

Because He Lives... // 1 Cor 15 //

WALNUT CREEK

(Announcement)

Many of you know that earlier this week my mother went to be with the Lord, and that fills me with all kinds of emotions this morning. I'll admit, there was a big part of me that did not want to be up here today, as it has been a really difficult week, but on the other hand it is precisely the hope of today that has given me the ability to get through this week. There is something about Easter Sunday that can best be celebrated in the midst of deep sorrow.

I've had two conflicting emotions at work in me this week--one is a hollow, gnawing sadness that comes from losing one of the most significant figures of my life. The other is this genuine and indescribable joy, thinking about what my mom is seeing and experiencing today. My mom gets to celebrate Easter in Heaven this year. What's that like? I'm excited to be here, with all of you at Walnut Creek--this is awesome--but my mom has the best seat in the house today.

Plus, I knew I better get up here and preach today because one day I'm going to see her again, and I know she'd say, "Oh, son, don't feel sorry for me. Why wouldn't you preach? Get off your butt and get out there and tell people the incredible hope we have in sadness." Except she'd never, ever, ever say the word "butt."

So anyway, after talking to my dad, we both knew she'd want me to stand up here exactly where I'm standing and talk to you about the hope that Easter brings to people living under the shadow of death. And so that's what I am going to do.

Listen, whether or not the resurrection is true, you should want it to be true. Tim Keller says to imagine you got an official letter in the mail saying that a distant relative you didn't know that well had died and left you millions of dollars. You'd likely be skeptical. I mean, why would someone you haven't spoken to in years suddenly leave YOU all that money? But you would at least look into it, and you would hope that it's true!¹ That's how the Apostle Paul assumes you and I would approach the question of the resurrection. Everything in us should want it to be true.

In his biography of Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson records that just before Jobs died, he was asked whether or not he believed in God. Jobs said that throughout his life he'd had seasons where he did and seasons where he didn't, but as he was facing the prospect of his own death, he found himself believing in God more and more. "Why?" the interviewer asked. "Because," Jobs said, "I just can't accept that the body just turns off one day and then it's all over--you're gone forever; and then one day the sun of our solar system goes out and that's the end of human history. There's got to be more to it than that; we can't just be an illusion of consciousness arising from a fortuitous cosmic accident." "Incidentally," he said, that's why he never liked to put on-off switches on Apple products--because he didn't like the concept of being able to just flip a switch and turn something completely off.

¹ My paraphrase

So, I'll say it again: whether or not the resurrection is true, you should want it to be true. And so the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, gives us the incredible news that ***It is true***. Someone has entered into our greatest fear, death, defeated it and overturned it forever.

1 Cor 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (the prophecies in Scripture: no less than 3000 places in the Old Testament that foretell the coming of Jesus--giving details about where he'd be born, what he would be like, how he would die, and many other things), verse 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Not only is it true, Paul says, it is the core of all that we believe and teach. And if it didn't happen, Paul says, all the rest of Christianity is false. He says in vs 19, **"If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."** (15:19)

Christianity is not primarily about a better way to live, or about how to have a fuller or more complete life here. It's about unflinching hope in the face of death.

Nor is the Christian Easter hope some kind of Spring-time *"it's been a dark winter but there's a new birth of better days ahead"* kind of hope. The Christian hope is built on the actual resurrection of Jesus. Jesus died an actual death on an actual cross and his actual body was

put into an actual grave and 3 actual days later he actually walked out and left that actual tomb actually empty. And a bunch of people actually saw him. Imagine that you witnessed the death of one of your friends; you went to their funeral and saw them buried. And then a week later they come walking up to you at Starbucks, sit down and have a cup of coffee. That's what the resurrection was like.

Well, you ask, "How do we know that it happened?" This is not a place I can present a full-scale defense of the resurrection, but let me at least point out some of the pieces of evidence Paul uses to press his point:

The first, he says, the Scriptures. All this happened according to prophecies in the Old Testament. Literally thousands of places where the coming of the Messiah is foretold. You should read and study it if you never have. The coming of Jesus was communicated through direct statements and symbols and foreshadowings on nearly every page of the Old Testament. Honestly, this might be the most convincing evidence of all to me. It's like you are hearing someone described by 30 different authors over 1500 years and then he in the Gospels he shows up and you say, "That's him! That's him!"

Secondly, Paul points to a series of eyewitnesses:

- **"He appeared to Peter,"** and then after him, to all of the Apostles. These Apostles, Peter first among them, would go to their deaths proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive. You say, *"Well, maybe they were lying. We all know throughout history lots of people who die for a lie. Think about the soldiers from Russia right now."* Yes, but people don't typically die for something they know to be a lie, if they have nothing to gain by it. The Apostles gained no power or privilege or prestige by claiming Jesus had been raised

from the dead. It brought them only persecution, pain and poverty. Nor was it just commitment to Jesus' teachings that kept them going--as in, they believed in his teaching so much and just wanted to see this movement take hold and so they made up these exaggerations about his resurrection and maintained them until their deaths. Peter himself is a pretty convincing example here. Peter--after he'd walked with Jesus for 3 years and heard everything Jesus had to teach--denied Jesus 3 times in the space of a few hours as Jesus was being crucified in order to save his own skin. That same Peter, who caved in fear 3 times before the crucifixion, would go on to his death proclaiming that Jesus was Lord, never once caving or changing his story. What changed for him? He saw the resurrection.

- "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time." That's important because some people dismiss the resurrection as wishful thinking or hallucination--kind of like when you really miss somebody and so you imagine that you see them and talk to them. Paul says, "500 people don't typically hallucinate at once and hear the same things and corroborate the same story." And when Paul writes this, all these people are still alive. He says, "Go ask them to tell you the stories."
- Paul says, "Then he appeared to James." You know what's remarkable about that? James was the half-brother of Jesus. According to Josephus, the secular Jewish historian, James became the leader of the Jerusalem church and was stoned for his belief that Jesus was the resurrected Son of God. James started out not believing his half-brother Jesus was the Messiah--we know that because the Gospels tell us that in a couple of places.² But something convinced James that his older brother was the Son of

God and worthy of worship. **Question: How many of you have an older brother? Raise your hand.** What would it take to convince you that your older brother was God in the flesh and worthy of worship? You say, "Ha. Son of the devil, maybe. But not, 'Son of God'." What convinced James?

- Finally, Paul says (vs. 8), "What about me? I was the last person who wanted Jesus to be alive. I'd built my life and career on him not being the Son of God. But something happened that changed my course completely."

All these things show you that this was not a fairy tale. It actually happened. And sure, you can come up with a different theory about what happened, but I'm telling you that none of them are as convincing as the simple that Jesus actually raised from the dead.

And because that's true, Paul says, I see everything differently.

1. Because he lives... Jesus is who he says he is.

- Paul says, vs. 9, "...I was formerly a persecutor of the church." *But now, he says, I proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.* Paul had previously found the message of Jesus objectionable. If Jesus was the Messiah, why was there still pain in the world? If Jesus was the Messiah, why was Rome still in charge? But, Paul said, "if Jesus was raised from the dead, then my opinions about his message are irrelevant. If he was raised from the dead, he is who he says he is and did what he said he did."
- I want to say this sensitively, but I know some of you who won't come to Jesus because of unanswered questions. Maybe they are similar to Paul's questions: **If God is love**, why is there so much pain in the world? If God is real, why didn't he answer this prayer that I prayed? **And they are all valid questions.** And, I might add,

² John 7:5

all asked by the Bible writers themselves! I keep waiting for a skeptic to ask a question not already asked by a Bible writer but I haven't found one! (Did you hear that?)

- **But here's the point:** if Jesus is who he says he is, then there are answers to those questions even if we don't know them yet. Right? If we know Jesus was raised from the dead, that means there IS an answer to my question even if I can't grasp it yet.
- Years ago I was exploring the claims of Christ with a Muslim friend, and she was having the hardest time with the concept of the Trinity. She kept saying, "I just don't see how you could say there is only one God but he exists as 3 persons." And I tried every possible explanation and illustration and nothing satisfied her.
 - So, I asked her, "Suppose that suddenly Jesus appeared to you--walked right up to you in this room, and did something that convinced you that it was really him--shared some secret about your life that only you knew or something like that. And then he said, 'Listen: there is an answer to your question about the Trinity, but you're not going to understand it right now. But you can see that I am real and I am who I say I am; I just need you to trust me with that unanswered question for a while.' And I asked her, "If he did that, would you trust him?" She said, "Well, yes, of course." I said, "So the question is not 'Can you ever explain the Trinity satisfactorily to me;' the real question is, 'Is Jesus who he says he is?'" The next morning she called me and said, "I know he was raised from the dead. My heart has known that for a while. I still don't know the answer to all my questions, but I'm ready to follow him and I'll trust him with the answers."
- **That's the same question for you. Is Jesus who he says he is? Listen, I know you have questions, and they are real.** But if

Jesus was raised from the dead, you can trust him with those questions.

- Some of you pride yourself on being skeptical, on doubting everything. Ok. **What if you "doubted your doubts"?** What if you said, "If Jesus was raised from the dead, maybe my doubts and objections are not as significant as I think they are."

2. Because he lives... we can be forgiven.

I love what Paul says in vs. 9, **For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am...**

How does a former murderer go to being one of the fathers of the church? You'd think that there are **certain things that would get you canceled for life in the Kingdom of God**, and overseeing the torture and execution of innocent Christians would go in that category.

"But," Paul said, "because of the resurrection, I wasn't **canceled.**" The resurrection meant that I could be redeemed. You see, the resurrection meant that whatever Jesus was doing on the cross had worked.

The Scriptures prophesied that Jesus would die for the sins of the world. That every sin ever committed would be put upon him--**this was one of the reasons his cross was so unspeakably awful.** He was dying for murder, and betrayal, and dishonesty and selfishness and uncleanness and abuse. And because of that, Paul knew he could be forgiven.

And the resurrection means that this morning you can be forgiven, too. You say, “Not me, J.D. My sin is too bad. I’ve turned away too many times. I think I’m beyond his love now.”

- Paul would say, “Are you kidding me? I was a persecutor. A murderer. “But he was wounded for my transgressions. He was bruised for my iniquities. That price that brought me peace was laid upon him, and by his stripes I was healed. And that’s true for you, too.”
- On the cross, Jesus became your sin. All of it. He became your selfishness. Your compromised integrity. He became your broken promises. He became your marital unfaithfulness. He became all those things you’ve hidden, and lied about. God laid those things upon him. Think of your sin like this. (BOOK ILLUS: Imagine this Bible represents your sin, so that no matter how close you try to get to God... Well, God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us; our punishment was laid upon him, and by his stripes you were healed. Jesus died for your sin, put it away, so there’s nothing left between you and God.
- Think about your worst sin, your worst mistake. It was placed upon Jesus and he was punished for it. The penalty for our sin is death. Jesus, the perfect and innocent Son of God, was killed for your sin. Then his dead body was placed in a grave. 3 days later, the body of Jesus walked out, but your sin stayed there. And there your sin remains, buried in the deepest sea. I love how Corrie Ten Boom always said it, “God put our sin in the deepest parts of the deepest sea, and then put up a sign that said, ‘No fishing allowed.’”
- That’s what he offers to you, if you choose it. You have to choose it. One of the Old Testament pictures of the coming Messiah was the yearly sacrifice each Jewish family was required to participate in. Each year, the father of every family would bring a lamb--a

perfect, unblemished lamb--and he would lay that lamb on the altar and then lay his hand on the head of the lamb, and begin to confess the sins of the family that year. As he did that, the priest would slit the throat of the lamb. The picture was clear: the lamb was dying in the place of the family, for the sins they’d committed.

- It was a picture of the coming Messiah, and this is what we now do with Jesus. He’s died on the cross, but we have to place our hand of faith on his head saying, “I receive you as mine.”
- And it’s not just forgiveness and a new perspective we receive. Paul was CHANGED. When you trust Christ, the power of the resurrection--the power that brought Jesus’ dead body out of the grave--actually comes into you. In Christ, the murderer becomes the lover; the racist becomes the humble servant; the cheating husband becomes the faithful father, the addict becomes the trusted friend.
- Paul says, “*By the grace of God, I now am what I am. And that’s because God made him who knew no sin to become my sin, Paul writes, that I might become the righteousness of God in him. And now, in him, I am a new creation, the old has passed, the new has come.*” Friend, that can be true for you, too.

3. Because he lives... death has no more sting

In vs. 55, Paul says that because of the resurrection, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” Then Paul proclaims, “O grave, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

- The sting of death is its permanence. When you bury them, you feel like you’ll never see that person again. That their life is over and they are gone forever. But Christ has taken that sting away.
- On the cross, Jesus took the curse of death into himself, so that now, when we or a loved one enter death, it’s not permanent. It’s just a transition, and I don’t have to be afraid of it anymore.

- I remember hearing one time about a dad who was driving down the interstate with his little 3-year old daughter in the back in the car seat. Suddenly she began to scream, “Daddy, daddy a bee.” She was terrified of bees, and deathly allergic to them. So the dad rolled down the windows and was trying to shoo the yellow jacket out. But it wasn’t working, and the dad was panicking, so he pulled the car over, got out and jumped in the backseat and trapped the bee against the glass with his hand. After a moment, he pulled his hand back and the bee flew away. The little girl started to scream again, “Daddy, daddy, the bee, the bee!” But the dad said, “Sweetheart, that bee cannot hurt you anymore.” And he opened his palm and showed her the bee’s stinger lodged in the palm of his hand. On the cross, Jesus took the stinger of death into his hands so there would be no more left for us.
- And so now, when we approach death--while it is still incredibly sad, it has no sting. And that means I don’t have to be afraid of it. Or, let me change the metaphor.
 - There was a pastor I knew of, a little younger than me, whose wife died when his kids were young. He was driving them from the funeral service to the graveside. His 12-year-old daughter was sitting in the front seat, very quiet. In his funeral message, the pastor had referenced Psalm 23, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” His little girl said, “Daddy, what does it mean that mommy has gone into the shadow of death?” he was thinking about how to answer her when a big truck passed them going the other way, and the truck cast a brief shadow over their car. He asked his daughter, “You see that truck, honey? Would you rather be hit by that truck or by its shadow?” She said, “By the shadow, of course.” And he said, “The truck of death hit Jesus, so only

the shadow hit mommy.” Death is an enemy that we still hate, but we no longer need to fear. Death has been defanged. Its stinger is gone.”

- We often say at times of death things like, “I lost my mom. I lost my wife.” But in a truer sense, we haven’t lost them, have we? We’ve just lost contact with them for a while. That’s why we don’t say things like, “I’ll never see my mom again,” or “I’ll never see my wife again” or “I’ll never hug my grandma or hold my baby again.” **Because he lives, you absolutely will hold, see, and hug them again with your physical arms in the new world.**
- O grave, where is your victory--oh death, where is your sting?

4. Because he lives--our suffering is light and momentary

I don’t want to make light of your pain, and neither would Paul. Paul was personally familiar with the worst kinds of pain. The death of loved ones. Abandonment and betrayal by friends. Loneliness, isolation, even torture. Yet, Paul said, because of the resurrection, the worst of this pain is only temporary, and compared to what God has waiting for me in eternity, it’s--he says to the Corinthians--only “light and momentary.”

Many of you have heard of John Newton. He is the writer of *Amazing Grace*. Newton, if you didn’t know, started out his adult life as the captain of a slave ship. But then he had this radical conversion, and eventually locked arms with William Wilberforce and many other brave men and women to shut down the slave trade in the Western world.

Newton’s conversion to Christ cost him dearly. And people asked him how he remained joyful, even in the midst of pain, and he said, “Imagine a man who was told that he would inherit an estate worth

millions of dollars. You can see him grinning in his carriage on the way. Now imagine this man, as he rounds the last corner, with only a short mile to go, as his carriage begins to rattle. The axle comes undone and the carriage stops. Now imagine the man, with his estate in sight, inspecting his carriage and realizing it is broken. What a fool we would think that man, Newton said, if we saw him wringing his hands, and blubbering out through tears for the remaining mile, 'Oh no, My carriage is broken! My carriage is broken!' He'd be a fool because just up ahead is a greater fortune than he could possibly imagine.³

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Our pain now is only light and momentary compared to what is just up ahead for us. **Again, I don't mean to make light of your pain** or say it's only like a broken carriage wheel. I'm just saying that BECAUSE HE LIVES, it's temporary.

In the final moments before my mom died, my dad and sister and I were with her and as she struggled for her last breaths, a small tear formed in her eye. I don't know what caused it, but my dad took a Kleenex and gently dried it and stroked her face, and 3-4 minutes later she was gone. And all I could think about was that the next hand that touched her face was a nail-scarred one, who wiped away her final tear. I told my dad, "That was the last tear she'll ever shed." What a week my mom has had! What joy she experiences day by day in eternity.

Whatever pain you suffer--because he lives, it is all as Paul told the Corinthians, "light and momentary."⁴

³ Courtesy of David Platt

⁴ 2 Cor 4:17-18

Lastly, **5. Because he lives, living for him is the only wise choice**

Paul says in vs. 58, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." If Jesus resurrected, what we do with Jesus and for Jesus is all that really matters in life.

My mom and dad had a phrase they taught me, '*Only one life to live, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last.*' If Jesus is resurrected, that is true.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul said it this way, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." Question: How would you fill that statement in? "To live is _____." To live is pleasure, family, money, golf? Paul said, "To live is Christ" and because of that he could complete the verse, "And to die is gain." You see, here's the thing: anything else you put in that first blank besides Christ makes that last blank "loss." If for you to live is money, then to die is loss. If for you to live is recognition, or family, or pleasure, then to die is loss. But if for you to live is Christ, to die is gain.

Friend, what you do with him is the most important decision of your life. There's only one Savior who has overcome the curse of death for us by dying under it, in our place, and then rising again. And what you do with him determines whether death for you is permanent, or just a transition.

In the Rocky Mountains there is a famous dividing line--it's marked by a big sign, I've been there and stood on it. All the water that falls to the East of that line flows downward toward the East, forming into streams and rivers that eventually empty out into the Atlantic Ocean.

All the water on the West side of that line does the same thing headed toward the Pacific. That means two raindrops, falling side by side through the sky, only inches apart, land on different sides of that line and end up oceans apart.

That same thing happens here, right now. Seated side by side, inches apart, are two people who will land on different sides of Jesus. One ends up in the unspeakable joys of heaven. The other ends up in an eternal place of death and darkness. Two people, side by side today, that end up eternities apart.

Listen: **For those in Christ, this world is as close to hell as you will ever come. For those outside of Christ, this world is as close to heaven as you'll ever come.**

And what you do with Jesus, makes the difference between those two. And so, this morning, I make no apologies about it: I want to give you a chance to respond to Jesus if you never have.

I want to invite you right now to receive what Christ has done for you. John 1:12. Salvation is a gift, and like any other gift, you have to receive it!

The heart of Christianity is not a new approach to morality; a new reform to live better or get more religious. The heart of Christianity is something Jesus DID for you that you have to receive. It's why we say, **"Christianity is not about turning over a new leaf but receiving a new life."** The Bible term is "being born again" or "being saved." Has that happened to you? It can right now.

My second invitation is for you to be baptized. *(In fact, right now we have scores of teams that are getting into place and ready to help coordinate what's about to happen)* **Baptism** is a public profession of

your faith in Jesus. **It's like your wedding ring: you're supposed to do it as soon as you receive Jesus as your savior**, just like putting on your wedding ring is the first thing you do after saying your vows. I want to give you a chance to do that today, too.

- You say... "But J.D. I brought **no clothes...**?"
- This is your first act of obedience--it's what tells everybody else you are serious about Jesus being Lord.
- **You say, "My family is in the lawn, will they be able to see me get baptized?"** Yes! Once we start baptizing they can walk right down here to celebrate alongside you.

BTW, there are some of you who may have trusted Christ some time ago, but have never done this. This is your chance today.

- **You say, "Yeah, but this feels complicated**--even if you have clothes for me, getting wet on a Sunday morning when I wasn't planning on it? **I just don't think this is all that important. I can follow Jesus just fine."** Listen: I'm not sure you want to start out your relationship with Jesus by telling him which of his commandments are important and which aren't. Talk about starting off on the wrong foot! If you're serious about his Lordship, obey his first command. If you won't obey this one, why would you obey the more difficult ones later?
- **You say, "I rode with someone and they don't want to wait for me."** They'll wait. I promise. If not, bring down with you and we'll talk to them and maybe they should get baptized, too.
- **You say, "But I've already been baptized as a baby."** We respect that, but did you know there are 27 baptisms in the book of Acts and in all 27 of them they believed BEFORE they were baptized. It doesn't make sense to put on the wedding ring before you're married, right?
- **You say, "I don't want to disrespect my parents.** They baptized me when I was a baby, and I feel like if I got baptized now I'd be rejecting that." Rejecting that? It's the opposite! What was their hope for you when they baptized you? That one day you'd grow up and follow Jesus! And now you are. You have the opportunity

to ratify their hope for you. This afternoon you'll get to call them and say...

- **You say, "I don't want to become a Baptist."** That's fair. But you're not being baptized in the name of a denomination, but in the name of Jesus.

Every follower of Jesus should be baptized as a profession of their faith in Jesus. If you haven't, you should do that today.

- **When my parents were first married, neither were Christians.** And my dad was in a service like this one, and a guy like me gave an invitation. It was one of those old fashioned churches where they sang all 218 verses of "Just as I am" until everyone had either been saved or left to go home. And my dad said he was standing there, 3rd or 4th verse of Just as I Am, gripping the pew in front of him--he was gripping the pew so hard he could see his knuckles were white--not wanting to let go and walk forward. And then, he said, all at once, he let go and stepped out. And everything in his life changed. Sometimes I think about how many things changed because he let go and stepped out. I sometimes wonder, "What if he had held on? How different would my life be?" Because he let go, my mom's life changed. My life changed. My sister's life changed. For those of you affected by my ministry, your life changed because my dad stepped out. I don't think it's over-speak to say that future generations will be affected by what some of you do in these next few moments.

Here's what's gonna happen: I'm going to lead you in a prayer so that those of you who want to receive Christ can, **and then I'm going to invite you to come forward and be baptized.**

Let's pray. (RECEIVE CHRIST?)

In just a minute, I'm going to stand you up, if you prayed that prayer, or you need to be baptized, step out. In one motion.

You say, "Well, I'm not sure... I still have questions?" Great. You can come forward to start a conversation—that's what all of these people in teal shirts are here for: to help you guide you on your next step. And if you're not ready, we'll take some time over the next few weeks to make sure all your questions are answered.

OK, on 3, stand and you come. 1-2-3. Summit, let's celebrate. CLAP.

Oh, one more thing: Don't come alone. It's a long way down here. If the person next to you is going and you know them, go with them. In fact, turn to them right now and say, "If you want to go, I'll go with you." Now come.