

EASTER - JOHN 3:16

A few weeks ago during our missions month I shared the stories of 5 people who had come to faith in Jesus because they all met the risen savior. I once heard the story of a Muslim in Africa who became a Christian. Some of his friends came and asked him, "Why have you done such a thing?" He answered, "Well, its like this: Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions. You didn't know which way to go; and there at the fork were two men—one dead, and one alive—which one would you ask to show you the way?"

Today we are here to remember that Jesus not only died for our sins but He has risen. There are billions of people around the world today who will pay little to no interest in Easter. They will go about their life and business as if nothing at all had even happened. As believers we know that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the most important event that has ever or will ever happen.

Today I am not going to talk so much about WHAT happened but WHY it happened. Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16. You've seen this verse probably at a lot of sporting events. Some guy usually with colored hair holds up a John 3:16 sign in the end zone. Most of you know this verse by heart so let us quote this verse together:

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life

In this one verse the entire Gospel is summarized. It is the good news in a nutshell. If you were only going to memorize one verse in the entire Bible than this would be the one I would recommend because it is the Good News summarized. In fact, you can even see the word "gospel" spelled out. Notice the letters "God's ... only ... Son ...perished... eternal... life"

Today we are going to tear this verse apart to see what it holds. I want you to notice first of all that there are 25 words in this verse. The middle word, the thirteenth word is the word "Son" which means Jesus. The first 12 words are all about what God has done; "*For God so love the word that He gave His only begotten.*" The last twelve words are all about what man must do; "*That whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*" That in itself is a picture. Jesus Christ came from heaven to earth to be the bridge between God and man so we could know what God is like.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE GOD'S GREAT PASSION – for God so loved the world

What do I mean by that? The first step is realizing how much God loves you. It all starts with this.

1 John 4:9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Even if you were the only person who had ever lived on earth and you needed a savior, Jesus Christ still would have come to earth and died for you. That's how much He loves you.

Eph 3:17 And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

This passage says that God does not simply want us to understand His love in an intellectual way, he wants us to experience it. There are Christians who have gone to church for years but they have never truly experienced God's love. They understand in their heads that God loves them but they have never truly experienced it in their hearts. My prayer today (as was Paul's prayer to the church in Ephesus) is that today God will grant you the power to truly GRASP God's love and to KNOW it experientially.

How long is God's love? It is long enough to last forever. That's what makes it different from human love. Have you noticed human love wears out? That's why we have so many divorces. God's love will never stop loving you. It is long enough to last forever.

God's love is wide enough to be everywhere. There is no place that you could go in life that God's love is not with you. You will not always feel it. In fact, sometimes you're going to FEEL ALONE. But you will never BE ALONE. That is because God's love is everywhere. There's no place that you can be where God isn't. It's wide enough to be everywhere.

God's love is deep enough to handle everything. No problem, no pressure, no stress, no difficulty. You say, "I'm in the pits right now!" There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.

God's love is high enough to overlook all your mistakes, no matter how big that mistake may have been. God loves to forgive. He loves to help you start over.

To understand Easter you have to understand God's love. That is the starting point. Understand and recognize and acknowledge God's passion for you.

2. APPRECIATE GOD'S GREAT PRESENT – that He gave His only begotten Son

God did not simply SAY that He loved you. That would be easy. God SHOWED His love for us by sending Jesus. God's gift to us is Himself. God loved the world so much that He didn't send an angel or prophet or godly teacher or a moral, ethical leader. God came himself. Why did He come and die?

Jesus came because our sins had separated us from him. The Bible says, "*The wages of sin is death.*" That means spiritual death. What we earn in running from God is eternal separation from Him. For justice to be done somebody has got to pay for all the things you've done wrong in life. Either we have to pay it or somebody else has to pay it for us. That's where God steps in and says, "I'll do it. I created you. I made you. I love you. I will pay for all the things you've done wrong."

That is why Jesus came. He became one of us so that He could take our place. The crucifixion of Jesus was not a mistake. It was the reason He was born. It was the reason Jesus came to earth. No one took his life, He gave it up freely for us.

In the First World War a young French soldier was seriously wounded. His arm was so badly smashed that it had to be amputated. The surgeon was grieved that he must go through life maimed. So he waited beside his bedside to tell him the bad news when he recovered consciousness. When the lad's eyes opened, the surgeon said to him: "I am sorry to tell you that you have lost your arm." "Sir," said the lad, "I did not lose it; I gave it -- for France." Jesus did not lose his life, He gave it for us.

Jesus was crucified at 9:00 AM (the 3rd hour). At noon (the 6th hour) darkness fell over all the land until 3:00 in the afternoon. Though the sun was at it's highest there was nothing but darkness all around. The darkness which the crowds witnessed was nothing compared to the darkness which Jesus was experiencing on the cross.

Jesus cried out from the cross "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me". These are the only words from the cross which Matthew and Mark recorded – perhaps because they made such an impact on them. On the cross the sins of the world were placed upon Jesus. As Paul would latter write:

2 Cor. 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The wages of sin is death and death means separation. God cannot look at sin so he had to turn away from His only Son. Sin drove a wedge between God the Father and Son and, in that moment on the cross, they who had ALWAYS been together were separated.

The only man-made things in heaven are the scars of Jesus. We put those scars on him ourselves. We were the ones who sent him to the cross – not just Pilate long ago. We were the ones who drove the nails into his hands and feet. Jesus paid our debt. He took our separation unto Himself.

Dr. Joseph Haroutunian is a professor at an American Seminary. He came to America from Armenia. One day a well-meaning friend said to him, "Your name is difficult to pronounce and difficult to spell-- it could hurt your professional career. Why don't you change your name to Harwood or Harwell or something like that?" Dr. Haroutunian asked, "What do those names mean?" His friend said, "Well, nothing. They're just easier to remember." Dr. Haroutunian said, "In Armenia, when my grandfather was baptized, they named him Hartounian which means 'Resurrection.' I am Joseph Haroutunian and I will be a son of Resurrection all my days."

These are the basics of our faith. First, you acknowledge God's passion. He loves you more than you will ever know. Then you appreciate His present. That He gave His only Son. This is what God has done. So how do we respond? What is the next step?

3. ACCEPT GOD'S GREAT PROPOSAL – that whoever believes in Him should not perish

God has done His part. God has an incredible gift to offer you. Now it is time to do our part. The way we receive the gift is through believing in Jesus.

Rom 3:22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

There's only one condition to accepting God's proposal of eternal life for you. Only one. It is faith. You trust Him. You must believe in Him.

The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked 'No Entrance' and left through a door marked 'No Exit.' -- Peter Larson:

Believing is not just understanding or knowing, it is about trusting. It's not just saying, "I believe He's God." Big deal! You say, "I believe in Jesus." So does the devil but you're not going to find him in heaven. Many believe that Jesus was God (In *Newsweek* 82% of America would say this) It is more than a head knowledge. It's a heart knowledge. The word in Greek "believe" literally is the word, *pisteuo* which means, "to trust in, to cling to, to rely on, to commit to."

Let me explain it this way, I believe in Karl Marx. I believe he existed. I believe he's the founder of communism. But I'm not a communist. I believe in Hitler, but I'm not a Nazi. But I believe in Jesus and I'm a Christian. Why? Because I trust Him. I've committed myself to Him.

The events of Easter cannot be reduced to a creed or philosophy. We are not asked to believe the doctrine of the resurrection. We are asked to meet this person raised from the dead. In faith, we move from belief in a doctrine to a knowledge of a person. Ultimate truth is a person. We met him. He is alive -- Bruce Larson

So what do you do after you accept God's proposal? Here's the last thing you do.

4. ANTICIPATE GOD'S GREAT PROMISE – but have everlasting life

God's passion is for you. He has a present for you. The condition is that we accept through faith his offer. The promise is that if we do we shall live forever with Him.

All of us were made to last forever. One day we are all going to physically die but that will not be the end of our lives. We will spend eternity in one of two places. God wants you to be in heaven with Him and not in hell.

Everybody is created by God but not everybody is a child of God. Only those who choose and say, "God, I want to be in Your family." Only those who choose to believe and trust what Jesus Christ did.

Ellis Island New York was once the biggest immigration processing center in the U.S. It processed thousands of immigrants a day. All of these immigrants left their homelands through much difficulty to come to "the land of promise." They believed they could make themselves a new and better life here.

At the time, a trip to America took at least a month by boat. People were kept in dormitory rooms while they were being processed. They weren't much to look at from our 21st century American perspective, but I wonder what they looked like to the 19th century immigrants. Maybe to some of them, especially after months on a boat, they looked promising. Maybe it was the grandest room they had ever seen. And imagine with me that one person is so overwhelmed with the greatness of this room that he decides he will stay there forever.

And so when they try to finish processing him, he stalls it. He hangs up his pictures above the bunk. He unpacks all his clothes and moves right in. You would want to grab this guy and tell him how foolish he was being. You would want to explain to him that this place was a dump, and that America has so much more to offer him.

And yet, how often do we do the same thing. Surely, this earth is grand. But it is only the processing center. This life, especially our life in Christ, is much more grand than when we were dead in our sins. However, it's still just the gateway. The next world holds beauty and grandeur that is incomprehensible to us. We can become convinced that things like wealth, and fame, power, and

knowledge is the climax of our existence. We would be like the immigrant who thought the dormitory was his final destination.

I don't know if any of you knew this; but, the late great Prime Minister and British Statesman, Sir Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965), arranged his own funeral. There were stately hymns in St Paul's Cathedral, in London, England, that day; and, there was an impressive liturgy. But, at the end of the service, Sir Churchill had an unusual event planned. When they said the benediction, a bugler high in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral on one side, played "Taps," the universal signal that the day is over. There was a long pause - then, a bugler on the other side played "Reveille," the military wake-up call. It was Sir Churchill's way of communicating that, while we say "Good Night" here, it is "Good Morning" up there.