

We Believe: Life to the Full!

1 Cor 15:51-58, Matt 28:1-8

Good morning! I am so glad you joined us today! This is clearly the most unusual Easter worship I've ever been involved in. But maybe our worship today is not that different from how early Christians celebrated Easter. For decades Christians met in homes, just as you are doing right now. On that first Easter the news of the empty tomb started spreading— from home to home and person to person. There was no big group gathering then, just friends telling friends the amazing news. Kind of like today.

One time a pastor was talking to a bunch of kids about Easter. As he got to the exciting conclusion of the story—Jesus coming back to life, rising from the dead and appearing his followers—the pastor asked the kids what do you think Jesus said to them when he first appeared on Easter? One little girl raised her hand and answered—Ta-Dahhh!

It is all too easy to think of Easter as some kind of a trick. Kind of like David Copperfield making the Statute of Liberty disappear on live TV. My question for you today is— What if it wasn't a trick? What if it is true? ----- What if it really happened?

What would it mean to you if Jesus really was resurrected—physically raised from the dead? If it were true it would mean that there is a lot more to reality than we'd imagined. It would mean that we have to take what Jesus said seriously. When Jesus claimed to be God, when he gave us moral teachings, when he showed us by example how to live—all of those things are suddenly impossible for us to ignore. Jesus told us that death isn't the end, and the resurrection means he was telling the truth. The reality of Easter changes everything—our hope for the future and even our purpose for life today.

Did Jesus' resurrection happen? I think this is the most important question you'll ever answer. The stakes are high. I know that some of you watching today believe it couldn't have happened. "That's Nonsense," you're thinking-- Everyone knows dead bodies don't come back to life. That's just a made-up story.

Easter confronts us with a miracle. Some people say that “miracles can never happen.” That isn’t a statement of fact, it is an assumption, a claim of faith. Believing miracles are impossible is just as much a faith statement as believing God exists. Instead of assumptions, let’s look at the facts of Easter. How do we get reliable information about past events? Through history.

Historians have looked at the facts of Easter. They apply the same methods that they use to analyze any past event. What have they found about Easter? Historian Gary Habermas surveyed what all kinds of historians concluded about the resurrection over the last 40 years or so. He looked at work by historians of all kinds of faiths and of no faith at all, including all kinds of Christians, Jewish historians, atheists, and agnostics. He found that there are some facts that are so strongly established that basically every historian agrees about them. Let me give you a short version of those overwhelmingly agreed upon facts and then you can decide what’s the most reasonable conclusion to draw from them.

You can remember this core of facts with this acronym—FEAT. F-E-A-T, like an amazing accomplishment. The F is for fatal torment. Jesus of Nazareth really existed, he was arrested, and he was killed by crucifixion by the Romans. Scholars across the board all agree that the crucifixion of Jesus is an indisputable fact. As liberal scholar Dom Crossan said, “that Jesus was crucified is as sure as anything historical ever can be.” The Roman soldiers were professional killers. The spear in his side proved he was dead. They did their job well. So we can be confident that Jesus lived, was crucified and was killed.

The E stands for Empty Tomb. On Sunday morning Jesus’ body was gone. The gospels all start the empty tomb story with Mary Magdalene and other women discovering it. We read it together from Matthew this morning—Mary Magdalene was the first to the tomb and saw that it was empty. Later she was also the first to see the risen Jesus. The original witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection were women! In the first century, in both Jewish and Roman cultures, women were not considered reliable witnesses—their testimony wouldn’t be accepted in court! No one *making up* a story about Easter would put *women* as the witnesses to the empty tomb on Sunday morning. You wouldn’t base your story on unreliable witnesses! The only

reason to say that women discovered the empty tomb is because that is what actually happened. That is why all 4 gospels agree on this—it is what happened.

Even Jesus' opponents agreed that the tomb was empty. Later on in Matthew it describes a plot between the religious leaders and the guards at the tomb to claim that the body had been stolen. Obviously if there was still a body in the tomb it would have been easy to produce it. They could have said: "What do you mean he's alive again? Here's the body!" But that never happened. Instead the authorities had to make up a story about the body being stolen to account for the undeniable—the tomb was empty.

The A in Feat stands for Appearances. The historians overwhelmingly agree that many, many people believed they met the risen Jesus in the 40 days after Easter. All of the earliest accounts—by Peter, Stephen, Paul—ALL of them tell how Jesus died, was raised from the dead, and appeared to people. The appearances are key--they show us that Jesus is alive again and not just a missing body.

Our second reading today was 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. Paul was describing our future resurrections—something we can look forward to if Easter is true. But at the beginning of that chapter Paul recites powerful historical evidence of the resurrection. Historians believe it dates all the way back to just *two or three years* after Jesus' crucifixion. It is maybe the very earliest post-resurrection account. Paul wrote "I handed on to you what I received"—he is passing on what he'd learned from Peter and James and the apostles in Jerusalem—"that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." This ancient creed then goes on to list evidence—Jesus "appeared to Peter and the twelve and more than 500 brothers and sisters, most of whom are still alive, and to James and all the apostles and last of all to Paul himself." Why does Paul add "most of them are still alive?" Because Paul was saying—go check it out! Go ask the witnesses for yourself!

The evidence for these appearances is so strong that even the *atheist* historian Gerd Ludemann conceded that it is "historically certain—historically certain!-- that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ." Ludemann tries to explain those experiences away as visions,--some kind of group hallucination I guess, but even he agrees they happened. Liberal scholar Paula Fredriksen says

that the disciples' conviction that they had seen the risen Christ is "historical bedrock, facts known past doubting."

Finally, the T in FEAT is transformed lives. Transformed lives. People whose lives were changed because they met the risen Jesus. I want to point you to 3 undisputed examples. First—James the brother of Jesus. All through the gospels we see that Jesus' family and especially his brothers thought he was crazy. Jesus' brothers were NOT disciples. But not long after Easter Jesus' brother James is suddenly the leader of the church in Jerusalem. What happened? As resurrection scholar William Lane Craig put it—what would it take to convince *you* that your brother is the Lord? What it took was Jesus appearing to James after his crucifixion. That changed the course of the rest of James' life.

A second life transformed by the resurrection is Paul—Paul was originally a pharisee dedicated to wiping out Jesus' followers—until one day Jesus appeared to him on the road. That changed everything for him. He went from persecuting Christians to being the biggest, most successful messenger for Jesus of all.

The third example of lives transformed is the church itself. Killing Jesus should have been the end of the Jesus followers. That's the way it worked. Rome killed a troublemaker and the sheep scattered. Instead, this time the very opposite happened. Less than two months after Easter Peter preached a sermon in Jerusalem—right where Jesus had been killed! Peter claimed that Jesus was risen. Peter wasn't contradicted, instead, FIVE THOUSAND people became believers that day. Somehow killing Jesus wasn't the end of the Jesus movement. Because it wasn't the end of Jesus. His resurrection changed everything. His band of fishermen and back country hicks were transformed into world changers. Against all odds they became the founders of the largest religion in the history of the world—one that crosses all language barriers, all national boundaries, all cultural and ethnic barriers, one that circles the globe.

But that transformation was very costly for those first disciples. Peter, Paul, James, Stephen and many others all died as martyrs. People do not die for something they made up. No one is tortured and killed to protect their own lie. These early disciples risked everything because of Easter. They knew Easter is true, not a story they'd made up.

Chuck Colson was Richard Nixon's hatchet man. He was a White House lawyer during Watergate. Eventually he went to jail for it. Colson said later that Watergate showed the truth of Easter. He said that Watergate was a conspiracy between 12 of the most powerful people in the country—and they could not keep their secret for even three weeks. Three weeks! They were not facing crucifixion or torture or anything more than embarrassment and maybe some time in a white collar prison. But that was enough to break that conspiracy in a few days. Jesus' followers never went back on the Easter story—not for the rest of their lives. The resurrection of Jesus was always their main point—even when sticking to it meant jail, torture, or death—even the agony of their own crucifixion.

The transformed lives continued after that first generation of believers. According to Sociologist Rodney Stark, the early Christian church grew at the astounding rate of 40% per decade for three hundred years, despite tremendous persecution from the Roman Empire. That has never happened in history. Why? Because the risen Jesus continued to change people's lives! Life transformation is still happening today. You do not have to rely only on historians—there are many people today, including folks right in this congregation! People whose lives have been *transformed* by Jesus. I would not be standing here today if I wasn't convinced that Jesus is alive and active, today. If I wasn't convinced that Jesus is crazy about you and wants you to know it! Easter isn't just a past event, it's a present reality. On Easter God pulled life out of death. That new life, that new creation, that new beginning is available to each of us, right now.

The resurrected Jesus changes both our future and our present. First, it means that we can look forward to our own resurrections! It means that death is not the end. There is a life after death, and it isn't just a wispy church service on a cloud—it is physical life—life in healthy resurrected bodies-- in a perfect, renewed creation. God launched his new creation project on Easter, and eventually all of creation will be renewed-- where we'll live amazing, joy filled, creative lives. Art, food, music, stories, worship, love, dancing, laughter—it will all be there, and Jesus' followers will get to take full part! Our hope extends far beyond this life!

But Easter doesn't just give us hope for the future, it also means that everything is different for us right NOW—today! We get to live in relationship with God and are sent out to

do our part in his rescue mission in the world. Jesus' resurrection breaks down the barriers between us. We can turn and live with God today and start to experience that new creation in our own lives, right now. Eternal life starts right here. And it is a life full of meaning and purpose and joy. As Bible scholar Tom Wright says, at Easter God's new world has been unveiled, and we are now invited to belong to it! You are invited to join in God's new creation party!

Don't miss out! The Risen Jesus is inviting us into a new *quality* of life—eternal life with him, where we can discover joy and hope and love---even in the middle of a pandemic. This Easter, make this the start of the best part of your life—start following this Jesus and see where he takes you.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—Hallelujah! Thank you!! Our words fail to describe how you are saving us. Thank you for pulling us out of our pit of selfishness, pride and revenge. Help us to trust you and walk in your new life of love and joy and purpose and hope. Use us, Lord, to be beacons of your life, your truth, your love, your rescue, all along the Wasatch Front. Hold us close and lead us Lord. In your name we ask it, Amen!