there.

I love the sequence where she doesn't quite recognize Jesus, and then he calls her name. "Mary." And she instantly says back to him, "Teacher."

Almost three years ago, my Grandma and Grandpa Cole died within days of each other. They'd been married 67 years, so it was very touching that they should die together. What has surprised me in thinking about them since then is that what I miss is hearing their voices. To never hear them again after listening to them my whole life is hard to think about. I still hear them in my head. I could be blindfolded in a room and if several people were talking, I'd know their voices in a heartbeat.

Mary knows the voice of Jesus right away, and it changes everything for her. She goes from total despair to knowing she can go on.

If Jesus had just died for our sin and left it at that, our relationship to God would be fairly academic. It would be a transaction, a contract, a legal arrangement. It would also be something tied only to the past.

But if Jesus is alive, that means he can still talk to me. Things become much more personal in the relationship. I can believe that he cares for me and that he's got something more in store for me.

Romans 8:10-11

It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!

Just like with Mary, Jesus isn't only about taking care of the demons that haunted us in the past. He's about giving us a new purpose and hope for the future. He's about speaking to us in a personal way and helping us move forward from a point of grief to a point of comfort.

Mary moves forward in her new found hope and tells the disciples like she's been asked to. But it's a different thing to have an experience like that for yourself than it is to convince a group of other people you're not just hallucinating. The disciples think she has made it all up. Until Jesus comes to them himself.

John 20:19-21

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Put yourself in the shoes of those disciples. It is now the evening of the day Jesus' body had disappeared. They're not sure if somebody stole it as a cruel joke, or maybe to try to frame them and get them in trouble. They're afraid that the religious leaders who pushed for Jesus to be executed will come looking for them at any moment, and they're hiding out. They have no plans. Mary and these other women keep telling strange stories.

Their entire world has come crashing down. They're confused and afraid. And it is at that point that Jesus shows up. And his presence there blows them away. The verse says the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. The Greek could be translated as "cheerful." It was pure happiness. They had a complete about face.

The reality of the resurrection gave them **a courageous joy** beyond anything else, and it does the same for us. If death isn't final and doesn't have the last say, what could give greater joy than that?

1 Peter 1:8

You love him even though you have never seen him; though not seeing him, you trust him; and even now you are happy with the inexpressible joy that comes from heaven itself.

So often Christianity gets turned into a list of rules and sacrifices. But at its heart, Christianity isn't about rules – it's a reason to celebrate. I'm so glad that the resurrection puts joy at the very center of our faith.

In the book of Nehemiah, it says that the joy of the Lord is our strength, and there must be real strength in the joy that the disciples felt, because it gave them courage – they were transformed from huddling in fear to being sent out by Jesus. They would really need that courage later on, because if you read the rest of the story, you'll find that the disciples faced very tough opposition everywhere they went. But the joy that came from knowing Jesus was really alive gave them courage to go up against whatever came their way.

The toughest and second oldest cross-country foot race in the United States is the Dipsea Race, held annually in California since 1905. It covers rocky, hilly terrain that is grueling and treacherous to cover when you're running.

One of the people who runs the race is Harry Cordellos, the man on the left. They made a short documentary about Harry, because he is blind and runs on the arm of a guide. Author Ann Lamott watched the movie and had this to say afterwards:

The seeing man called out every root, every rock, holding the hand of his blind friend. They ran together joyfully, the seeing man calling, "step, step, step, step, step," as they went up and down eighty degree steps and "Roots roots roots" as they navigated trails laced with huge tree roots."

Then she goes on to say this. "I know it is odd to a lot of people that I am religious – I mean, it's odd to me that I'm religious, I never meant to be. I think that at some point, a long time ago, I made a decision to believe, and then every step of the way, even through the worst of it, the two years my dad was sick with brain cancer, the last few years of my drinking, I could feel the presence of something I could turn to, something that would keep me company, give me courage, be there with me, like the seeing man in this movie. The movie so exactly captured how I feel these days, that Jesus is there everywhere I go."

Thanks to the resurrection, we have the presence of Jesus to run this race joyfully with us, to lean on and to give us courage in that joy to make it down a treacherous trail.

A hopeful future and a courageous joy. That's what the disciples were discovering about the resurrection. There was one disciple who wasn't on hand for that meeting with Jesus, though.

John 20:24-29

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas takes a lot of grief for his statements here. Calling somebody a doubting Thomas is a slam. Not exactly how anybody would want to be remembered.

But on the other hand, there's a lot to be said in Thomas' favor. He's more like us than he is not like us. When it comes to our faith, none of us wants to be duped. And yet, we sometimes act like to really believe all this stuff, we have to set aside our normal

intellectual capacities and just accept it. Thomas' experience proved that with the resurrection, we can have **a satisfied mind.**

Thomas asked for what he needed. "Show me the nail marks. Show me the gash in his side. I want to touch them for myself. Otherwise, I'm not buying it."

And you can knock him for asking the question, but at least he asked. And Jesus gave him what he needed. He said, "Okay, Thomas. Here I am. Will this do?"

It was more than enough. Thomas didn't need to touch him. He knew. He was satisfied.

Dr. James Kennedy writes these words:

The resurrection of Christ is the best established fact of antiquity. I have never met a person who has read so much as one book on the evidences for the resurrection of Christ who did not believe it. I have met many people who did not believe it, but they have never examined the evidence.

He goes on to talk about Dr. Simon Greenleaf, who was the royal professor of law at Harvard University back in the 1800s. The chief justice of the Supreme Court called Dr. Greenleaf the greatest authority on legal evidences who ever lived. His books were the standard textbooks on evidence for years. If you wanted to quote anyone in the English language as the highest possible authority on courtroom evidence it would be him.

After writing volumes on legal evidence, Dr. Greenleaf decided to expose the resurrection claim as a hoax. So he dug into his research the same way he approached any legal case. He examined the evidence for the resurrection of Christ and concluded that in any unbiased courtroom in the world, if all the evidence were presented, it would be judged to be an absolute historical fact. His mind was satisfied, and he then was faced with what to do about that fact. He could no longer deny it, so he instead committed his life to Christ.

The resurrection holds up to scrutiny. The question is what we'll do with the proof once we have it. We'll have to deal with the implications. Thomas accepted that it was real and got on board with what Jesus was doing. He found the resurrection gave him a satisfied mind.

There's one more disciple worth noting briefly. That's Peter. He had already been in on the Jesus sightings. He didn't have any trouble believing Jesus was really alive. The problem was, he had some baggage he was dealing with. Right before Jesus died, in his blackest hour, Peter abandoned him. Not just once – but three times he denied knowing him. Not only that he knew Jesus knew. Jesus heard Peter say, "I've never met the man."

So there was this mixture of relief that Jesus was alive and terrible shame for having let him down so terribly. How would Jesus react? We find out in a scene just a little later in

the story. Jesus has just appeared to the disciples while they were fishing, and they're now sitting around a charcoal fire on the beach.

John 21:15-19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said,

"Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep..."

...Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

It's interesting that this conversation happens around a fire. The only other place John mentions a charcoal fire is the one Peter warmed himself at as he denied knowing Jesus. Once again, he's looking into Jesus' eyes through the smoke of a fire. It just kills him that Jesus feels the need to ask the question three times. Doesn't Jesus believe him?

But it turns out Jesus is letting Peter say "I love you" three times because he'd said, "I don't even know you" three times. He gets to reaffirm his commitment as often as he had failed in it.

Then Jesus looks at Peter and says, "Follow me!" Again, there's something familiar about those words. They're the same ones he said when he first met Peter. Come follow me, Peter. Let's start again from the beginning.

It's a do over.

Peter discovered that the fact of the resurrection meant he would get **a second chance**. Jesus dying for Peter's mistakes and pardoning his denials would have been one thing. But to strike up the relationship with him again and let him start over could only happen if Jesus was alive.

And the fact is, Jesus does that for each of us. We let him down. He forgives us. Then he says, “Do you really love me? Come follow me. Pick up the pieces and we’ll start from scratch.” And he does that over and over, every time we fail. Jesus lets us reaffirm our faith as many times as we fail. The resurrection means Jesus is still here to give us second chances.

Growing up, I always looked forward to getting an Easter basket. It didn’t really matter that mine weren’t all that exciting. We did fairly small scale Easter celebrations at our house. I think part of the excitement was the anticipation that comes from not knowing what would be in it, where I would find it, what was inside the eggs. The search and discovery process was central to the event every year.

We’re all still on different kinds of searches – hunting for something, and sometimes we’re not even sure what. As you go this morning, the question I’d like to leave you with is this: What resurrection prize do I need to find in my Easter basket today?

Maybe I’m looking at life and it seems pretty dismal. There’s not a whole lot to get up for in the morning. And what I need is that sense of a hopeful future. Some purpose beyond day to day existence.

Or maybe I’m one big anxiety attack. I’m full of fear as I think about my situation and I could really use some courageous joy to put me in a different spot.

Then again, maybe I’m feeling conflicted about even believing there is a God because my mind hasn’t been satisfied. I need answers that can meet the needs of my head as well as my heart.

Or – it could be that I find it hard to accept the fact that Jesus would accept me, given who I really am. I’ve blown it so many times. Will he really offer me a second chance? Or third or fourth?

Like Thomas, we can ask for what we need. Or like Mary, if we don’t even know what to ask, we can just look for Jesus and wait for him to come to us. Because of his resurrection we can know that he still speaks to us and listens to us and loves us. If you’re here this morning and you don’t know how to be sure of that, I would love to talk with you in more detail after the service. I’ll be here at the front to meet with anyone who would like to talk or pray. Don’t let the day slip by without discovering what matters about the resurrection and what makes Easter really worth celebrating.