

## Easter Message

April 9, 2023

Luke 24:1-12; 35-37, etc.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Happy Easter everyone. We're so glad you've joined us for Easter worship this morning, to celebrate the fact that Christ is risen, *indeed*.

As Christians, we truly believe that— that the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead actually took place, and is, in fact, *the* defining event of all history. Easter marks the climax of the biblical story—God's Story.

It's the message of the resurrection of Jesus that makes God's Story far better—far more captivating and compelling and hopeful—than any competing story this world has to offer. So much so, I'm convinced, that God's Story— with Easter as its high point— is the only story worth building your life on.

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer built his life on the hope of Easter. Indeed, he staked his life on it. It's what gave him the courage to resist Hitler's regime, and it's what gave him the courage to face his own execution in a Nazi prison camp.

A German SS officer who witnessed Bonhoeffer's hanging would later describe him as "brave, devout, and composed" as he went to the gallows. In a final note to a friend, prisoner Bonhoeffer wrote these words: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

An unshakable belief in Easter—that Christ is risen *indeed*— is what gave him such remarkable confidence that death would not be the end of his story. That's because, as Bonhoeffer himself once put it:

**The resurrection is God's "yes" to everything Jesus accomplished on the cross.**

Had Jesus remained in the tomb that would have been the end of the Story. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:

... if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins... But in fact, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead...<sup>1</sup>

The resurrection is God's "yes" to everything Jesus accomplished on the cross. Without Easter, Good Friday would just be... Friday. Without Easter, there would be no forgiveness

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17, 20a (NLT)

of sin, no hope of eternal life, and no hope for the ultimate restoration of this world. But the Bible says in Romans:

...he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical accounts don't leave room for interpreting the resurrection as anything other than an actual historical event. They have all the literary marks not of legend or fairytale, but of eyewitness accounts.

For example, Luke reports in chapter 24 of his gospel that the initial witnesses to the empty tomb are women (see verses 1-12). Now in that place and time, women held low status in society. Their testimony wasn't even admissible in court. So if you wanted to make up a credible-sounding fake-news story about Jesus being raised from the dead, you would never make women your first eyewitnesses.

The only motivation Luke could possibly have had to record that women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb was that *they actually were*.

Later in Luke 24, the risen Jesus appears among his disciples, and says:

Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don't have bodies, as you can see that I do.<sup>3</sup>

And then he asks them:

Do you have anything here to eat? <sup>4</sup>

So they give him a piece of broiled fish, and he munches it down, right there in front of them.

Jesus is saying, "Check me out, guys. I'm not just an impression in your mind or heart. I am here, in the flesh!" It reads like an eyewitness account.

What of the transformation that we see in Jesus' disciples from that point onward? What happened to turn this group of confused, hiding, fearful men into apostles, willing to boldly

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:4 (NLT)

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24: 39 (NLT)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24:41b (NLT)

proclaim the message of the crucified and risen Jesus at the cost of their own lives? Would they die for fake news? Would they die for a lie? No. They had encountered the risen Jesus in the flesh, and had become convinced that death would not be the end of their story, either.

So like the apostles, and like prisoner Bonhoeffer, we stake our lives on the fact that this isn't just some made-up story. We believe it's a *true* story—one that can eternally transform your own story. It's a far better story than any competing story the world has to offer. In the time that remains, I'd like to briefly break down why that is.

First, in God's Story, with Easter as its high point, **there actually is a future for us**—a future beyond this life.

That's because according to the Bible, the resurrection of Jesus was the first of what will be many resurrections, including yours and mine, if we put our faith in him. In 1 Corinthians the Bible says:

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who have died.<sup>5</sup>

So Jesus' resurrection is hope for our own resurrection— for a future that doesn't end with death. But not all stories this world offers include a future beyond this life.

For example, the great Greek philosopher Epicurus taught something that many people believe today: when you die, that's it. You're gone. Curtains. Lights out. Therefore, according to Epicurus, death is nothing to be afraid of, because when you're dead you'll have no consciousness or sensation of that fact. You'll simply cease to exist.

Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking, who himself died about 5 years ago, basically agrees. He said:

I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.<sup>6</sup>

Don't be afraid of the darkness of death, says Hawking. Take comfort in the nothingness, says Epicurus.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20 (NLT)

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven>.

Do you think they offer a better story—a story you’d want to build your life on—a life with no future?

Another story that *does* offer a future is that of the Stoics, who said that when you die, you continue to exist, but not as your personal self. You become part of the substance of the world, part of the “all.”

It’s kind of like the “circle of life” in *The Lion King*. You die, you decompose and you become fertilizer, so that plants and other life forms can emerge from what once was, well... *you*. You’ll become part of this impersonal circle of life, say the Stoics, so take comfort in that.

Do you think the Stoics offer a better story—a story on which you’d want to build your life and stake your future?

God’s Story—the story of the Bible with Easter as its high point— not only offers a future beyond this life; it offers, secondly, **a future that is personal**. When Jesus was raised, he said:

Look... You can see that it’s really me!<sup>7</sup>

And because *his* resurrection is the pattern for *ours*, it means that we will be raised not as minerals or plants in the circle of life, but as *ourselves*. So with resurrection, the future is personal.

And that’s so important, because *love* is personal. Everything that gives us meaning in life, everything that satisfies our souls, has to do with loving, personal relationships. And yet the Stoics would ask us to take comfort in being part of some circle of impersonal existence?

I much prefer resurrection. I much prefer the idea that even though death may take loved ones away from me, or take me away from loved ones, death is not the final word. I much prefer the Story that says I will be reunited with all my friends and loved ones who have died in Christ.

And I much prefer the Story whose Author promises that one day I will get to see him face to face, and dwell with him—with *God*— forever, in the community of his people, filled with and surrounded by love. Only the story of Easter offers the hope that our truest and deepest human longings will be forever satisfied.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:39

God's Story—with Easter as its high point— not only offers a future beyond this life; it not only offers a future that is personal; it offers, thirdly, **a future that is embodied and earthy**. Some religions tell of a future of disembodied, spiritual bliss, in some far-away heaven. But Jesus' resurrection is the pattern for ours, and his *physical body* was raised from the dead.

One day, as the Bible says in Philippians:

He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own...<sup>8</sup>

So God's promise is not that we'll have some disembodied existence, but that we will enjoy physical bodies that will never wear out or succumb to injury or disease. Maybe some of you are thinking of loved ones that you've lost—surely it was devastating to watch their bodies wasting away with disease, or to see their life so suddenly snatched away by an accident or some type of medical trauma.

Although we grieve our losses, we also worship with hope this Easter Sunday, knowing that those who have put their faith in Christ will get their bodies back—glorious, strong, vigorous, imperishable bodies that illness and death can never, ever touch again. For the Christian, the resurrection means that cancer or Alzheimer's or car accidents and other such tragedies don't get the last word when it comes to our bodies. The risen Jesus does!

Not only that. Instead of an eternity in heaven *away from* this earth the Bible teaches that heaven will come down to earth when the risen Jesus returns to set the whole world right, once and for all. The Bible says in Revelation:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.<sup>9</sup>

And of Christ, the Bible also says:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Philippians 3:21 (NLT)

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 11:15 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> 2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NIV)

When we think of the afterlife, we all too often think of sitting on clouds, strumming harps, and having endless worship services. Hey, I love church services, but how boring would an *endless* service be?

As Christians, we may not often think of ourselves as kings and queens who will rule over a restored creation, but one day we will be, all because of the renewal of creation that began when Jesus rose from the tomb on Easter Sunday. One day, we will be raised to rule with Jesus; we will be given unimaginably important roles to play and richly meaningful and fulfilling assignments to do.

I don't know about you, but to me, this is a story that offers a future I can get excited about. It is a much better story than other stories that are floating around—stories of disembodied heavenly bliss in some distant unseen realm.

Fourthly and finally, this future hope of resurrection also gives us **purpose and perseverance in the here and now.**

God invites us to join him in writing the final Act of his Story. Those of us who follow Jesus are called to be agents of God's mission to restore this world. Our purpose here as Christians is to proclaim and to bring the hospitality, hope, and healing of the risen Jesus to every nook and cranny of this broken world, with all that we are, with all that we have, and in everything we do.

To me, God's Story—with Easter as its high point—offers a much better story for us not only to build our future on, but to build our lives on right here and now—a life of purpose and meaningful service that goes beyond building our own little kingdoms of self.

So many of the alternate stories this world has to offer are stories about living for ourselves alone. Those stories just don't compel me anymore. God's Story—with Easter as its high point—is the one story on which I will build by life, and stake my future.

Even when life and ministry in this world gets hard, as it inevitably does (with the COVID years having been especially difficult), it's the closing words of the Bible's great resurrection chapter—1 Corinthians 15—that keep me going—and I share these words to encourage all of you who serve the risen Jesus:

Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.<sup>11</sup>

Some of you really need to hear that this morning. Your labour in the Lord is not in vain. Please repeat this after me, phrase by phrase: *Because of Easter... my labour in the Lord... is not in vain.*

There's a popular book called *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*.<sup>12</sup> If you are persuaded this morning that God's Story—with Easter as its high point—is the best story—the kind of story you could build your life on, and stake your future on, I want to invite you to consider taking one or perhaps even both of the following two steps:

- First, start connecting regularly with this church community if you don't already have a church home. God's Story shapes who we are as a church, and will in turn shape your own story as you become a part of what we're doing here. A great place to start is by joining us each Sunday for worship at either 9:30 or 11:30 a.m., and from there, you can connect further still. Consider yourself invited!
- Second, maybe God is calling you to follow the example of this morning's baptismal candidates, and to get baptized yourself at our next baptism service. As you [listen to the baptismal candidates share their stories, and] witness them taking this basic and vital step of following Jesus, if you sense Jesus whispering to you, "Hey, next time, I want to see *you* in that tank," then I encourage you to go to visit the baptism page on our website. There, you can learn more about baptism, and you can also let us know of your interest in being baptized: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism)

No matter where you are in your journey, my prayer for each and every one of you, is that more and more, God's Story—with Easter as its high point— will become the Story on which you build your life, and stake your future.

It's the Story on which our baptismal candidates have decided to build their life, and stake their future. Today, we're excited to baptize:

**9:30** – Joanna

**11:30** – Giah, James, Claire and Abby

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact*.

Easter is an especially meaningful day to be baptized, because baptism signifies that your own story is being shaped by and swept up into the grander story of Jesus' death and resurrection. As the Bible says in Romans chapter 6:

... don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.<sup>13</sup>

At this time, I'd like to invite our baptismal candidates to come up...

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<sup>13</sup> Romans 6:3-5 (NIV)