

EASTER – A NEW FUTURE

Does anyone have a cross necklace on right now? Have you ever thought about what that cross really is? Like the illuminated cross above the stage, it looks great. Originally, the cross was a brutal tool Rome used to execute its criminals. It was not just a form of execution; it was a form of torture and humiliation. The victim usually suffocated to death from the weight of his own body after days of intense pain. Before that first Easter, if you wore a cross around your neck, it would be like wearing a necklace with a little electric chair on it. The fact that such an ugly instrument has become a thing of elegance and beauty is actually a testimony and clear picture of what this day is all about.

Easter is the day when broken, cruel, harsh and ugly things are made beautiful again. The Resurrection is all about redemption. The Resurrection is all about transformation. The Resurrection doesn't make the cross less barbaric, it instead transforms it into a symbol of hope and salvation.

Today, I want to take us back to what happened on that morning almost 2000 years ago. This day is celebrated by more than two billion people across the world. Like those beautiful crosses we wear around our necks, the Resurrection points to a harsh reality while at the same time displaying an overwhelming beauty and transformation of grace. Without the Resurrection, the cross is barbaric and meaningless. With the Resurrection, the cross is our hope and our life.

Today we are concluding our series Easter Challenge. Because of Easter we have a new foundation, fellowship and focus. Today I want to talk about the fact that, because of Easter, we have a new future.

1Co 15:17-21 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. 20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

If Easter is true, then everything in our lives is different. Paul says here that the resurrection of Jesus is of first importance. It is the central to the Christian faith. It is the turning point of history, the greatest event that *has* ever taken place or *will* ever take place.

It rests on the time-line of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers. History has idolized and despised it, gold-plated and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything but ignore it. How could you ignore such a piece of lumber? Suspended on its beams is the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming to be God on earth. Divine. Eternal. The death-slayer. Never has timber been regarded so sacred. No wonder the apostle Paul called the cross event the core of the gospel. It's bottom line is sobering: if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. If not, the cross is history's hoax – Max Lucado

A scholar by the name of John S. Whale said, "Belief in the Resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith; it is the Christian faith." It is proof that all Jesus did and all Jesus said was true. Without the Resurrection, nothing makes sense.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Without the resurrection, this verse makes no sense. Because of the Resurrection, that same claim is our great and only hope for salvation. So how can we have confidence that it is true? How do we know if Easter is history's hinge or hoax? Let me suggest 4 things for you today;

1. The External Testimony

First, in order for there to be a resurrection, there had to first have been a crucifixion. How do we know that Jesus actually existed and was crucified like the bible says? We have great confidence in both the truth and power of Jesus' Resurrection. While scholars may argue over what Jesus' words meant, no serious Bible scholar denies that Jesus was a historical figure who profoundly impacted His immediate world. In fact, more than a dozen historical witnesses outside of the Bible confirm that Jesus lived and was crucified. Amazingly, these historical witnesses also prove that Jesus' earliest followers were extremely serious about their devotion to Him, His teachings, and His resurrection.

For example, in Annals of Imperial Rome, written around AD 116, the pagan Roman senator and historian Tacitus wrote about how Emperor Nero burned Rome in AD 64 and then blamed it on, "the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their animosity. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate."

Other non-Christians such as the Jewish historian Josephus wrote about Jesus and His followers as well. A Roman governor, Pliny the Younger, complained in a letter about how the early Christians he persecuted and punished would "sing hymns to Christ as to a god."

Dr. Paul Maier called this "positive evidence from a hostile source. In essence, if a source admits a fact that is decidedly not in its favor, the fact is genuine." These and other witnesses confirm that something monumental and transformative took place in the followers of Jesus. Even the pagan Roman rulers testified to the fact that the earliest followers of Jesus, people who had known Him and had walked with Him, did not consider Jesus to have been just an ordinary man.

There is very little doubt as to the historical life and death of Jesus. There is external testimony.

2. The Empty Tomb

While there is a great deal of historical proof for the death of Jesus, what proof do we have for his resurrection? There is little debate as to whether or not the tomb was empty. Even Jesus' detractors admitted this. At any point they could have simply pointed to the dead body of Jesus in the tomb and the stories about his resurrection would have been silenced. The fact is they could not do that because there was no body. Rather than say "here he is, come see for yourself" they had to come up with a story to explain the empty tomb;

Mat 28:12-15 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Why was the tomb of Jesus guarded? Because the leaders understood the risk. They did not count on the resurrection. Jesus appeared to many people after He had risen from the dead.

1Co 15:4-6 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

There were many people who were still living who could testify that they had seen the risen Christ. This testimony of the eyewitnesses is important. When Peter stood before the crowd on the day of Pentecost, he was able to say that they all knew the truth because they had seen it. They had seen the miracles. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus had not been something done in secret.

Act 2:22-24 Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, *as you yourselves know*. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Peter was able to say to the crowd “as you yourselves know.” There was no one who could refute the facts. It would be like writing a book today claiming that John F Kennedy had never been president of the United States. There are people still living today that could stand up and say that it was not true, they had first hand testimony of the fact that he did serve as president.

More than five hundred different witnesses saw the risen Jesus in the weeks after His crucifixion. All of them testified to the same thing. No one could come forward to refute the truth of the empty tomb through the Resurrection. Everyone knew it was true.

Author Clarence W. Hall said it like this: “The resurrection of Jesus changes the face of death for all people. Death is no longer a prison, but a passage into God’s presence. Easter says you can put truth in a grave, but it won’t stay there.” The Resurrection completely transforms death. Without the Resurrection, death is the tragic ending to life. With the Resurrection, death is just the beginning of eternal life. Without the Resurrection, death is where our strength finally runs out. With the Resurrection, death is where our eternal glory begins.

The external testimony and empty tomb prove the death and resurrection of Jesus to be true.

3. The Expensive Toll

The third proof we have for the resurrection is the transformed lives that we see in the eyewitnesses. In the years after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples faced persecution and rejection. Acts 12 tells us the apostle James was killed by Herod. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that later James, the half-brother of Jesus, was stoned to death by Jewish leaders. The second-century church father Origen wrote of Peter’s crucifixion. Tradition tells us that all of the other apostles except for John died as martyrs.

Of course, Christianity isn’t the only world religion with martyrs. But what makes these martyrs so unique is that they died for their belief in something they had seen with their own eyes, the Resurrection of Jesus. Many people in history have died for what they truly believed to be true as a result of what others had told them. These apostles willingly gave their lives for what they saw with their own eyes, rather than deny the Resurrection.

They knowingly and willingly died at the hands of various rulers for that which they had witnessed with their own eyes. They would not have done that for a lie they purposely fabricated or for something they knew to be false. Their determined adherence to believe and proclaim the Resurrection brought them no fame, power, or status. Rather, it cost them everything! Herein we find the beautiful aspect of this reality. What a transformation had come about in the hearts of the disciples because of the certainty of the Resurrection! The external testimony, empty tomb and expensive toll.

4. The Everlasting Transformation

You might remember, before the Resurrection, Peter was afraid to admit to a young servant girl that he knew Jesus. That first Easter, the disciples were in the upper room hiding, fearing their lives. They were a sad, broken group of outcasts. They were beaten, their dreams were gone. After the Resurrection at Pentecost, Peter was willing to stand up and proclaim the truth about Jesus to thousands of men and women. When he and John were arrested and put before the council it says;

Act 4:13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

These men had been with Jesus. Because of that they were different. What a powerful testimony. The beauty of the Resurrection is in the transformative power it brings! Peter and John were changed by it. Look at Jesus' half-brother James. We read in John 7:5 that before the Crucifixion, James didn't even believe in Jesus. But after the Resurrection, James is the central leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Before the Crucifixion, every single one of the twelve disciples deserted Jesus and ran away. After the Resurrection, all eleven of the surviving disciples boldly proclaimed the message of His death and Resurrection. Something happened to them that can only be explained through their first-hand witness of the Resurrection of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Countless people throughout the ages have been transformed through it. I know that I have been changed by it. I am a different (better) person today because of Easter. I know that there are many hear today and watching from home who could testify to the same thing. Today, you can be transformed as well. By receiving the gift of salvation that Jesus purchased for us on the cross anyone can be transformed. That resurrection power is available to all who would receive it.

The power of the resurrection reaches back into our past. In Jesus we find the strength to forgive and let go of things that have wounded us in the past. At the cross and through the Resurrection, God forgives and redeems our very worst moments. Like the picture of the cross, even things that look like defeat and pain can be transformed into symbols of hope and healing. Our deepest regrets are transformed from unbearable shame to a proclamation of God's amazing grace, mercy, and love.

The power of the resurrection changes our present. In Jesus we find the power to live today through the help of the Holy Spirit that God has placed within us. No matter what challenges or trials we face, we have the assurance of God's presence and power with us and in us. Like those first disciples we are transformed through our connection with Jesus.

The power of the resurrection also changes our future. We have hope and know that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God. Paul encouraged us in Colossians;

Col 3:1-4 "Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

In Jesus we have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Past, present and future, we are transformed. If you have not experienced the transformative power of the Resurrection in your life, today is the day to enter into it. If you have already put your faith in Jesus, today is the day to move forward in its power to make you bold and make you free.

Watchman Nee said, "Our old history ends with the Cross; our new history begins with the resurrection." This may be the most precious and amazing transformation the Resurrection brings. The Resurrection makes us new. Will you enter into the Resurrection today? If you have already done so, will you choose to live every day in the freedom, joy, and hope of the Resurrection?

Jesus did not die on a cross to make bad people good, He did it to make dead people live. It is not about religion; it is about rebirth. It does not mean we get nicer; we get a new start. The resurrection of Jesus is our resurrection as well. It means death and rebirth.

To experience this transformation, you need to receive the gift that Jesus purchased for you on the cross. Jesus is inviting you today to come. To put your faith in the one who died for you and who rose from the dead. It is an invitation to put your faith in Him. Jesus didn't make it too hard for us. In Romans Paul said,

Rom 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Easter is a choice. You can choose to accept it or reject it. If you don't want to walk with Jesus in this life, He is not going to force you to walk with Him forever in the next. If you do not want to accept His invitation, He will not force you to take it. To receive His gift of eternal life, you just need to ask for it. You need to give up control and let Jesus be Lord of your life.

As we close today, I want to ask you again, have you been transformed by the resurrection power of Jesus? Do you have a new future today because of Easter?

Astronaut Charles Duke is one of only twelve men who have left footprints on the moon. He was the lunar module pilot for the Apollo 16 Mission. He now lives in Texas. He wasn't a Christian when he walked on the moon. Here's his story:

After walking on the moon, I was bored. Fame, fortune, a spot in the history books: I had it all. But if you had been a fly on the wall in my home, you would have seen that I wasn't so hot. I was failing miserably as a husband and father. Though I had gone to church all my life, I had all of God I needed in that one hour every Sunday morning. Even the moon had not been a spiritual experience. I wasn't looking for God. I only knew Jesus the way you know the U.S. Presidents -- in name only.

But my wife Dottie was different. She had changed. Her depression had lifted, and she demonstrated a new, believing faith. She turned to God and not me for answers to her problems.

One night I attended a Bible Study with her that focused on one penetrating question, 'Who was Jesus?' All my life I had said the words 'Son of God' but had never trusted Him. That night I came face-to-face with the opportunity to follow Him. I prayed with Dottie in the front seat of our car and gave my life over to Christ. I didn't see angels. I didn't hear music. No blinding lights. But I knew what I knew. It was real. The next day I awoke with an insatiable desire to read the Bible. I was forever changed. It cost the government \$400 million for me to walk three days on the moon -- and then it was over. But to walk with Jesus is free and it lasts forever!

That change begins with a prayer. It begins by inviting Jesus to come and to save you. Praying this prayer will not make you perfect. It will not mean that you will never have any challenges in your life. It is simply recognizing that you need help and asking for it. It is allowing God to rewrite your past, present and future. I can testify to the fact that it was single best decision that I have ever made. I have experienced the difference that Easter makes, and you can as well.

So, if that's the journey you want to begin, if you want to accept God's invitation, pray this resurrection prayer with me right now. I'll lead you in it, and you can repeat after me.

Dear Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I believe that you have risen from the dead and that you are here with me right now. I want to be transformed by your resurrection power. I invite you to come into my life. I receive you as my savior and make you Lord of my life right now. Please forgive my sins now and save me.

Thank you, Lord, that because of Easter we truly have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. This is the difference that Easter makes.