

# Welcome

Welcome to Easter Sunday!

Have you ever had a friend or family member who was a chronic liar? I went to college with a guy who, as far as we could tell, couldn't help himself. I say that because when he lied, it was about dumb stuff. Like, he told a bunch of us that he owned a corvette. Which is awesome - except he didn't drive a corvette. He said it was because his parents wouldn't let him bring it to school. Which actually made sense.

But then he told some of us it was a blue corvette. Then he told other guys it was a yellow corvette.

Uh. Wait. Which one is it?

We asked him.

“Oh, I have *two* corvettes,” he said. “A blue one and a yellow one.”

Riiiiight. This is where the story became just too out there for us to believe it.

I share that story because we're gathered today to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. And it's *this* story where I often lose people when we're talking about faith.

Afterall, people in general love Jesus. They see his kindness towards those on the margins. How he spoke truth to power, challenged those who abused their power. His pithy wisdom and provocative parables resonate with us even today. It's no wonder he's listed among the greatest persons who ever lived - up there with Buddha, Mohammad, Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Dr. King.

But then we get to Easter. To the conviction we have that, after Jesus was crucified, he was buried. Then, on Sunday, his body was raised from the dead.

I can't tell you the number of times someone has said, “So you really believe that?” as though I've just told them that thunder is angels bowling.

And yet... we *do* believe that. More than just that we believe Jesus was raised from the dead, we believe that his resurrection is what validates all the other stuff we love about Jesus. The resurrection is what proves that Jesus' way in the world makes sense. It's why we can find the courage to love our enemies, to resist oppression, to live in solidarity with the marginalized. To speak truth to power. To confront the sin in our own hearts.

Jesus' resurrection makes all this possible. Without Jesus' resurrection, there's nothing to Christianity. Paul, who planted many of the first churches, said as much in one of his letters. In writing to the churches in the Greek city of Corinth, Paul said:

But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. -- 1 Corinthians 15:12–19 (NLT)

“If Christ has not been raised, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.”

Does it surprise you that in Corinth, there were people who denied resurrection? After all, don't we usually think of ourselves as the scientific, rational people who have moved beyond superstition? It was those primitive people back then who believed in gods and omens and miracles.

But Corinth is a Greek city - the culture of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They were skeptical people, especially to outlandish claims like Paul's that there's only one God, that this God had a son, and that not only was this son crucified, but three days later, God raised him from the dead.

For Paul, this wasn't just a cool story. And it wasn't an optional idea. Paul didn't think we could take all the good stuff Jesus said about loving our enemies and being kind to the outsider, but leave the resurrection. Why?

Well, since it's Easter Sunday, today, we're going to hear the story of Jesus' resurrection again, and we're going to pay particular attention to the people in the story who *weren't* excited about it. Those who were threatened by the idea that God might raise God's son from the dead.

Who would *lie* about *Easter*? Well, the people who stand to lose when God brings justice. Those who profit off the misery of others. Those who thrive in the midst of ethnic division. Those who don't have the courage to look within and be changed.

Why do we celebrate today? Because God *did*, in fact, raise Jesus from the dead. And that means the whole world is changing, bending toward justice. So let's celebrate!

## Message

Today is the most important day in the Christian calendar. I know, it's easy to think it's Christmas. But really and truly, it's Easter Sunday. The day Jesus was raised from the dead. I mentioned earlier that plenty of people didn't believe Jesus was raised. But before we get to them, I want to review the Easter story.

Turn with us to [Matthew 28](#).

A lot of folks don't realize that each Gospel has its own version of the Easter story. In Mark, the women who go to the tomb don't even meet Jesus. John has Mary encounter Jesus in the garden, then a footrace between Peter and the Beloved disciple.

Matthew's story focuses less on the disciples than on the Jewish and Roman authorities - something that shouldn't be too surprising since his Christmas story is the one that featured King Herod. Throughout Matthew's gospel, he has focused on the response of the powerful to this God-with-us. So let's read, paying attention to the emotions of those in the story.

Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb.

Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint.

Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you."

The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message. And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there." -- Matthew 28:1-10 (NLT)

A lot of fear in the first part of the story - and understandably so. The Roman soldiers are so afraid they fall down as though dead - ironic, since they're guarding what they think was a dead man.

The women, on the other hand, see their fear transformed into joy. An angel appears to them and tells them what's happening: Jesus has been raised! Then, on their way to find the rest of the disciples, they encounter Jesus himself. Jesus appoints them as the first Christian apostles, sending them to announce the good news of the resurrection.

This is the story we have in the four Gospels, the Easter story. Before we dive into what sets Matthew's story apart, let's celebrate again how Jesus' resurrection transforms our fear into joy by making the impossible a reality!

## BREAK

Matthew tells us the story of guards who were so afraid they passed out. But they weren't the only ones afraid; the women were afraid too.

The other gospels tell us they had come to finish the burial process. This is an important note: The women were *not* coming expecting to find the tomb empty. These are the women who made it to the cross, even when the rest of the disciples had abandoned Jesus. And *even they* did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead.

This despite the fact that, on at least three separate occasions, Jesus told his followers he was going to be raised.

And it wasn't a very well-kept secret. How do we know? Let's back up and read what happened on Saturday, the day between Jesus' execution and his resurrection.

The next day, on the Sabbath, the leading priests and Pharisees went to see Pilate. They told him, "Sir, we remember what that deceiver once said while he was still alive: 'After three days I will rise from the dead.' So we request that you seal the tomb until the third day. This will prevent his disciples from coming and stealing his body and then telling everyone he was raised from the dead! If that happens, we'll be worse off than we were at first."

Pilate replied, "Take guards and secure it the best you can." So they sealed the tomb and posted guards to protect it. -- Matthew 27:62–66 (NLT)

The religious leaders who had been opposing Jesus since he was starting out had heard about his prediction that he'd rise from the dead.

Those guards? They were there to keep anyone from breaking into the tomb. Roman soldiers, the most powerful, well-trained, well-equipped army in the world, facing away from the tomb, looking for threats from without.

Do you wonder at their conversations? Were they grateful for a puff detail - knowing at most they'd have to fight off a handful of untrained, would-be revolutionaries?

Were they laughing at the superstitions surrounding Jesus? Did they recount how many other would-be leaders they'd put in the ground? Joke about how few of them had come back to life?

And then the earth moves. The stone - sealed to prevent this very thing - rolls away and the tomb opens.

The danger for these guards comes not from beyond the tomb, but from within it.

And that's exactly what the religious leaders were afraid of. Which is why they do what they do next:

As the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and told the leading priests what had happened. A meeting with the elders was called, and they decided to give the soldiers a large bribe. They told the soldiers, "You must say, 'Jesus' disciples came during the night while we were sleeping, and they stole his body.' If the governor hears about it, we'll stand up for you so you won't get in trouble." So the guards accepted the bribe and said what they were told to say. Their story spread widely among the Jews, and they still tell it today. -- Matthew 28:11–15 (NLT)

Those religious leaders knew exactly what Jesus' resurrection meant:

He was right. About all of it. About God's way in the world being the way of the meek, the poor, the peacemakers. He was right about loving your enemies and welcoming the stranger and the powerful being pulled down from their thrones.

And they couldn't let word about that get out.

So they lied.

They made up a preposterous story - that those same pathetic disciples who abandoned Jesus when the Jewish soldiers arrested him - that *they* somehow got the better of Roman legions.

Why?

Because God raised Jesus from the dead. Which meant the whole world was turned upside down.

Friends, this is the true power of Easter. In a world that is filled with pain, Jesus is making all things new.

In a world compromised by rampant individualism, Jesus offers us a way to see ourselves as part of one body.

In a world that puts profits over people, Jesus offers a reality where the poor, not the wealthy, are the blessed ones.

In a world that wants to ignore pain, bury trauma and skip past sin, Jesus offers a way to engage the pains of history with grace and love that heals everyone.

In a world that offers a very narrow image of healthy family relationships, Jesus offers a spiritual family with room for every kind of person to find their place.

In a world that insists God is male and white, Jesus reminds us that each person bears God's image, and we all need each other to be faithful.

In a world that imagines God is on our side, fights our battles and hates those we hate, Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to seek out God's image even in those we hate, and work alongside him to create peace.

Do those sound like pipe dreams?

A world where we truly care more about others than ourselves?

A world of economic justice? A world of gender and racial harmony? A world where nations don't war?

Friends, these would be pie in the sky were it not for one simple fact:

God raised Jesus from the dead. In that single action, God affirmed for the whole world that Jesus' way is life. The world he imagined is not false; it's the world he's creating right now, among us.

## Communion + Examen

Jesus' death and resurrection make a new world possible. Let's bring it in together.

How does Jesus' resurrection open up spaces of liberation for you?

Where does Jesus' resurrection challenge places you're comfortable with injustice?

How is God calling you to reconnect in this next season?

## Assignment + Blessing

Preview of Easter Series