

The Bottom Line of Easter

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

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We gather this Easter weekend with millions of others who will fill churches for the annual Christian celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It's a great weekend. We're glad you are here. Let's walk through the rest of the typical Easter day for church goers here in Northwest Indiana. After attending church, what happens? You may go home for Easter lunch or you may have family over. Or maybe you join the family. You may go to a restaurant...long lines but no cooking and no dishes. Then what happens? Go home or stay home. Maybe you take an Easter nap. Then what? The yard needs attention or some other household chore. Maybe you play a game with the kids or watch some sports on TV or go for a walk. Then what? Snack on Easter lunch leftovers. Then what? Go to bed. Wake up Monday morning. Back to work, school, homemaking, or whatever it is life entails. *We celebrated the resurrection yesterday; back to normal life today.*

Do you see how crazy this is? If there was a resurrection, there's no such thing as normal anymore. Think of this on a global scale. Around 2.1 billion Christians will gather today to celebrate the resurrection. 2.1 billion. What world event compares to this? If just a fraction of this many people gathered for a peace demonstration or some political rally or a candlelight vigil for whatever, it would be hailed as the greatest gathering of humanity in world history. See how many front page stories there are tomorrow about the resurrection and the 2.1 billion people who celebrated it. Oh, that. Yeah. Life goes on.

Do you see how crazy this is? One day, someone was resurrected from the dead! Next day, on with life. That's the schizophrenia of our culture. How can something as radical as the resurrection of Jesus be passé for billions of people and life-changing for others? Two billion are celebrating. Four billion are not. How? Why?

This gets at the core or the bottom line of what Easter is all about – what really happened? Is it credible? And if so, what difference does that make for humanity and for me? Our teaching series at Bethel is teaching through a letter called 1 Corinthians written by the Apostle Paul to a church in a major city of its day, the city of Corinth. Their culture and lifestyle were similar to our own. They placed a high value on education and money but with a dark side of idolatry and moral corruption. Sound familiar? In chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, The Apostle Paul writes:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

What we have just read is the oldest written statement of the gospel in history. 1 Corinthians was written before the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Before the Apostle's Creed. This is the oldest Christian creed of all. So old in fact, that it is only separated from the actual resurrection event by a few years. Paul became a Christian around two years after the resurrection. Three years later he personally met with the Apostles Peter and James where the creed likely came from. So five years after the resurrection, Paul was told first hand of the resurrection by eyewitnesses. Five years. By historian standards, that's very close. To put that

in perspective, five years ago Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. How well do New Orleanians remember Katrina? Like it was yesterday. They are still talking about it.

How important did Paul consider these words? Look at verse 3, *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received*: Paul wrote nearly half of the New Testament. Of all he wrote, this is "of first importance." First in priority. First in rank. Most important. We say it this way, "This is the bottom line." It is the bottom line of all bottom lines.

The Bottom Line of Easter

Jesus died for our sins

The bottom line of Easter begins with the tragedy of the cross. When we speak of the cross historically we are talking about a Roman execution device which the Romans used to intimidate any who would defy them. It was so effective because it was so cruel. Most consider it the most gruesome death ever devised; an opinion shared by anyone who ever hung on one. The Roman cross is famous around the world not for the thousands of people killed on one but for one person in particular, identified in verse 3 as *Christ*. The creed doesn't focus on how He died on a cross, but why He died on a cross.

Christ died for our sins. Every word here is important. Christ. Who's that? He is who this whole thing is all about. Jesus was His given name. The Bible's portrait of His personhood highlights His divine nature; He was God. He was born of a virgin. He was a man. He was totally human and totally God; the God-man. The accounts of His life by those who knew Him record miracles and power over disease and nature and even death. These are all the sorts of things we would expect God to do if He showed up around here. Jesus did them.

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. What are the Scriptures? These refer to the Old Testament prophecies which told of one who would come and bear the guilt of our sins. Let me give you one example:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

This was written 700 years before Christ. How accurate are they? He suffered immensely. He was personally betrayed by Judas and abandoned by His disciples. He endured physical suffering in His beatings and floggings. And then there was the cross which we've already said is the most excruciating of all deaths. *According to the Scriptures* means this wasn't an accident of circumstance or fate; this was according to a pre-determined plan. God's plan.

Christ died FOR our sins. The physical suffering of Christ is not mentioned in the creed. It focuses on the moral and the spiritual suffering. He died FOR our sins. "Sins" describes our condition before Almighty God. We are sinners. We are guilty of violating God's moral law and deserve His righteous judgment against us – death. "Sins" also explains why life in this world is so hard. Suffering. Injustice. Hatred. Violence. Sin hurts. Look around your neighborhood. Can you see the pain? How about in your home or your heart?

Christ died FOR our sins means that Christ died in our place. He died as our substitute in God's eyes. As I said a few weeks ago, this doctrine is illustrated over and over again in the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament. Monday night, let's hope it's the Butler coach that will be surveying the floor. Many times a game he will look to his bench and say, *You are in for him*. That player takes off his warm-ups, checks in at the table, runs in and takes the place of

a teammate who runs off the court to the bench. That's a substitute. Spiritually, that's what God did while Jesus was on the cross. God the Father said to Jesus, *You are in for them*. Christ died for OUR sins. He died for your sins.

Jesus really was dead

Next it says, *That he was buried*. Why include His burial? Isn't that assumed? Burial means finality. If you have ever buried a loved one, there probably was something you sensed at the graveside. A sense of real finality. Jesus was buried. He wasn't sick. He wasn't unconscious. He was dead.

The Apostle John's account in particular gives evidence that He was dead. He describes how the Roman executioners, still revered for their expertise in this, verified that He was dead. Just to make sure with such a famous victim as Jesus, they took a long spear and plunged it into His chest cavity. The Roman executioners authenticated His death. The Roman governor Pilate did. His friends who buried Him did. He was buried. He was truly dead.

Here's the bottom line that brings 2.1 billion people together today. No fanfare. No drum roll. Matter-of-factly in verse 4...*He was raised on the third day*.

Jesus was resurrected back to life

This is how the gospels of Scripture tell it. Sometime early on Sunday morning, three days after His crucifixion as the Jews account days, God the Father exerted His divine power into that cold tomb where Jesus' body lay. And by power that only God possesses, He resurrected Jesus back from the dead. The Spirit and personality of Jesus that He "gave up" when He said, "it is finished" on the cross, was united to a resurrected body. And Jesus, who was dead, now and forevermore is alive.

Lots of other stuff happened too. There was an earthquake. Angels show up. Family and friends show up. The disciples show up. The stone is rolled away from the opening and everyone can plainly see the grave is empty. He's not there. It's been said the stone wasn't rolled from the tomb to let Jesus out but to let the world in. The empty grave is one of the compelling arguments for the reliability of the resurrection. When the Apostles began preaching the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, all Pilate or the Jewish leaders would have to do is exhume Jesus' body and Christianity would have gone away forever. That they didn't, shows that they couldn't. The grave was empty.

We have to admit with intellectual honesty that an empty tomb doesn't necessarily mean resurrection. Christianity acknowledges that and this creed does as well. How could the world know this is more than an empty tomb, that this is a resurrection? Look at verse 5:

...and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

Jesus appeared to hundreds of people who were not inclined to believe, but were convinced of His resurrection and some died for it.

Something to realize about this list is that all of them had personal reasons NOT to believe this happened. First of all, this was not a commonly held belief in the culture. The Jews believed in a final resurrection someday for everyone, not a personal resurrection like this. If there's anything that's clear from the story, it's that NOBODY was thinking resurrection. Look at the

list through verse 7. Peter (Cephas) wasn't thinking that. He had just betrayed Christ three times and was in anguish. He was clearly not thinking resurrection. The disciples weren't. They had run away as fast they could at His arrest. We don't know who these 500 were but claiming to see a crucified man as a resurrected man was to put yourself at peril with the Romans who had just crucified Him.

Paul adds this comment, *most of whom are still alive*. Why would he add that? What are the mobsters always trying to do when the mob boss is up for trial? Silence the witness. What's the best way to do that? Kill them. It is easy to misquote dead people; it's much harder if they are still around. Most who saw Jesus resurrected were still alive when Paul wrote this. *Go ask them yourselves!*

The gospels tell us that Jesus' brother, James mentioned here, did not believe in Him (Mark 3:21). It would be hard to believe that your brother is the Messiah...it's not so hard to believe he's Satan. Then there's Paul. Before his conversion to Christianity, Paul spent a year as a Jewish hit-man, jailing and killing anyone who believed in the resurrection. He hated Jesus and everyone who followed Him. Nobody listed here was thinking, *Of course He's going to be resurrected*. They had to be convinced just like you and me.

Why did Jesus appear to all these people? On the CSI shows, who do they call in to identify the body? People that didn't know the victim? No. They call in family members. Why? You have to know someone to identify their body. Who better to identify Jesus than those who knew Him? He wanted the world to know, and us here today, that He was resurrected so He went to the people who could validate His identity and authenticate His resurrection. They would be witnesses.

We could ask the question, *What more could Jesus have done to convince the world that He was alive?* How many people do you have to appear before? How many people have to see you, touch you, watch you eat food, and hear you speak? He wanted them to touch His hands. Jesus did all these things and hundreds of eyewitnesses were still around to verify it.

The reason this creed spends so much time on the resurrection should be obvious. The resurrection of Jesus is the fulcrum of our faith. If Jesus wasn't resurrected, there's nothing to Him or any of this. If He was resurrected, then He is the Son of God and Savior of the world.

This leads me to the question I began with. Today, why are 2 billion celebrating and 4 billion yawning? For many, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes no perceived personal difference to them. You will see them on the way home, mowing their yard, walking their dog, shopping for this or that. *Resurrection? Whatever*. Yet we are here. Why? What makes the difference?

I want to show you a picture that says it all (see next page). This is from the devastation of the Haiti earthquake. After eight days, a 5 year old boy named Kiki was rescued from the rubble. Look at his smile. Look at his eyes. Total joy. Kiki was happy. He had been rescued. This picture illustrates why for some Easter is a yawn and for others like us, it is a total celebration. Many people have either no knowledge or just a general knowledge about Jesus and something about a resurrection. But they have no personal faith ownership in it. They have never seen themselves in need of rescue or Jesus as someone who can do the rescuing.



But for those who believe, Jesus died *for our* sins. He was truly dead and buried. And on the third day, he rose again from the dead. We feel like Kiki. Exultation. For us, Easter is like being pulled out of the spiritual rubble of our sins all over again. It's personal. It's wonderful. Is Easter personal for you? If not, could it become a personal faith commitment for you today? Here's how: *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.* (Romans 10:9)

The call of the creed is to believe and the saving benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection are applied to you. Do you believe Jesus died for your sins? Do you believe He was dead and buried? Do you believe that on the third day, He rose again from the dead? Believe this in your heart and you will be saved.

After the service today, as you leave, at all the exits we have pastors and prayer-counselors wearing nametags ready to talk with you, dialogue about questions you may have, or pray with you. We have resources at tables in the Commons for you.

He died for our sins. He was buried. And He was raised on the third day.

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