



THE POWER OF THREE

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Have you ever seen any really big diamond in person, or any other kind of bling? Years ago, I met the Prince of Bavaria and his wife at a banquet (which is a story in itself). It wasn't all that much of a thrill -- I didn't even know that Bavaria had a prince. But apparently so, and apparently there's some family money attached to the title, because the prince's wife had the largest emerald hanging around her neck that I had ever seen. It had to be over an inch in diameter. All I know is they didn't have anything like that in the jewelry case at the Sears in Lacey.

That's the biggest gem I've seen in person, but that's really pretty small compared to some of the record holders. And they all seem to have names. There's the Hope diamond, which is a pretty famous blue one. It's about 50 carats. There's the Golden Jubilee Diamond, the largest cut diamond in the world at over 500 carats. And of course we can't forget the Pink Panther. Nobody's sure how big that is because it keeps getting stolen.

Take all those diamonds and put them together and they'd look like a small speck in comparison to Lucy. That's the name of the newest diamond discovery. It's bigger than anything on the planet, because it's not on this planet. It's actually a rock floating out in space 50 light years from earth. No joke -- it is a chunk of crystallized carbon astronomers say is the biggest diamond in the galaxy. It's about 2,500 miles in diameter. If you put it in terms of carats, it would be ten billion trillion trillion.

There IS no comparison between that and those other diamonds. It makes its own scale.

That's kind of how I see the Easter story. The resurrection of Jesus is so massive that it has to be measured on its own scale. No other story compares to it. It is the grand jewel of the Bible. We may be 2000 years away from the event, but the light from it is bright enough to reach us here today.

Even the color scheme of the holiday should tell us something. Think about it: The fourth of July -- red white and blue. Halloween -- black and orange. Thanksgiving -- pretty much just brown. Christmas -- red and green. But what color is Easter? It's green and yellow and pink and purple and white and blue and orange. It's this whole vibrant palette that overwhelms your eyes with all the colors of life. It is a day bursting with energy.

There's just not room in this world to contain the joy of Easter, because it is a joy welling up and spilling over from heaven itself. This is God's victory celebration, and it defies description.

Not only is it big – it's incredibly significant for our own lives and faith. It's not just a piece of history that's unrelated to us. The apostle Paul saw the resurrection as being the key to everything. He told his readers this:

1 Corinthians 15:13-14

If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it — if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors.

This is the heartbeat, people! Without the resurrection, church would be batting practice without the ballgame. It would be all appetizers and no main course. This is the single greatest message the church is responsible to share with the world.

But for as big and important as the message is, we still have a hard time really grasping it. One of my favorite movie scenes is in the Godfather part III. Al Pacino flies to Rome and is seeking redemption at the Vatican. He's walking in a garden with this priest. The priest reaches down into a fountain and picks up a rock that's dripping wet. And he says, "You see this? Europe is like this rock." Then he takes the rock and breaks it in two against the side of the fountain. The camera zooms in on the inside of the rock, which is totally dry. The priest says, "We've been surrounded by Christ for centuries, but it hasn't sunk in. He hasn't penetrated our hearts."

How deeply has the good news of the resurrection gotten into our hearts? That's always the real question. Even back when Paul was writing his letters, he often reminded his readers of what they already knew, hoping it would grab them in a new way. Just a few verses before the section we read from 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote this:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

Every good boy deserves fudge. How many people have heard that sentence before? It's a music teacher's trick to help students remember E G B D F -- the lines of the staff when they're learning to read music. I probably learned that in 4th grade, and it still stays with me.

Scholars believe what Paul is doing in these verses is quoting a very early creed – which is a simple tool to help people remember the important truths of the faith. Paul hadn't come up with this – he's passing it on. Even though it's incredibly short, it's more than

just a list of facts. For one thing, **it says Christ's death had a purpose.** It says he died FOR our sins.

So how does that work exactly? You could look at the bare facts of Jesus' death and say it was a misguided execution at the hands of a corrupt government. You could call it a conspiracy by religious leaders. But those are just the HOW – they don't explain why he died. This creed says there was a reason Jesus died beyond the circumstances.

And the reason was because of our sins – our rebellion against God. Ever since Adam and Eve chose to disobey God back in the Garden of Eden, there have been terrible repercussions. Sin has resulted in separation from God. That was the point where death entered the equation, and it has plagued humanity ever since.

All through history, mankind has been trying to get back to the garden, to get back to a good relationship with God. Nearly every religious effort is some attempt to erase sin or compensate for it. Cultures and tribes from all over the world go to incredible lengths to make God or the gods happy and lift the curse of death.

Even if you ask non-religious type people what they think about why they would get to go to heaven someday, and nine times out of ten they'll say, "Because I'm a pretty good person." It's almost a universal assumption that if I make enough of an attempt, God will accept me.

But the attempts have all been inadequate. The Psalm writer makes this sad observation:

Psalm 14:2-3

*The LORD looks down from heaven on the entire human race;
he looks to see if there is even one with real understanding,
one who seeks for God.*

*But no, all have turned away from God; all have become corrupt.
No one does good, not even one!*

My great grandfather and grandmother – Cone and Maude Peabody -- lived on a farm over near Outlook Washington. There was a big irrigation ditch that ran across the farm, just behind the house you see onscreen. One day, Maude's sister, auntie Eura was came for a visit and brought her kids, and before you knew it, one of the youngest ones fell in the irrigation ditch that ran across the property. Now the water was only about knee deep for an adult, but it was a flowing river for a toddler, and the water swept the child under a foot bridge, where he got trapped in the supports. There was no way for that little person to break free.

Aunt Eura saw what happened, and quick as a flash ran to the bridge. It was a big solid bridge that ordinarily a grown man couldn't even pick up by himself. But Aunt Eura was like a mama bear fighting for her cub. She got this surge of strength and single-handedly tore the bridge from its foundation and lifted it up into the air, freeing her baby and saving its life.

That's the fierce love God has for us. He could see that we were trapped and unable to free ourselves. So he rushed to our rescue by sending Jesus to lift what was in the way and set us free. Here's how he did it: Jesus lived a perfect life as a human, accomplishing what nobody else had done.

That meant he didn't have to face the same consequences of sin as the rest of us. But he chose to do so anyway.

It was as if the judge who had declared us guilty was now saying, "I'll serve your sentence." We don't have to find a way to escape from the prison – Jesus took our place so we could be pardoned. Now all God asks is that we accept that substitution, that we acknowledge our own need for it and thank him for it.

So this creed says Christ's death was more than just a death – it was a meaningful death that fixed something for us that we couldn't fix ourselves.

But the creed doesn't only deal with Christ's death – it also talks about his resurrection. And that's what I'd like to spend the bulk of our time considering this morning. You find it in the very last line we read:

...that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

What I find interesting is that Paul didn't just say, "that he was raised according to the Scriptures." Instead he includes this seemingly unimportant bit of information that it was on the third day. It's kind of odd when you stop to consider it. Honestly, who cares when it happened, as long as it did happen? Whether it was two minutes after he died or two weeks, does it matter?

Surprisingly, the answer is yes. It does matter. God is never random, and there is power in the fact that the resurrection happened on the third day.

To begin with, it **clarifies what happened**. There have always been people who have been uncomfortable with the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, so they have tried to spiritualize it. They would say Jesus didn't really rise physically, but he's present with us "in spirit."

But N.T. Wright points out why that doesn't make sense in light of this creed:

If by Jesus' resurrection the early church had meant that they believed he had attained a new state of glory with God, a special kind of non-bodily, post mortem existence, it is difficult to see why there should have been any interval at all; why should he have had to wait?

In other words – if we're not talking about a body, the timeline isn't necessary. And since the chronology is so clear in the gospels, we can't get around the resurrection being physical.

Let me pause right here for those of you who struggle intellectually with the resurrection. I realize this morning that I'm speaking as if we all buy into it, when I know there are some of you who question it. I personally believe in the resurrection for many reasons. The historic evidence alone is convincing. The spiritual evidence of its truth is powerful. And people who have set out to disprove it have consistently changed their minds in the process because of what they've found. Smart people like Harvard professor Simon Greenleaf and Chicago Tribune legal editor Lee Strobel are 2 examples – both of whom started out as atheists. Some of the most brilliant minds of history were devout believers. Galileo and Kepler. Isaac Newton and Max Planck. Dr. Francis Collins who heads up the Human Genome Project. Ian Hutchinson, who's in charge of the nuclear energy department at MIT is a believer. Are all these people just deluded? It's a good question.

We don't have the time this morning to walk through that question together. BUT – I did want to mention that we have copies of a fantastic little book called “The Case for Easter.” It goes through in great detail the enormous amount of support for Jesus' physical resurrection. If you're wanting to explore that more for yourself, come up and talk to me after the service. I'd love to put one of these books in your hands. I can also give you great web sites to check out to research it for yourself. The support is staggering.

Back to my point: The “third day” clause keeps the discussion grounded in the truth that we're talking about Jesus' body. But it says more than that. It tells us something about the kind of body Jesus had as well.

Forensic medicine has identified multiple stages of decomposition in the human body. It's actually quite amazing how our bodies change on their own after we've died. Within 24 hours of death, there are significant chemical changes that occur inside. We may not look all that different on the outside for quite some time, but almost immediately, things happen on a cellular level that fundamentally change our bodies.

Why do I say this? If three days had gone by, Jesus was not simply going to be revived as he was before. Jesus didn't pass out and wake up again. It's too late for that. Three days means decay has already set in. Three days crosses a line of no return, so this wasn't a matter of grabbing the paddles and restarting his heart. Resurrection had to involve God doing a work of new creation.

This helps explain why afterwards, so many of his followers had trouble recognizing him initially and how he could show up unannounced in locked rooms. Something was dramatically altered about the risen Jesus. It's still his physical body – he still has the scars from his crucifixion, but there's an unmistakable difference.

This is what resurrection power is about in our lives too – God doing something totally new. He doesn't just patch us up – he recreates us. The Bible talks about us being new creatures in Christ – the old has gone, the new has come. There is something fundamentally different about us when we invite the risen Jesus into our lives, and that's a truth we're reminded of by the third day.

A second reason I believe it was important for the pause before the resurrection is because it **gives space to regroup**.

MSNBC did a big story this week on the city of Elkhart, Indiana. Elkhart was known as the RV capital of the world, with dozens of RV manufacturers and their supplier companies locating there. That was great when the economy was good. But when times got bad, the region lost an estimated 168,000 jobs. There is currently over 20% unemployment in the region.

The takeaway for the mayor, government officials and the entire population is to realize what they had counted on for their bread and butter was no longer what they thought. They have had to regroup and retool as a community, pursuing new industries, getting job training in new fields and reimagining what their town is all about.

Before Jesus' death, his disciples had a skewed idea of what he was all about. You can see that in several of their conversations throughout the gospel. They thought of him as a miracle-working teacher. They thought he had a political agenda. They thought they would be working with him for a lifetime.

Had his death been only for an hour or a day, there wouldn't have been much time for reflection at all. They wouldn't have had to let go of their preconceived notions. But three days – that's different. Once the initial shock and grief had settled in, three days would have given them time to see how misguided their ideas had been. They would have had to give up their dreams of power. They would have had to abandon their fantasies about how Jesus would set up his kingdom. Three days was long enough for their faulty expectations to die, to trade political aspirations for the redemption of the human race, to replace their personal ambition with such an awe of the gospel that they were willing to die themselves for it.

That's part of why God gives us space in our own requests to him. We wonder why he doesn't answer immediately, why he leaves a gap. But sometimes we need that time to get to the point where we will give up our expectations, to come to him empty handed instead of with an agenda. We need the time to recalibrate our priorities and let the illusions die. There is grace in the space.

Another reason I see for God delaying the resurrection was because the third day **speaks a more complete hope**. I've said many times that I think Christianity has the most hopeful message in the world: Death and evil have met their match. That's about the best news you can come up with.

UNLESS...unless you take it one step further, which is exactly what the third day resurrection does. It multiplies the hope, because the hope needed for Day One is different than the hope needed for Day Two. And there's enough in Day Three to cover both.

Think about Day One – the day Jesus went to the cross. It was marked by guilt, dread and pain. Guilt, as we already mentioned, is what took Jesus to the cross. He was paying for our sins. Dread was everywhere as that death approached. Jesus agonized in prayer over it, wanting desperately to have another option. The disciples and the women were also full of fear and dread as they watched their worst nightmare unfold.

And finally there was unspeakable pain on Day One. A crucifixion involves a horrific amount of suffering prior to death.

Now think about Day Two. The far side of the cross is marked by a different kind of anguish. There is a different texture to Holy Saturday than to Good Friday. Guilt, dread and pain have been replaced with grief, despair and paralysis. The disciples are inconsolable. Their grief is unbearable as they miss their best friend and teacher. They are grieving the future they thought they had. They are grieving their personal loss.

And they are at a point of despair. There is nowhere to go. Chances are the same people who killed Jesus will now begin looking for them. They have no plans, no idea of what to live for anymore, no reason to keep going. That's the epitome of hopelessness.

Which puts them in a place of paralysis. They can't move, so they lock the door to the outside world and just sit in their misery.

You can see that there is a depth of emotion to Day Two not quite reached on Day One. Day One is full of intensity, Day Two is full of darkness. It's rock bottom.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur said this:

Hope...is the living contradiction of what it proceeds from

When you're having a bad time, you hope for the good – the contradiction. When you're sitting in the dark, you're hoping for the light. It's the belief not just that there is something more, but that there is something that is the direct opposite of what you're experiencing.

The hope of the resurrection is big enough to contradict both Day One and Day Two. It says there is an opposite to all these things. There is health and wholeness. There is peace and love and joy. There is freedom and pardon and grace and meaning that fly directly in the face of those first two days. And that's just what I need, because I feel both kinds of days. I need a Third Day God. I need a hope that is so complete that it swallows up both guilt and grief, both pain and paralysis, both dread and despair.

The latest issue of Newsweek features a story about Bishop John Rukyahana. Born and raised in Rwanda, he had fled to Uganda as a teenager. Then in 1994, he was on a visit to the United States when violence broke out in Rwanda and quickly became one of the most grotesque scenes of unspeakable brutality ever. Countless people were slaughtered.

Rukyahana felt this strong need to go back to help the recovery process. He started out running seminars, calling on people to repent and start over. But he didn't feel that was enough, so in 1996 he moved his whole family back to Rwanda.

One of the first things he did was set up a boarding school for orphans. Since a million people had died in the conflict, there were children left behind everywhere. The school opened in 2001 and is now one of the best schools in the country.

What caught my eye about the school was its name: Sonrise – with an “o”. Rucyahana said it “means the Son of God rises into the misery, into our darkness.”

We think of Jesus as coming out of the darkness of that tomb. But he also rose into darkness as he emerged into that pre-dawn of that third day. And this morning, he comes into your pre-dawn hours, ready to pierce that darkness with light.

Because God waited for the third day, the hope that comes from it is more complete. Thankfully, though, he didn't wait a day longer than necessary. Because even when God delayed the resurrection, it was still only three days away – not some longer period of time. To me, this **brings rescue near**.

God could have waited a week. He could have waited 40 days – that would have seemed to fit a Bible pattern. He could have waited a year. But he didn't. He only delayed as long as was necessary and not a minute more, and that is a beautiful thing to know.

Long before the resurrection of Jesus, God was using the concept of the third day rescue to help his people see he was near.

When the people of Israel fled from Egypt across the wilderness and finally reached the base of Mt. Sinai, God told Moses, “Get the people ready. They've got two days to get cleaned up. Because on the third day, I'm coming down on the mountain, and everybody's going to see it.”

And God did it. He came down on the mountain with fire and smoke and lightning and trumpets. It was a third day wonder.

Years go by. The people finally reach the edge of the promised land. They're standing on the edge of the Jordan, afraid of what they'll run into on the other side. Joshua stands up and tells them, “You've got two days to get ready, because on the third day, we're crossing this river and taking the good land God has promised us.”

And as soon as the priests stepped into the river God parted the waters and it says they stood in a heap as the people passed through. Another third day wonder

More years go by. The people lose the land and are taken into exile. The king of Persia issues a decree that the entire Jewish population will be wiped out in a form of ethnic cleansing. But there's a young Jewish girl in his harem who steps up to intervene. She says, "Tell all the Jews to start fasting. And on the third day, I'll go talk to the king."

Miraculously he spares her life and grants her request. God's people are saved. Another third day wonder.

Then one day a prophet named Jonah runs away from God and finds himself on a boat in the middle of a raging storm. Knowing that God is upset with him, he tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He sinks and sinks, sure he will die as punishment. Instead a giant fish swallows him whole. And inside that fish Jonah prayed and thanked God for his mercy. And on the third day, the fish spit him out on dry land and he was a new man. Another third day wonder.

Those are just a handful. You can find third day stories all over in the Bible, and they're there to point us to a God we can expect to act on our behalf in the near future. The prophet Hosea brought it all home when he said this:

Hosea 6:1-2

*Come, let us return to the LORD...
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence.*

The third day is the day of restoration. The third day is the day God comes down in power. It's the day he leads his people into a new place. It's the day he gives runaways like Jonah a second chance. It's the day waters stand in a heap. It's the day God raises the dead and revives hope.

The best news of all on Easter is that we are now on this side of it. The resurrection is a fact of history, which means it is a done deal. That means today is still the Third Day. It is still the day of new life and fresh starts.

Too much of the time, I live like it's still Day One or Day Two. Burdened with guilt and pain. Heavy with grief and despair. I carry around my sorrows as if God hasn't already done anything about them. But the risen Christ holds out his wounded hands and says to me what he said on the cross, "It is finished! The work is complete." Life can now be full up of hope, because no matter what may come our way, that third day wonder cannot be undone. As the choir sang this morning, "Hell has been defeated, Heaven claims its prize."

God is the God of the Third Day.

As you think about the resurrection, ask yourself: Is Jesus real to me? How much have I let his resurrection sink in? And what is the new thing God wants to do in me?

Maybe you've never known what it's like to have a living relationship with God. Easter Sunday is an awesome time to start one. He's made it incredibly easy. The book of John says this:

John 1:12-13

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

You can simply pray, "Thank you Jesus for dying for MY sins. I know that I need your forgiveness. Please come in and start something new in me." And he promises he'll be there to stay when we let him in.

What perspectives do I need to shift in how I think about God? Human beings have an amazing ability to project our own stuff on God. Because of our experiences we believe (or don't believe) in a God who is damaged. God has become hard to please or unloving, a random slot machine, a benevolent, impotent fairy tale.

None of these are accurate pictures of God. The church is not even God. He is no religion or politics. Jesus is God. And he wants to be known. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is love and he is rescue.

Am I living in Day One or Day Two? Is my life marked by guilt or grief, pain or paralysis, dread or despair? In the book of Jeremiah, God said:

Jeremiah 31:13

*I'll convert their weeping into laughter,
lavishing comfort, invading their grief with joy.*

He wants to trade days with you, because the hope he offers is more solid and real than all our troubles.

Maybe today you're needing to know that God is not far. What third day wonder would I like to see God do in my life or someone else's?

Jesus is still Lord of the Third Day. There is power in day three. And that means there is hope – a hope that's bigger and brighter than any diamond in the sky.