

CHRIST AROSE!
Easter Message
Essentially as given at:
New Life Church in Suffolk, VA
March 27, 2005

It is a privilege to be welcomed to speak to you this Easter Sunday. Your pastor has been a student of ours in the School of Divinity at Regent University. It is indeed special for me with my wife Rose to be with you this A.M.

Probably most all of us will at some time in our lives wonder if our faith is really all we profess it to be.

1. It could be at the time of utter surrender to Jesus Christ in a new and deeper way. The thought may occur: "Am I throwing my life away, or is the Christian faith all I have been led to believe."
2. Perhaps as a college student we took a course in philosophy or world religions and were brought to think, "Am I right when millions of people think differently."
3. Or maybe we attended a funeral of a loved one or of a dear friend and asked ourselves the question: "Will I really be with him or her again?"

There is one foundational fact that makes ALL the difference. The resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the cornerstone of our faith as Christians.

I will present our message this A.M. from two overall perspectives:

- I. The Historical Proofs for the Resurrection
- II. Resurrection Provisions for us.

I. Historical Proofs for the Resurrection

Around the turn of the 19th century, a young Englishman began to study seriously the life of Christ, with a definite feeling that the history of the life of Jesus rested on very shaky foundations. Being steeped in the widespread higher criticism of that day, he had accepted the belief that the narratives of Christ's life and death that have come down to us are unreliable.

Having a "deep and even reverent regard for the person of Jesus Christ, he decided to write a short work on the last seven days of His life and get at the facts that lay behind the Crucifixion.

As he carefully studied and analyzed the facts of his pursuit his perspective shifted, not suddenly, but “almost imperceptibly, by the stubbornness of the facts themselves,” until he found that he had landed upon an “unexpected shore” and was no longer able to write the book which he had started out to write.

Since that time he completed a book, a book which gives the reasons why he changed his mind and which is a carefully presented case FOR the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The author is Frank Morison; the book: *Who Moved the Stone?* first published in 1930.

There are three lines of evidence that we may consider proofs for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A. Facts of the Empty Tomb

Matthew 28

Two women of Jesus’ disciples come to the tomb early Sunday morning to visit the tomb and anoint the body of Jesus with spices—a Jewish custom. They must have been initially surprised, but at some point an angel gives them the words of verses 5-6.

“Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying” (NASB).

The fact that the tomb was empty has been confirmed by a story that circulated in Jewish quarters in the first century and is referred to by early church fathers. Read Matthew 28:11-15. One early Christian recognized as the most important early church historian, Eusebius (3rd-4th centuries), has been quoted as saying “within a short time all of Palestine buzzed with the tale.” He also refers to a report made by Pilate to the authorities in Rome that the tomb was found empty.

Could the disciples of Jesus have done this, and then be willing to suffer persecution and even death to defend what they knew to be a lie?

Could the enemies of Jesus have removed the body and possibly destroyed it otherwise? Then why was this not made known when disciples of Jesus began to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection a few weeks later in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified? There is no evidence that this occurred.

John R. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, has said: “The authorities’ silence was as eloquent a proof of the resurrection as the apostles’ witness” (p. 50).

As the angel said: “Come, see the place where He was lying.”

But there is evidence that we may consider even greater.

B. The Appearances of the Risen Jesus to His disciples after His death

We see a reference to this in our text Matthew 28:7-10. The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to His disciples is confirmed in Acts 1:3: “To these [the eleven apostles] He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs. . . .” Several subsequent texts in the book of Acts tell of how the apostles bore witness to Jesus as alive after His death.

Such appearances are summarized by Paul in I Corinthians 15:3-8. This includes an appearance to 500 at one time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote this, and could thus vouch for the fact.

How might these appearances be otherwise accounted for?

1. One widely circulated opinion is that the disciples had “hallucinations,” that is the thought they saw what was not really there.
 - a. But what about hardheaded Peter and doubting Thomas?
 - b. How could so many all at one time have the same hallucination?
 - c. How could we account for these appearances happening several times and then stopping after 40 days?
 - d. How could we account for the fact that they were psychologically unprepared for such hallucinations. The record says the apostles at first tended to disbelieve (Luke 24:36-39).

Luke says in Acts 1:3 that by many “convincing proofs” Jesus showed Himself alive.

C. The Fact of the Christian Church soon afterward

Matthew 28:15 hints to this fact: the news of the empty tomb was widely spread among the Jews, Matthew writes, “and is to this day.” This was some decades after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

By this time the church had experienced a phenomenal growth . The question that must be faced is this:

How could a small band of disillusioned, fearful, disappointed followers of the earthly Jesus muster enough zeal and courage within 6 or 7 weeks after the death of their Leader to launch a movement which resulted in a whole network of churches being established, stretching from Jerusalem, through Asia Minor and on to Rome in less than forth years?

The early Christians began preaching the news of Jesus’ being raised from the dead after His crucifixion in Jerusalem, the very place Jesus was crucified. And converts were won by the thousands, including Jewish priests.

In Colossians 1:5-6 Paul wrote that the gospel had come into all the world and was bearing fruit. This was roughly 30 years after Jesus died and was raised.

By the 4th century Christianity had so penetrated the Roman Empire that Emperor Constantine paved the way for Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman world.

III. Resurrection Provisions for us

- A. First of all, in His resurrection we have evidence that Jesus was and is, who He claimed to be—the *unique* Son of God, one with the Father as no one else was.

We live in a day and country when many other religious beliefs are present. Muslims, Buddhists, and other religions are very present. Along with that is the increased secularism in our culture, not to mention the craze of what is commonly called “new age religion. We live in what is sometime referred as the post-modern era, in which there is no absolute truth in the realm of final beliefs.

What is the evidence that Jesus Christ is THE way, THE truth, and THE life?

Jesus Christ is alive!

As the apostle Paul wrote long ago in Romans 1:4, speaking of God’s Son:

Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. . . .”

- B. The resurrection of Christ guarantees that we are accepted and loved by God for Christ’s sake, who died for our sins and failures and was raised.

According to Romans 4:25 Christ was delivered because of our sins and was raised because of our justification. To be “justified” means to be declared “righteous.” Our standing before God is one of holiness because we are “in Christ,” God’s perfect Son and His sacrifice on our behalf. Thus the letters of the New Testament are addressed to “saints,” even though in various ways early believers often fell short of the ideal as God’s people.

Because we are justified in God’s eyes, the Holy Spirit is at work, making us more like Christ practically in our manner of life. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. We are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, as we become more and more like Christ in our daily lives. But it is all based on our acceptance as God’s beloved and forgiven children, whom He does discipline as there is need.

- C. The resurrection of Christ is the strongest evidence of our own resurrection yet to come.

Paul says in Romans 8:23 that we, having the first fruits of the Spirit, await the redemption of our body—the is our resurrection! Note Romans 8:18-25.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20 that Christ is the “first fruits” of those who are “asleep,” that is, those who have died. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive, that is those who are “in Christ.”

To what extent does our hope determine how we look at our daily life with its decisions now? THE BEST IS YET TO COME. Does this make a difference in how we look at our lives now?

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Going back to our Matthew text, it concludes with the charge to the apostles to make disciples of all peoples. Christ promises to be with His people to the end of the age.

This is now happening in an unprecedented way, as far as modern times are concerned. In 2002 a book was published by Oxford University press entitled *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity*, by Philip Jenkins. Some significant statements include the following:

“We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide” (p. 1).

“Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America” (p. 2).

“One way or another, inside the Catholic Church or outside it, Third World Christianity is becoming steadily more Pentecostal” (p. 67).

I have a friend who preaches in Venezuela (South America). He is reporting seeing numerous people coming to trust in Jesus, and as miracles of healing are occurring.

Why is this happening? The risen Jesus is meeting people in ways He did long ago, and people are responding! Yes, the Lord Jesus is live and at work today, as people come to trust Him!

Amen.