

## Matthew 27:45-54

<sup>45</sup>From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>46</sup>And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>47</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." <sup>48</sup>At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. <sup>49</sup>But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

<sup>50</sup>Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. <sup>51</sup>At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. <sup>52</sup>The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. <sup>53</sup>After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. <sup>54</sup>Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

## John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

## **A DOWN-TO-EARTH EASTER**

Christ is risen! Turn to the person next to you and say, "Christ is risen!" Now turn to the person next to you and ask, "What does that mean?" That's not an easy question to answer, is it? It means you're here at church, for one. We're here to celebrate the anniversary of the Resurrection, but I believe that too many people think about the Resurrection only in terms of the past, like they think about the Fourth of July, as something that happened a long time ago, and it was certainly an important event, but we may have lost a feel for just how significant the event really was. Two hundred thirty-eight years have passed since the Declaration of Independence was signed and passed by the Continental Congress, and amidst our barbecues and fireworks we may not appreciate what was at stake when those fifty six men put their signature on a document and the thousands of colonists who participated in a revolution that put many people at great risk and cost many

people their lives. Likewise amidst the Easter egg hunts, the bunnies and the parades, I wonder if we've lost our connection with the resurrection and its significance. So this morning let me remind you.

If you asked anyone how significant the resurrection of Jesus was, you'd get answers ranging from "it didn't really happen" to "it changes everything." Clearly I believe it means everything though I confess that my life, my words, my deeds don't always indicate that - I'm a big fan of God's grace, but I'm also a struggling disciple, struggling with a heart that should care more, should do more, and should love God with the same intensity that God loves me. I suppose I'm here because I have a sense of how much God loves me, indeed how much he loves all of us, and I care that there are a lot of people out there that could benefit from knowing how much God loves them. And Easter is God's perfect way of showing that love. There are two components of Easter that I want to discuss. First is resurrection, and second is Jesus. Easter is the resurrection of Jesus. Both components are essential and interconnected. Let's talk first about resurrection...

Why is the Resurrection important? Because it's about our life *HERE, ON EARTH. It was flesh and blood that was resurrected.* Perhaps you know of some folks that you might say are "so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good." You probably don't know too many unless you happen to be one of them. You might recognize them by the bumper sticker on their car: "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." (I like the responsive bumper sticker: "In case of rapture, can I have your car?") Their conversations often include biblical references to the rapture. They've read a few more than sixty-six books in their lives; the books of the Bible and any required reading they had in school, and maybe a few books about the rapture. They'll quote you scripture passages, in King James English, related to the rapture, perdition or damnation, and when you find yourself in their company, you will find that involuntarily you are slowly back away from them and looking for the nearest exit. That's why you may not know many of them, because they tend to congregate with their own kind, sometimes waiting together for the rapture. As a pastor I'm familiar with "rapture theology" and the sort of person who embraces it; I sometimes find myself in the company of one or two. If I'm given the opportunity to speak with them, I question them and I try to bring them down to earth if I can. I ask them why God would want to whisk us away from this planet, this world he created and declared "good." We should cherish the earth and not be anxiously waiting to vacate it. In fact we should be trying to save the earth, because God certainly is working on saving it. God resurrected a human being. Jesus died, but his spirit didn't go to heaven right afterwards. He walked and talked and breathed and ate fish *after* the resurrection. His body was different; he could disappear, reappear, enter and exit through closed doors. The disciples didn't always recognize it was him until he said something or did something to cue them in. But he resurrected in body, not in Spirit. What does this tell us? *THAT THE HERE AND NOW IS IMPORTANT! IT'S IMPORTANT TO GOD, AND IT'S IMPORTANT TO US.* God did not place us on this earth to just get by until we die and go to heaven. Our bodies are good; even our *old* bodies are good - a little sore at times, some pain here and there - but they're good. And God cares about us in the here and now. And just as God resurrected Jesus in a new body, so too will he make the earth new as well. So point one: the resurrection of the body shows us that the here and now are important to God, just as they are important to us.

Second, God resurrected Jesus! I don't think it would matter too much if God resurrected *me*. I might like it, but I'd probably freak a lot of people out, and I doubt if anyone would have had any clue why me. The resurrection wasn't just about God doing some magic trick - God could resurrect anyone God chooses, *BUT GOD CHOSE JESUS.* The resurrection only makes sense in light of Jesus' life, and to be honest with you, we really don't know that much about Jesus - almost all we know of him is in the New Testament, and the New Testament isn't that big. But there is enough in the Bible to convince anyone that Jesus is worthy of our praise and our allegiance. For me to tell you that *he-was-the-Son-of-God-who-died-for-our-sins* does not do him justice; it may be true, but a simple comment like that ends up raising questions, some silly questions like, "*If I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, will I go to heaven?*" or "*Is there a place I can plug in my cell phone?*" or "*Do I have to share a room with any of those folks who are waiting for the rapture?*" To simply say that Jesus

was/is the-Son-of-God-who-died-for-my-sins doesn't get to the root of *his* message. It also raises more serious questions like, "Why did Jesus have to die?" "Did God order Jesus to die?" And there have been and still are a lot of BAD answers to those questions that are being tossed around in the church. You shouldn't reduce Jesus to a title; it doesn't begin to explain who he was anymore than a one-page resume tells us what a person is really like.

So briefly let me tell you why the resurrection of JESUS is important. Jesus' entire ministry on this good earth focused on establishing God's reign in the here and now. God had created us to live peacefully, joyfully, lovingly on this good earth, and we screwed up. God set the rules: we broke them. We tried to figure out ways to get ahead of others, to get more than others. The strong began to dominate the weak, deceiving them, taking advantage of them, robbing them, terrorizing them, torturing and murdering them. Chaos prevailed both on an individual level, with spouses lying to one another and neighbors fighting neighbors, and on a more social level with kingdoms and governments enslaving, extorting, subjugating, and terrorizing entire nations in order to keep their power. And sin on both an individual and a social level are very much alive today. Jesus came not only to set an example of how individuals need to treat one another; his message about the kingdom of God challenged the entire system of domination that had been the status quo since anyone could remember. He marched into Jerusalem proclaiming God's kingdom. He cast out the money changers for God's kingdom. He was ultimately crucified because he was advocating God's kingdom. Not a kingdom in the clouds where our spirits go when we die *BUT A KINGDOM HERE ON EARTH WHERE PEACE AND JUSTICE ARE THE ORDER OF THE DAY. Jesus lived out that peace, freedom, and justice here on this good earth, yet he was crucified by those who ruled by violence, oppression, and injustice.*

Now do you see why the resurrection of Jesus was so important? God has declared Jesus to be the winner! The old order that's based on selfish gain and might-makes-right has failed! God's kingdom has prevailed! The victory over sin and death has been won, though the war still rages. The kingdom of God is upon us, and it's spreading!

And Jesus calls us to join that movement; that's what he means when he tells us that to gain life we must die, that the greatest is the one who serves the other the most, that following him means that we carry a cross – when we bear witness to the kingdom of God, we cannot put our *selves* first; we put God and his kingdom first. In Christ we are a new people representing a new order, representing the kingdom of God that is being established on this earth in the here and now. Jesus' resurrection is proof positive that God is a God of the here and now who is on our side as long as we're on his side. Jesus' resurrection is the greatest reason of all to celebrate, as long as we are part of his kingdom. May the magnitude of that truth fill you each day with a joy beyond measure. Amen.