Resurrection Revisited

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[0:00] Well, good morning to all of you, especially if you are joining us for the first time, if you're here from out of town, visiting, maybe here for one of the baptisms.

We're so delighted that you're here to celebrate Easter with us. I don't know if you can tell by the energy in the room, but this is a service that we look forward to all year. Easter is a really big deal, right?
Easter is a holiday that most people look forward to and celebrate, regardless of what they believe, if they consider themselves to be religious or not. Most people love Easter, and so it's easy because of that, because it's so widely loved and celebrated, it's easy to lose sight of what it actually means. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that if we actually take time to understand the meaning of Easter, it has the power to completely transform our hearts and lives. It goes way beyond just another holiday.
So this morning, what we're going to do is look at this passage in Mark chapter 16 that Jeff just read. Mark is likely the earliest gospel account to be written down, probably sometime between 60 and 70 AD, within the lifetime of people who were there on that first Easter.
[1:16] So we're going to look at this passage together, and we're going to see that Easter is about three things. Easter is about mystery. It presents us with a mystery that we have to wrestle with.

It's about mercy. And finally, it's about mission. Easter reorients us toward a new set of purposes that God has laid out for our lives.
So mystery, mercy, mission. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for Easter, and we pray that by your grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, you would open our hearts to the truth of Easter.
Lord, that we would leave here changed as a result of that, as a result of these hallelujahs and these resurrection praises, Lord, that this would continue to ring in our hearts, Lord, long after we depart from this service.
We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, the mystery of Easter. From our vantage point, in 2024, in a place like D.C. or wherever you have come from, from our vantage point, it's very easy to look back into history and to imagine all kinds of scenarios around the claims of the resurrection.
[2:43] You know, the early Christians had lost their leader. They wanted to keep the movement going, so they started spreading this idea that Jesus rose from death to lend legitimacy to their movement.

Right? Various versions of that. That's honestly what I thought for years before I came to faith and became a Christian. My assumption is that the early followers of Jesus, they weren't ready for the movement to die, and so they started spreading this idea, Jesus is alive, Jesus is alive, to keep things going.
On closer examination, we see right away that that starts to fall apart. It just simply can't be the case. Let's imagine for a moment that we are the gospel writer, Mark.
And imagine that we're wanting to sit down and write an account that will convince the world that Jesus has risen. Already in Mark's gospel, up to this point, Jesus has clearly told his disciples multiple times.
In chapter 8, in chapter 9, in chapter 10, here's what Jesus says. He says to his disciples, here's what's going to happen. I'm going to suffer.
[4:02] I'm going to be killed. And then after three days, I'm going to rise again. So if you're Mark and you get to this part of the story, chapter 16, what would you be inclined to say?

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You would be inclined to say, well, after Jesus' crucifixion, all of his disciples remembered his words, and so they waited patiently for three days. And on Easter Sunday, they all walked arm in arm down to the tomb.
And there was Jesus waiting for him just as he had promised. And they all hugged, and they laughed, and they sang, and they rang bells, and they all lived happily ever after.
If you're Mark, that's the story that you're going to want to tell. But that's not what he says. Right? The disciples are nowhere to be found.
Instead, we have these women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. And I hate to say it, but if you're making up a story that's going to become the foundation of your entire religion, you want it to be credible, and you want it to be convincing.
[5:18] And if that's your agenda, I hate to say it, but in this time, in this place, in this culture, you would never want to say that the primary witnesses to the foundational event that will give legitimacy to your entire religion were women.

A woman's testimony didn't have any credibility in this culture. And Mark had to have known that writing this would immediately undermine the credibility of his entire gospel.
So the only explanation is that Mark is not actually making this up. He's writing down, and maybe cringing while he does it, the things that actually happened.
And then we notice that these women, when the Sabbath ends, the sun goes down on Saturday night, they're going to buy spices. Why are they going to buy spices?
So that they can finish the burial procedure by anointing Jesus' body. They use spices to cover the smell of decomposition.
[6:23] Because ideally, eventually other bodies would be placed in the same tomb where Jesus' body had been placed.

The point is, they're expecting to see a dead body. And they are completely unprepared for what happens. They arrive early Sunday morning. They see this massive stone.
They've been worrying about how are we going to move the stone. It's been rolled away. And then they see a young man in a white robe, and this man says, you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.
He's risen. He's not here. See the place where they laid him. And look at their reaction. Again, you're Mark. You're writing this down. Foundation of your whole religion.
Look at the reaction of these women. It's not joy. It's not celebration. It's shock. It's alarm. It's stunned silence.
[7:25] This is how Mark ends his gospel account. The women see the empty tomb, and they're so terrified that they are trembling, and they cannot speak, and they run away in fear.

The end. This is because nobody in the ancient world anywhere believed in the bodily resurrection of an individual.
The Jews believed in a kind of national corporate resurrection at the end of all time when God restored the heavens and the earth.
The Greeks speculated about other places where one might go after death. There were platonic ideas and stoic ideas about other worlds or some form of afterlife that we might enter into.
As the historian N.T. Wright has said, the discovery that dead people stayed dead was not made by the philosophers of the enlightenment.
[8:23] Christianity was born into a world where everybody knew that its central claim was ridiculous. Let me just say that again. Christianity was born into a world where everybody knew that its central claim was ridiculous.

The early Christians knew it themselves. So the idea that the resurrection was somehow concocted by Christians looking for legitimacy just doesn't hold any water.
The idea itself sounded absurd. And what's more, the early Christians were ridiculed, and they were mocked, and they were tortured, and they were killed for making this claim.
They gained nothing by it. They suffered because of it. So the implication is this.
We need to resist the temptation to flatten the mystery of Easter by reducing it into spiritual platitudes and metaphors.
[9:28] Where people say, well, you know, Easter is really about the teachings of Jesus living on in our hearts. If they live on in us, then he lives on in us.

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Or people saying, well, Easter is really about how good things can come out of suffering. Or people saying, you know, Easter is really about new beginnings. It's about reinventing ourselves.
Now, maybe you think those are nice ideas, and they're nice ideas, but they have almost nothing to do with Easter. Easter confronts the world with a profound and fearsome mystery.
A man went into a tomb dead, and then he came out of the tomb alive. I like it. Let's try it again. A man went into the tomb dead, and he came out of the tomb alive.
Amen. Amen. Now, everybody, everybody, every human being on the planet has to answer the question of the resurrection. I don't care if you're religious, not religious.
[10:34] I don't care if you grew up Christian. This is your first time in a church. I don't care where you come from in the world. I don't care what your tradition and background may be. There's a huge variety of those things represented in this room.

I have no doubt. Now, every single man, woman, and child on the planet has to answer the question of the resurrection, the mystery that Easter confronts the world with.
Did it happen or not? So, everybody, at some point in your life, you have to be willing to look at the evidence, and there's a lot of evidence. There's great, a lot of great work that's been done on this. I mentioned N.T. Wright, his book, The Resurrection of the Son of God. If you've got the time and the energy, it's worth working through it. Everybody has to look at the evidence and decide, did it happen or not?
Because here's the thing. If it didn't happen, just take it from me. Don't waste your time with Christianity. I mean, there's not much to it apart from that.
[11:38] Go figure out what you think will make you happy. Go do that. If it didn't happen. If it did happen, right, if a man went in dead and he came out alive, that means that Jesus is the single most important person in history.

That means that all of this is true. That means that God worked through thousands of years of history to make it possible for you to know him.
And that means that if it's true, this is worth giving your entire life to. Right? So if it's not true, don't waste your time. But if it is true, this is worth giving everything to.
Because it's the most important fact in all of history. This is the mystery of Easter. And it confronts each one of us. But as we delve deeper into the story, there's also profound mercy to be found if we know where to look.
If we know the story up to this point, we know that over the last week before Jesus' crucifixion, all of his disciples abandoned him, especially Peter.
[12:51] No one worse than Peter. At the Last Supper, Peter valiantly promises that he will never betray Jesus. He will die for Jesus.

He will give everything to Jesus. And then later that same night, he forcefully, he vehemently denies even knowing Jesus multiple times.
It was the ultimate betrayal. And because of this, Peter knew very well he was no longer a disciple. Right? The one job of a disciple is to loyally follow their master.
He had failed. Peter had one job. He failed. Peter had one job. So what would we expect this angelic messenger to say when these women encounter him in the tomb?
By the way, if you ever see those spineless weaklings again, you tell them Jesus wants nothing more to do with them. That's what we would expect. To be totally honest, that's what I would be very tempted to say.
[13:58] That's not what Jesus says. That's not what the messenger says. The messenger speaking on behalf of Jesus says this. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.

There you will see him just as he told you. Not only does Jesus plan to reunite with his disciples, but he mentions Peter by name.
Tell the disciples and Peter, meet me there. All the commentaries pick up on this. Peter had betrayed Jesus. He no longer considered himself to be a disciple.
If Peter heard that the message was only aimed at the disciples, he wouldn't have come. Because he said, well, that's not me.
But Jesus wants Peter to be there. Why? Because Jesus plans to reinstate Peter. Because Jesus has already forgiven Peter.

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[15:02] Because Jesus wants to fully restore him despite his failure of faith. And this shows us something incredibly important. That Jesus never gives up on us even when we give up on him.

Jesus never gives up on us. He never stops pursuing us. And that's because of his mercy. And this is precisely why the gospel has the power to transform our hearts and lives.
John Newton is known as an abolitionist. He wrote one of the most well-known songs about God's mercy called Amazing Grace. In his early life, though, John Newton was a slave trader.
In 1748, he had a near-death experience during a storm at sea. And he converted to Christianity.
Now, what a lot of people don't know is this.
He converted in 1748 to Christianity because of a near-death experience. But then he continued to work in the slave trade for years after his conversion.
[16:18] A lot of people imagined that he got converted and then immediately everything changed. He quit the slave trade. He became an abolitionist. He continued to work in the slave trade for years.

And then, after he left it, about six years later, it took three more decades before he publicly renounced it and began to speak against it and became an abolitionist.
You know, we tend to want stories of immediate transformation because they're inspiring and because that's what we want for our own lives. We know the things that need to change and we want it all to happen tomorrow.
And we love stories that make it seem like that's possible. Now, that can happen and God can do that. But most often, that's not how real transformation happens.
Because most of us, quite honestly, are just like Peter. You know, there are times when we feel deeply committed to following Jesus.
[17:20] Times of prayer where we say, God, I'm ready to give everything to you. Now I'm going to get serious about it. And then there are times when we really struggle. There are times when we don't care.

There are times of deep apathy. There are times of active rebellion. And all of that can happen over the course of the same day. You know, I can be fervently praying and giving my heart to Jesus first thing in the morning and by noon, I've already walked away.
I've already forsaken him. Sometimes, trying to get our kids out the door to go to school on time. I've already forsaken Jesus. Right? It can all happen over the course of the same day.
And so it's so easy for us to think that God must reach a point where he gets fed up with us. Where he's tired of giving us more chances because he realizes it doesn't make any difference.
But that is not how God's mercy works. It may be how our mercy works. It's not how God's mercy works. It's not how God's mercy works. When we become followers of Jesus Christ, at best, our commitment to him is shaky and conditional.
[18:35] But his commitment to us is steadfast and eternal. Because of Easter, his mercy is infinite.

It never runs out. Let me just get a little more personal. I think that there are people here this morning who are here because Jesus has asked for you by name.
I think there may be people here this morning who stopped considering yourselves to be disciple a long time ago.
And maybe you're just here out of obligation. Maybe you're just here and it feels like a coincidence. That may very well be how Peter felt.
Are you sure he meant me? I think that you're here because Jesus has requested you by name. Because he wants to reinstate you.
[19:42] Because he wants you to know that he's already forgiven you. Because he wants you to know that no matter where you go or what you do, he's going to pursue you and pour his love into your life. And there's nothing you can do about it.

You're here because he wants you to know that he will never, ever, ever let you go. And he wants to reinstate you. And he wants to share his life with you. And this is how we change.
Not all at once, but over time, gradually. We have victories. We have failures. We come back again and again to that well of mercy.
And we drink deeply. And over time, our hearts are softened and they melt and they change. So Easter brings this mystery that confronts us, but it also brings profound mercy.

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Inexhaustible, infinite mercy. As much as we can drink. And then finally, Easter is the beginning of a new mission that God has inaugurated in the world that we are invited to become a part of.
[20:53] The angelic messenger says this. He says, go. And then he says, Jesus is going before you to Galilee. Jesus is going before you to Galilee.

And the word that he uses doesn't just mean Jesus will meet you there. It's not a logistical word. It's more of a military word. It's a word that describes a commander leading troops into battle.
So you can imagine all those movies that you see where there's the battle scene and there's the leader, the commander, the commander is out front of the army and everybody's cheering.
And then there's that moment where the leader turns with their sword and they just start running alone across the battlefield. And then all of the soldiers look at one another and then they all start running behind.
Surely you've seen movies like that. That's what this word is intended to convey. Jesus goes before you. He's already charging. The mission has begun.
[21:55] And he wants you to follow along behind him. Right? Not only do we see Jesus charging into battle, but we recognize that it's a very different kind of battle.

It's not a military battle. It's a spiritual battle against all of the darkness and all of the evil in the world. What we need to understand is that in the decades before and after Jesus, there were dozens of messianic movements in Israel.
Many of them were military uprisings. And in every case, the same thing happened. The messianic leader was eventually captured. They were killed.
And then shortly after the leader's death, each of these dozens of movements collapsed. Nobody knows who they are.
Nobody knows what they were about. They fell apart and they're lost to history. Everybody went home and that was it. After Jesus was crucified, not only did the movement continue, it exploded with a kind of power that was utterly unexplainable.
[23:15] In the course of about 300 years, Christianity spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. The Christians were the ones holding the empire together even as it crumbled, caring for the sick as the plagues ravaged the land.

And there was a profound change in Jesus' followers. This also comes from N.T. Wright. Jesus' followers went from being fearful, living in hiding, to all of a sudden being extraordinarily inexplicably bold.
They were ready to go to the ends of the earth and die for the gospel. And many of them did just that. Even more impressive is the fact that their agenda changed.
Up until the resurrection, they were longing for Jesus to start a military uprising and get rid of the Romans. When Jesus is arrested, they draw their swords.
They're ready to fight. But after the crucifixion, after that first Easter weekend, we see them embodying Jesus' agenda.
[24:24] We see them beginning to love their enemies. We see them beginning to pray for their persecutors. We see them beginning to pray for their sins. We see them beginning to pray for their sins. We see them beginning to pray for their sins. We see them, the first Christian martyr.

As he's dying, he's saying, Lord, do not hold their sins against them. Do not hold this sin against them.
He's speaking the same words that Jesus himself spoke from the cross. The only explanation for this is Easter.
It's the resurrection. It's the truth that Jesus continues to lead his church. They are not just mimicking Jesus. This is Jesus in them, through them, going before them.
This is the risen Christ continuing to lead his church as he has always done. The mission is built around this hope that Jesus goes before us.
[25:30] He goes before us. He's already there. He's already working. You know, I've been thinking a lot about this as we, we as a church, if you're visiting, we've bought a building in the Shaw neighborhood in D.C.

And in about a year, year and a half, when the renovations are done, we're going to be moving there. It's going to become, God willing, our long-term home and ministry outpost and place of worship and formation and community outreach.

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And we've been praying about this for years. And we feel like God has miraculously provided this in ways that go beyond our expectations. And I've been thinking about this idea, the mission that we see begin at Easter.
Because I've been spending more and more time in Shaw. I've been spending a lot of time there. Deborah, other members of our team have been there. And some unexpected things have started to happen.
We're getting to know a number of neighbors there. And these neighbors have shared with us how excited they are that we are coming.
[26:42] One older African-American woman who's lived there for decades said, we are so excited that you're coming. We need more churches.

Which is extremely humbling. I mean, the kind of grace in that posture is, I was floored when I heard that.
And what's more, I've found that when I walk the streets there, as I pray for the neighborhood, so when I walk back and forth, when I'm down there to meet somebody or whatever, I just kind of pray when I walk.
And as I meet people, as I meet more and more people, I have felt this kind of deep and growing sense of love and rootedness for that neighborhood.
And I have to just be honest, I'm feeling that more for the Shaw neighborhood than I have felt anywhere that I've lived in the 17 years that I've been in D.C.
[27:39] And I can't explain it. And Deborah and I were talking about this, and she feels the exact same way. She was like, we want to move to Shaw now. And I believe that these are signs that Jesus is going before us.

I believe that these are signs that Jesus is preparing the way, that there are people of peace, you might say, who are already excited to welcome us because Jesus is already at work in them.
You know, we were invited to go to the Advisory Neighborhood Commission meeting last week called the ANC. It's a local form of government here in D.C., community leaders.
And we were invited to come to the ANC meeting for the area where our church is located and to introduce ourselves to some of the community leaders. And when the woman leading the meeting got to the part of the agenda where we were to introduce ourselves, she said this.
She said, and now we have some good news. Let's meet the people from Church of the Advent.
And I have to say, that really stuck with me and continues to stick with me, and I'll tell you why.
[28:59] It's because as soon as she said it, this question popped up into my mind. Are we good news? And will we actually be good news?

Or not? Of course, the answer is clear. Jesus is the good news. Jesus has already been at work in this neighborhood ever since long before we existed.
Whether or not we are good news or bad news depends on this. Will we follow him? Will we follow his agenda?
Will we follow his priorities? Will we follow his motivations? The church does not exist only for our comfort, our convenience.
The church does not exist only to meet our emotional needs. It can't ever really fully do that. The church exists primarily to follow Jesus on his mission, to bring the gospel wherever it is needed.
[30:15] The church exists to follow Jesus on his mission, to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. The resurrection means that God cares deeply about this world, and he plans to restore it.

And as people of the resurrection, following Jesus means joining in that work of renewal. That means as a church, we don't just focus on the areas that are most convenient for us, or the most comfortable for us.
It means we go where there might be high crime, where there might be a need for tutors, or mentors, or foster families, or affordable housing.
It means we go wherever Jesus is already at work, because he goes before us. So this is the meaning of Easter.
This is the meaning of Easter, if we want to pull all of this together. Easter confronts us with a mystery, and we have to decide, did it happen or not?
[31:24] Was that tomb really empty? If it did happen, it means that we now know where to find infinite, unlimited mercy.

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And some of us are in touch with that mercy, and some of us, as I said earlier, you need to be reconnected to that mercy, you need to be reinstated. Some of us, you're here, and this is the first time you've ever heard about it, and you feel that stirring.
This is the time where you need to respond to Jesus in prayer, and say, yes, I want to follow you. I want to give my life to you. Please forgive me. We need to be reinstated, or reaffirmed as disciples, and then we need to be about what Jesus is about, recognizing that he's already at work, and he is calling us to follow behind him, because he's already charging across the battlefield.
And so the decision we need to make is, will we follow him or not, wherever he leads us? It calls us out of our comfort, it calls us out of our security, because following the resurrected Jesus means recognizing that he has already gone before us to bring about a resurrected world.
Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the resurrection. It goes beyond words to describe the difference that this makes in the world, and we know that for centuries upon centuries, it has animated and catalyzed your people to be willing to give themselves, sometimes to give their lives, for the sake of the kingdom of God, and we pray that it would be the same with us.
[33:08] Lord, we pray that in all ways, we would be Easter people, we would be resurrection people, we would be people of hope, we would be people of sacrifice. Lord, that we might make your name great, that one day bells might ring throughout this city, that this city would be known not as a center of human power and influence, but as a place where the risen Jesus Christ reigns as Lord and King.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

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