

No Fooling

Easter Service

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 15:17
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This morning we have gathered in celebration, in fact a celebration that's been going on for about 2,000 years, that the tomb of Jesus Christ is still empty. Now for most of us, this is a different time today because today is the first time in 62 years that the resurrection day is simultaneous with April Fool's Day. 1956 was the last time that these two celebrations were together. It was a different day 62 years ago. In fact, the majority of our culture in those days celebrated the empty tomb, today we find it as the minority of our culture. In that day, we actually saw more people every year coming to know Jesus as their Savior than we will this year and yet our population has doubled in magnitude. So it begs us to ask a very important question: who's the fool? The statistical minority who still claims that a tomb over in the Middle East is empty or the masses who declare it's not worthy of one's attention? May today be the day that you be not found a fool.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we gather on this historical yet personal day, may you guide us into the truth of your word, may we glean its wisdom, may we glean its knowledge, and God, may we depart from here in a few moments, Lord, not being seen as a fool. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Corinthians 15. Now, 1 Corinthians 15 is oftentimes referred to by folks as what we know as the resurrection chapter. It begins in the first few verses with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and it ends speaking about a future event where those who believe in Jesus Christ will be raised together with him, but today we're just going to look at one very simple yet powerful verse in the midst of this chapter on resurrection. It's found in verse 17 of 1 Corinthians 15. One simple statement with three very strategic concepts. It says,

17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

Notice that first phrase, that first statement, "if Christ be not raised." This is the demand that must be met. Everything that we sing, everything that we speak about when it comes under the umbrella of Christianity, it all hinges on a resurrected raised Savior by the name of Jesus Christ, and let me be frank this morning: if it were not for an empty tomb,

you and I are simply wasting our time. We can find someplace else and some other activity to participate not just in this day but every day.

This is the demand that is laid forth that everything we claim to be true about "Christianity" hinges on an empty tomb. This demand began with a pronouncement, for in the mouth of Jesus Christ himself. In fact, he declared for 3 ½ years of his earthly ministry that he would bear the sins of the world and he would raise again victoriously. In fact, one of the most famous scenes in his life and ministry. It says the disciples are gathered in Ceasarea-Philippi and they are surrounded by all the religions of the world, in fact, in our vernacular it would have been kind of like co-exist conference, all everybody hanging out there. There Jesus dialogues with his disciples and they declare, specifically Simon Peter who we'll speak of in just a moment, he declares that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus declares it was no flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father which is in heaven. And later in verse 21 of that chapter, listen to what Jesus pronounces very clearly. He says, "For the day is coming where I will be taken by those who are opposed to me and they will lead me to a physical death." Not only did he speak of it in his first miracle in Cana of Galilee, he spoke of it in that situation there in Ceasarea-Philippi, but even at what we know as the Last Supper when the cup went around the bread was distributed, he made it very clear the time had come for him to be placed into enemy's hands.

This demand, this resurrection, was pronounced for the entire ministry of Jesus Christ but it was also prophesied. Now today we could spend a lot of time discussing the 48 specific prophecies that are mentioned in your Old Testament. We could talk about the Exodus 12 chapter of the coming Passover lamb. We could speak of Isaiah 53 and Jesus giving his life as a ransom for many. We could speak of his birth in Bethlehem and all the other events that take place, in fact, it's a mathematical anomaly that one man in one life in chronological order could actually fulfill these 48 given prophecies, but since today we're talking about our faith potentially being in vain, let's hear from the mouth of the one who gave the demand. You see, lots of people have claimed they were going to be killed. Lots of people have claimed that their life would be put into the hands of their enemies, but it's a different story to declare that one's death will be superseded by one's resurrection.

Matthew 12, Jesus is surrounded by those who are opposed to him, those that are contrary to him, shall we just say his enemies have gathered around him. They've seen him heal the lame. They've seen him walk across the water. They've seen him take bread and multiply it to feed the thousands. But they come to Jesus and they say, "Show us one really big thing, Jesus. Show us a sign. Show us something that nobody else can do." And Jesus says, "Okay, if it's a sign you demand, it's a sign I will give, but I'm only going to give you one. As Jonah, the Old Testament prophet, as he was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man," speaking of himself, "will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." Here's what Jesus does, here is the demand that is laid forth, here is the line in the sand, he says, "You want to know that it's true? Look past my life. Look past my teachings. Look past my miracles. Look past my death for if I don't come up from the grave, you can forget it all."

Do you want to know what hinges all of our faith? The resurrection. An empty tomb. It says here in verse 17, if Christ be not raised, our faith is in vain. All that we believe, all that we sing, all that we declare is empty breath. And what that garners for us today is a decision must be made. Not only the validity of what we know as the empty tomb but the vanity therein if it be not so.

Think about that decision that must be rendered. Not one's decision just for this day or this life, for all of eternity. I've heard it said years ago that eternity is too long to find yourself to be wrong.

So what's the proof? How do we know that it's true? We didn't have the advantages of the internet and YouTube and all those other items in those days. The same chapter that hopefully you have open, 1 Corinthians 15, as you back up a few verses, I want you to notice the litmus test that the Bible gives us for the empty tomb in verse 3, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins," listen to this, "according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." In other words, hundreds of years and in some cases thousands of years in advance, well beyond the limits of self-fulfilled prophecy, it was declared how, where, who, and even the when to the exact day, week and month.

How do we know? What's the proof? That the Scriptures from time beginning declared that the prophecy Jesus gave would come to fruition. In fact, even later in Acts 2, the psalmist is quoted as saying that his soul would not be left in the grave; that the resurrection would be the exclamation on the life and the ministry of this Jesus of Nazareth.

Today we could deal with all the pronouncements of Jesus, all the prophecies and all the proofs, but this passage beginning in verse 5 deals with some personal testimonies, and these next few verses are the ones that most resonate with me. It says, "he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." Now it sounds just like a census of sort, but let's unpeel that a little bit more. These testimonies that are given not of just a life changed but a consistent story of why their lives were changed.

It begins with Cephas. By the way, that's Simon Peter. It begins with Peter, in our language, declaring that he really did come up from the grave. Can we just be honest? This is a very favorable witness. I mean, after all, the Bible declares in the book of Deuteronomy you need two or three witnesses in order for a thing to be true. Jesus spoke of himself in Matthew 18. This is a favorable witness. This is one that you knew you had. Why? Because for 3 ½ years he was the mouthpiece for Jesus. Later in Acts 2, he would be the first proclaimer of the message of Jesus so it doesn't shock us at all that Simon Peter would declare. Of course the tomb was empty.

Then the census here continues with some favorable individuals. It says he was seen of the 12. That night as he gathered in that upper room post-resurrection, they were gathered there and they saw as he entered in and they witnessed his body raised from the grave. Once again, though, this is a favorable audience. I mean, these are those that for 3 ½ years, they left their family, they left their finances, they staked everything on who Jesus claimed to be. If there was anybody in the known world who needed Jesus to raise from the dead, or shall I say declared that he had, it was these guys.

So up to this point can we say it's a stacked deck? Everybody in the list needed Jesus to raise from the dead. But then it gets interesting because then it says not only Cephas and the 12, but after that, verse 6, 500. Now I tell this little anecdote a lot, anytime you get two Baptists together, you're going to get three opinions. But can we just say that anytime you get two representatives of humanity together, you're going to get three opinions. We can't seem to agree on anything and some of you may remember as children playing a little game that we used to call telephone. Remember everybody would sit in a circle and the leader would share a secret quietly so that nobody else could hear into the ear of the first contestant. Then that participant would pass it on and it would not be said out loud and they would whisper it from ear to ear and by the time it came full circle, you and I both know it didn't even resemble the first communication that was given forth. In a room of 20 people who we'll even call our friends, we can't get the story right and 500 of them? All from different backgrounds, all speaking different languages, all having different motives, yet the story is the same. Whether a game of telephone or in a court of law, a very difficult testimony to refute. And what we see happening in this list of individuals is the script is beginning to be flipped.

Notice what it says after the 500 in verse 7, "After that, he was seen of James." Now maybe you're thinking, "Well, what's the big deal about James?" James was the half-brother of Jesus. Matthew 1 says that Jesus was the firstborn of Mary but John 7 says his brethren, those he grew up with would not and did not believe on him. Now think about this: there are many who disagreed with Jesus, there are many who declared that he was telling lies and he wasn't who he claimed to be, but most of them had seen him for 3 years or maybe up to 3 ½, James had seen him for 30 years. I mean, it's possible they even shared a bedroom together at one point. He refused to believe. After three decades of disbelief, he could not deny that he, Jesus, had risen from the grave. Do you see things changing now? Now it's not just those who have a vested interest in but those who were the opponents thereof.

Then it continues by saying, "then all of the apostles." Now you may be thinking to yourself, "I thought we already dealt with the apostles?" That is a term that's used collectively for what we know as the 12, but that first night when Jesus appeared unto them, there was one particular individual who was not present. We know him as Doubting Thomas. Eight days later, the man who ignored the testimony of Simon Peter, the man who ignored the testimony of those who he lived life with for 3 ½ years, the man who ignored the testimony of the women who were there first and the hundreds who had seen him, he ignored every one of them, but when Jesus appeared, he fell on his face and he declared that it was the absolute truth, so much that years later he was willing to give

his physical life in exchange for a resurrected Jesus who he first doubted ever rose from the grave. Do you see things changing here with these testimonies?

Ah, but look at the last one. Last but not least the Apostle Paul says, "Look at me." For about 18 to 24 months, depending on how you date it, the Apostle Paul's profession was to seek out those who claimed Jesus' tomb was empty and to end their life. That was his job. His occupation. He made a living making sure that those who claimed the tomb was empty never spoke of it again. If there was one person who doubted, if there was one person who did not believe, if there was one person who profited from it not being true, it was Paul, for when he declared that it was empty, when he declared that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life, everything that he had built for his life came crashing down in the earthly realm. He had everything to lose and only eternity to gain.

"If Christ be not risen, our faith is in vain." Those who were favorable to and those who were absolutely opposed all agreed he rose from the grave, but then there is that last statement. It says, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain and you are yet in your sins." This verse is very dangerous today. You say, "Why is it dangerous today?" Because notice the personal pronoun. The story of Jesus Christ isn't just about history, it's not just about "church," it's not just a collective concept, it's an individual reality, that this affects you as an individual, and if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain and you are in your sins.

One of the favorite movies of our family, I don't know, it's because they enjoy watching it in the home or long rides back home to Texas, there is this movie many of you are familiar with entitled "National Treasure." It's kind of this eclectic treasure hunt/scientific who done it kind of thing, and by the way, if you're one of the only three or four people who have never seen it, I apologize. I'm about to spoil it for you. But in this well-known movie, an actor who we know as Nicholas Cage is the beneficiary of multiple generations of treasure hunters seeking some type of fortune that is buried somewhere in the New England colonies. There have been documents that have been read, there have been trails that have chased, but in the context of the movie, the United States Constitution is apprehended and stolen and the fun begins.

Fast forward to the conclusion, and by the name of the movie and the picture on the front, you know they find the treasure. Spoiler alert, I'm sorry. But when they get to that fateful moment, the treasure is beneath their feet and the primary seeker, who we know as Nicholas Cage, and the lead detective of law enforcement, they happen to be seated in a church, albeit not as big as this church, they're in a church environment and they're discussing the crimes that have been committed. They're discussing the things that must be paid for, to which the treasure seeker makes this great statement, he says, "I really don't want to go to jail. I would do anything not to go to prison." To which the lead detective says, "But, friend, somebody has got to go to jail."

In other words, somebody has got to pay the price for our sins, and I've got news for all of us: we've all done things we shouldn't have done, we've all said things we shouldn't have said and we've all thought things we shouldn't have thought. Here's the question:

who is going to pay the price for our sin? Who is going to pay the price for our rebellion? For thousands of years humanity has tried to do it ourselves and it always falls short, and we've tried to add to the equation, we've tried to remove from the equation, and it always falls short. 1 John 2:1 and 2 it says that Jesus Christ made the payment for our sins. He is our propitiation. He took our place.

You see, the question today that we have to ask ourselves is this, one a day where we celebrate the tomb being empty, verified by history, testified by those who were favorable and even those who were not, is have we asked him who rose from the dead to pay the payment for our sins? To quote the modern day Christian missionary martyr Jim Elliott, he is not a fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to attain that which he can never lose.

Let's pray.

With our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that individual today whether in this room physically or part of our media ministry, maybe you're that individual today that for whatever reason and whatever motive, it's just another celebration, it's just another family gathering, it's just another holiday, but today you realize it's much more significant than that. You realize that it's not just about this day, it's about eternity. I've got some great news for you today, that forgiveness can take place, salvation can occur, you can become what the Bible calls a new creation. Not by jumping through a series of hoops. Not becoming all religious and taking classes. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

If that's you this morning, we want to give you the opportunity to respond to the Gospel, to the saving message that Jesus Christ has paid the price for your sins, has raised from the grave, and if you call upon him, you will be saved. All you need to do is have a conversation not with me but with the Lord, not out loud, not the same words that I might say, but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to confess what you already know. I'm the problem and I believe Jesus is the answer. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sins on the cross and raise three days later so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems but I know that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, and I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, I'm going to pray briefly over us and at the conclusion of this prayer, you have the opportunity to come and to have a conversation with myself or others. We want to celebrate the eternal changing decision that Jesus Christ can and has made hopefully in your life today. This is the opportunity to pronounce faith and declare that when it comes to the empty tomb and the person of Jesus Christ, that one need not be a fool.

Lord, as we come to this time, thank you that we can look back with history, we can look back with hindsight to know that the tomb is empty, that forgiveness is still readily available and that Jesus Christ is still in the saving business. Lord, may we not take this opportunity for granted. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'd ask that you stand with me as our team leads us. Any and all decisions, I'll be here at the front.