

“It’s How We Finish that Counts”

Easter 2014

Scripture: John 19:41-42, 20:1, 11-16, 18

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

Meditation Moments for MONDAY, April 21 – Read John 20:1-10 - Early Sunday, Mary, Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” found the tomb empty. Had the authorities taken Jesus’ body? Had grave robbers been there? The two disciples saw an unexpected sight. Scholar Craig Keener noted, “The face cloth separate from the linen is “folded up” ... which could be an indication of neatness, or that it was still rolled the way it had been when it was wrapped around Jesus’ head—that his body had risen straight out of the wrappings and cloth.” “The other disciple ... saw and believed”—even without fully understanding.

- Mary went to the tomb “while it was still dark.” She didn’t expect to find Jesus alive, but out of love and devotion she was eager to care for his body as soon as possible. (The Jewish laws Jesus had challenged forbade that on the Sabbath.) How can you nurture a desire to go to Jesus first, even in times of discouragement and darkness?
- When Jesus raised Lazarus, “The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Untie him’” (John 11:44). Jesus didn’t need anyone to untie him. His undisturbed grave clothes were one sign that his resurrection was qualitatively different, the creation of a new plane of human life. Has your walk with God ever confronted you with something that didn’t fit your previous ideas about how life works? How do you remain open to see “and believe”?

Prayer: Lord God, your creative power didn’t just work once, eons ago. It’s always at work in my life and in the world around me. Keep my mind open and willing to believe in all you want to do in my life. Amen.

TUESDAY, April 22 – Read John 20:11-13 – In John’s gospel the details almost always matter. So he described Mary seeing angels in the tomb in a way that evoked the “mercy seat,” the Ark of the Covenant’s cover (cf. Exodus 25:17-20 for a description of the cover). John wanted his readers to realize that Jesus was the true center where God’s mercy always meets human sadness and need.

- Mary thought she was going to the tomb to finish preparing Jesus’ body for burial. Why not weep? Expressing grief over a loss is healthy. Yet two angels (“in white,” not the color of sorrow) asked her, “Why are you crying?” Has God ever helped you see a painful or negative experience in a different light? What are you facing now that needs the touch of God’s life and hope?
- It seemed to Mary that there was only one likely explanation for the empty tomb: “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” Have you ever faced a situation in which “they” (whether “they” were faceless and nameless, or very well known) have spoiled something you care about deeply? What helps you lift your focus from what “they” may have done to the living Lord of your life, letting him help you reframe the situation?

Prayer: Living Lord, keep making me a new creation, one whose God-given sense of self doesn’t let what “they” do and say hurt me so readily. Give me eyes to see people, situations and myself in the light of your eternal love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, April 23 – Read John 20:14-18 – Mary thought Jesus was “the gardener.” Symbolically, Jesus was the gardener—Adam failed, but Jesus would tend earth’s “garden” well (cf. Genesis 2:15, Romans 5:15-21). Mary didn’t recognize Jesus (scholar William Barclay suggested she may have been blinded by her tears), but it seems his voice, the way he said her name, was unmistakable. Then Jesus sent Mary to be the very first eyewitness to the risen Christ.

- At the sound of Jesus' voice, Mary moved in a flash from utter despair to unbelievable joy. How can you more and more come to know the “sound” of Jesus' voice? What steps will help you keep your relationship with Jesus personal, a link between your heart and his, rather than just an academic exercise?
- Scholar N. T. Wright said, “If someone in the first century had wanted to invent a convincing story about people seeing Jesus, they wouldn’t have dreamed of giving the star part to a woman. Let alone Mary Magdalene.” What does Jesus’ trust in Mary to share the good news of Easter tell you about how Jesus saw the value of both women and men in his new creation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in the beginning you created. Then, when everything went wrong, you came and launched a new creation. I want to be part of your new creation, to join Mary in sharing the news of a risen Lord. Amen.

THURSDAY, April 24 – Read John 20:19-23 – Everything the disciples thought they understood about Jesus’ mission seemed lost. Their leader and would be Messiah was dead. Now Jesus’ body was missing. The disciples were in hiding, afraid the Jewish authorities would come after them next. But no one had stolen Jesus’ body, and he was still their Messiah, in ways that surpassed their wildest dreams. “Jesus ... stood among them” and gave them his peace, his purpose (“As the Father sent me, so I am sending you”), and his power (“Receive the Holy Spirit”).

- John kept including clues to remind his readers of the creation stories in Genesis 1-3. After Jesus commissioned the disciples in verse 21, “he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”—a clear echo of Genesis 2:7. How has Jesus breathed new hope and purpose—new life—into you? In what ways can you tangibly bring peace and wholeness to those around you today?
- Have you ever been “commissioned” to do something you felt inadequate to do? Jesus told the disciples, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.” Wait—isn’t that God’s job? The answer is, “Yes—and God has ‘breathed’ the Holy Spirit into us, and will do his work through us.” How can you participate in Jesus’ work of extending God’s forgiveness to others, while warning them that sin is a serious, deadly disease?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for defeating death through Jesus’ resurrection. Help me to embrace your peace and purpose, and to trust the Holy Spirit as my power source as I shine your light in the dark world around me. Amen.

FRIDAY, April 25 – Read John 20:24-28 – For unknown reasons, Thomas missed Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples. He refused to take their word for the remarkable claim that Jesus was alive. But Jesus was patient with Thomas’ fears and questions. He came again when Thomas was present, and said “Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side.” As with Mary in the garden, the presence of his clearly-alive Lord overcame all Thomas’ doubt. He worshipped, calling Jesus “my Lord and my God.”

- John began with the words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). At the end, Thomas becomes the first person in the entire gospel to fully get that, to look at Jesus and address him directly as “God.” Will you join him in bowing before Jesus and saying “My Lord and my God”?
- The risen Christ was different—he could walk through locked doors, for example (verse 26). But he was not a ghost or an imposter—that was the point of “Put your hand into my side.” This was physically him, Jesus, the body the grave clothes could not contain. The Word who became flesh (John 1:14) arose as flesh still, but with what Paul would call a “spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-47). In what ways can knowing a bit about how Christ was raised “flesh out” your hope and expectation for life with him eternally?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are my Lord and my God. You are my Creator and my Redeemer. Because you live, I too will live forever. I thank you and I praise you today. Amen.

SATURDAY, April 26 – Read John 20:29-31 – Because this gospel was written as the generation of the apostles was dying out, Thomas’ experience took on special significance. If people weren’t willing to trust the testimony of those who’d seen Jesus, the faith would soon die out. Jesus said, “Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.” We

don't see Jesus as the apostles did. An eyewitness wrote this gospel however, so that we may believe as they did, and have eternal life.

Family Activity: Now that Easter is over, find ways you can continue sharing the Good News that "Jesus is alive!"

Gather as a family and share how each person experiences the joy and love of Jesus in their life. Ask, "How do you know Jesus loves you?" Or "When do you feel the love of Jesus in your heart?" Write these thoughts down then create a list of people who might need to experience the love of Jesus. Choose one or two ways to share Jesus' love with others. You might share kind, encouraging words or bake cookies. Maybe you want to share a song or a Scripture passage. Keep celebrating Easter and sharing the good news of Jesus' love all year long!

Easter Weekend 2014

"It's How We Finish that Counts"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

April 19-20, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: John 19:41-42, 20:1, 11-16, 18

41 The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb, never used before. 42 And so, because it was the day of preparation for the Jewish Passover and since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

1 Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance.

11 Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. 12 She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. 13 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

14 She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. 15 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?"

She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

16 "Mary!" Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

18 Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

VIDEO Easter 2014 Sermon Starter

SLIDE It's How We Finish that Counts (Use Easter 2014 graphic)

At Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ some 2000 years ago, but it's an event that reverberates throughout history and continues to impact us to this very day. We celebrate the fact that in the resurrection of Christ his ministry is vindicated and his divinity is confirmed. Jesus' teachings and work were validated. Today we also celebrate that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave we see clearly that hates, nor evil, nor brokenness, nor even death will have the final word in life. We see this powerful truth that I have said to you on numerous occasions, "The worst thing is never the last thing."

This is a message that seizes our hearts and continues to shape us and give us hope into this present day. Today we are going to focus on John's account of the resurrection story and were going to view it from two different angles. The first is that Christ's resurrection gives us a glimpse into the hope that we have for our own resurrection. We also will see how the resurrection gives us a clue as to how we should live our lives today, every single day. The second angle we will look at is what Easter calls forth from us. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, what this Easter asks of each one of us. Easter is not meant to be just a blessing to us but it asks us to participate in the world in a new way and we are going to try and understand what that might mean for each one of us in today's message.

SLIDE Mary Magdalene Sculpture (Graphic)

I want to start by looking at Mary Magdalene. You see one of my favorite images of her on the video screen, a sculpture who captures her look as she comes to the empty tomb on that first Easter morning. We can surmise from Mary's name that she was single. In the first century, if a woman was married, she would be known as, "Mary, wife of..." Mary is referred to Mary Magdalene which means she is Mary from the town of Magdalene on the northwestern coast of the Sea of Galilee.

Not only is she single but one of the Gospels tells us that she had seven demons. Demons in the first century could have been anything from an unexplained physical illness to a psychiatric disorder to an addiction of some sort to a deep spiritual wrestling, which might entail an actual spiritual entity that one might call a demon or the devil. All of those would've been covered by the term "demon possession" which was used to describe Mary at one point in her life.

This tells us that she was a very troubled person until she met Jesus Christ.

When she met Jesus, Christ set her free from the demons which afflicted her. She found peace and hope and love. Consequently, she came to love Jesus and she followed him. The Gospels tell us that she is one of several women that followed Jesus and the disciples wherever they went and helped make possible their ministry by serving and even providing money. Over the years she had watched Jesus closely and followed him and developed a deep faith, not only in Jesus but also in the God that Jesus embodied and preached.

Those three years of faith building were nearly destroyed by three days of watching Christ tested, tried, tortured, crucified and buried. She arrived at the tomb that Sunday morning with her faith in tatters and her heart broken as she comes to prepare the body of this man that she has loved, who is now gone. Her heart was filled with sorrow.

Mary represents every one of us, who at some point in our lives are going to experience tremendous grief or sorrow at the death of someone that we love. That sorrow is even greater when the death is untimely, and it is even deeper when the death is unjust. All of us have either had moments, or we will have moments, where we stand at the grave of someone that we love and we feel like our faith might be in pieces. We feel like our hearts are broken and we weep. Sometimes years later something will trigger that wave of emotion or grief and it washes over us again as we feel once more the sorrow and sadness in our hearts. We have all stood where Mary is standing on this Easter morning. If we haven't done so already then we probably will in the years ahead. This is a part of what it means to be human and it's a part of our common experience as humans.

Here at First United Methodist Church it's part of our rhythm of life, as we do funerals on a regular basis. I've done several this year and I've met with several who have planned their funerals because they are in the last days of their life here on this Earth. Some are elderly and we celebrate their long life and a hope they had Christ. But some are younger and life ends too soon and we struggle to make meaning with death when it comes at a young age.

No doubt most of you read about the shootings in Kansas City last weekend that took the life of a 14-year-old boy who was finishing up his Eagle Scout project and his grandfather at a Jewish community center, along with an older woman at a neighboring Jewish retirement home. The young boy and his grandfather were members of one of our largest United Methodist churches and that church had a prayer vigil for the shootings. Unbeknownst to those gathered, a woman came to the microphone early in the prayer vigil.

"I am the daughter of the gentleman who was killed and the mother of the son who was killed," Mindy Corporon said, eliciting a gasp from those gathered for prayer.

Her father, William Corporon, had driven her son, Reat Underwood, a 14-year-old high school freshman, to the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City to audition for "KC Superstar," an "American Idol"-style singing contest. Both were shot in a car William was driving. Frazier Glenn Cross, a 73-year-old man with a history of anti-Semitism, has been arrested.

William died at the scene and Reat later died of his injuries. Mindy shared, ***"I got to tell both of them today that I loved them, I was the last person in the family who saw them."***

Their funerals were on Good Friday. Death is a part of our human experience, and often times it is tragic. Whenever there is death we have several responses as humans. One response is the sorrow that Mary experiences that she brings with her to the tomb. The other response is the fear such as the disciples had. While Mary is at the tomb, the disciples are hiding behind locked doors, probably in the upper room where they had celebrated the Last Supper. They are afraid that the ones who had arrested Jesus and put him to death will come for them next and put them to death as well.

In our own lives, when faced with someone's death, we can find ourselves overwhelmed with sorrow but we can also become afraid of our own death and become aware of our own mortality. Every religious tradition offers some answer to the existential questions about death, but the answer from the Christian faith to the dilemma of death his resurrection—first the resurrection of Christ and then our own resurrection.

On Easter Sunday, when Mary finally sees Jesus, her sorrow and grief are turned to joy and hope for the future. When Jesus stands among the disciples on that Sunday evening, they find their fear gives way to peace and courage. This is what seeing and believing in the resurrection can do in our lives. We find joy in exchange for sorrow and courage and peace in the place of fear.

The resurrection of Christ is one thing, but we are also promised that gift of resurrection in our lives. Let me remind you of a few of the things that Jesus said about the afterlife in John's gospel. In John 5:28-29 Jesus says:

SLIDE ***"8 Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, 29 and they***

will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.”

In John 11:25-26 Jesus says:

SLIDE ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. 26 Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.”***

In John 14 Jesus is speaking to his disciples just before his arrest and he says this in verses 1-4.

SLIDE ***1 “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. 2 There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? 3 When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. 4 And you know the way to where I am going.”***

We have these wonderful promises of hope that there is something after this life is over. Those remain simply promises until the resurrection of Christ from the grave. It is that resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday that confirms the promises he made to his disciples and through them to us, that there is in fact something beyond this life.

This is why Mindy Corporan could say this with confidence about her son and her father, ***“I was there before the police and I was there before the ambulance. And I knew immediately that they were in heaven, and I know that they're in heaven together.”***

When we are confronted with someone's death that we love, we like the idea that people are in heaven, but we wonder what it's like. The Bible actually talks about this, not a lot, but some and tries to give us a picture of what the afterlife looks like. I read every single passage of the Bible that talks about the afterlife in preparation for sermon series we did a few years ago on heaven and hell. We often hear things about pearly gates and streets of gold and Angels with harps flying on clouds, but those images only appear once in the Bible and we find them in the book of revelation. Well, all of them but the Angels with harps!

The description the Bible has for everlasting life is quite a bit different. Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the dominant image offered by the

authors is that heaven is like a party. It's not just any party either, but it's like a wedding reception. I would remind you in the first century that people didn't save up money for their children to go to college, they saved up money for their child's wedding. The single biggest event in anyone's life was the moment in which they were married and that was celebrated by the family and the entire community.

Friends and family would gather for a wedding reception that would last seven days. It wasn't just two hours, but it was an entire week. There weren't Spanish nuts and mints and a few glasses of champagne. This was seven days of singing and dancing and feasting and laughter and music. The food and drink would have been extravagant because it was a pinnacle experience in someone's life. Friends and family looked forward to these moments because you didn't have money to take a vacation. You didn't do the kinds of things we do today to entertain ourselves. When there was a wedding in a family it would be the high point of the year. There were no fancy honeymoons to someplace warm where you could snorkel or someplace cold where you could ski. There was simply a weeklong party for everyone to enjoy.

So when the Scriptures try and describe for us what heaven looks like, it uses the idea of a wedding feast with sumptuous food and wine and dancing and song and a great gathering of celebration. This is what heaven is like.

This certainly seems consistent with how people describe their near-death experiences. We are fascinated by near-death experiences if we are honest. Two of the best-selling books over the last two years on the New York Times list were books about near-death experiences. One of you gave me Dr. Evan Alexander's book as a gift. He's a neurosurgeon out of Harvard who was an agnostic before his near-death experience. As a result of the E. coli bacteria he contracted bacterial meningitis and spent seven days in a deep coma and by all accounts should have died. While he was in that deep coma, with his brain basically shutting down, he says he went to heaven.

SLIDE Proof of Heaven (Graphic)

He describes in his book, Proof of Heaven, what it was like and how it was so real. As a neurosurgeon and a scientist he was trying to analyze and make sense of this experience. Ultimately, in the end, it led him to a strong faith in God and Jesus Christ.

Todd Burpo's book, Heaven is for Real was the other best-selling book about his little boy about his son Colton who was clinically dead for a period of

time and then came back to life. It's been made into a movie which opened this weekend. Maybe you've seen the trailer.

VIDEO **Heaven is for Real Trailer**

SLIDE **Heaven is for Real (Graphic)**

The trailer grabs you a bit doesn't? We are all fascinated by this idea of heaven and it made me think of several of you who over the years have shared with me your near-death experiences. I have probably received more than 30 e-mails or letters or had conversations with people who themselves, or had family members, have near-death experiences. They are people who are sitting around you in this church and have said to me, "Now don't tell anybody that I said this, but..."

I thought it would share with you a couple of these as we are pondering this idea of death because these experiences become particularly meaningful when you have lost somebody that you love. When you have lost a parent, a child or a spouse, you want to know what it's really like. Maybe these can give you some kind of clue.

One woman was in the hospital with a very serious illness. She nearly died twice and on one of those occasions she felt herself slipping away and suddenly she was somewhere else. This is how she described the experience.

I began to see everyone I knew who had died. The crowd was standing on both sides of the entrance, as far as I could see. Everyone was clapping and waving their arms and jumping up and down. They were so glad to see me and I was glad to see them, especially my parents. I cannot even describe the beauty of the river, the flowers or the trees beside the water. There are no words except to say that it was beyond description, beautiful, sweet, awesome. The atmosphere was so happy and this description, believe me, feel very inadequate.

Then she said the doctors began to bring her back and she said, *I want to cry out, "No, please, I want to stay!"*

Ever since that time, I have not been afraid of death, because I know what I saw and what I experienced. I look forward to the day when I go back to that place again to be with my loved ones and my Savior.

A United Methodist pastor shared about his dad was also a United Methodist pastor who had a near-death experience. In that moment, when his life hung in the balance, he found himself in a beautiful green field out in the

countryside. I laid in the field and did not want to leave. Time did not exist. I had nowhere to go, but just wanted to dwell in the peace of that place. As I was laying in the field, I heard a stream of water nearby and off in the distance I heard my father laughing and laughing. I felt amazing joy and as I sat up in the field I saw a figure coming toward me. It was Jesus and as he approached he said, "Thomas, I'm returning you to the prayers of the faithful."

I love that picture of his father laughing off in the distance. I have many other stories like that and they all sound pretty consistent with this picture of a wedding banquet where there is laughter and joy and the people you love the most are surrounding you in that place.

I think knowing that this is what heaven is like is meant to affect how we live our lives today. It's interesting that in John's gospel Jesus and John mentioned eternal life or life everlasting 42 times. That is more than Matthew, Mark and Luke combined. This is clearly an important idea in the gospel of John and when Jesus talks about eternal life he always talks about it not is something in the future, when you die, but is something that you have right now in the present. Even in Matthew, Mark and Luke, whenever Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven he says that it is now AND not yet.

According to Jesus, Heaven starts now. I think what he is telling us is that knowing what the afterlife will be like should affect how you live your life today. It is meant to change how you live your life today, because when I trust and believe that one day when this life is over the next one has just begun, then death is only a comma at the end of the sentence and not a period or the end of the book. This life is like a preface to a great adventure to come after this and this truth should change everything.

My grandfather on my mother's side has always been a very special person in my life. When I found out he had cancer and he only had a short time to live I went back to spend some time with him in California. He was in his late 90s and so he lived a full life. He had always been a deep man of faith and I'll never forget sitting with him before I left town to come back to Durango, knowing it would be the last time I would see him alive, and looking into his twinkling eyes and both of us saying with confidence to each other, "We will see each other again someday and I look forward to that day."

We grieve differently when we have this hope. We grieve as people who have hope and of course we have sorrow and we cry and we feel sadness, but at the same time we have a confidence that our loved ones who have gone on

before us have the opportunity to be in this place where there is inexpressible joy and incomprehensible beauty.

I just turned 50 this year and I probably have less years ahead of me than I have behind me which can be a depressing thought when you pause to think about it. When I get to be 65 or 70 then I may have finished two thirds of my life and if I'm lucky I'll have one third last. If I begin thinking that this life is the end then every day is simply a march closer to death and it becomes more depressing as each day passes. Unless you have this hope that when you get to the end of this life you finally launch out on the great adventure.

I remember an old wise sage from our church telling me once, "I don't buy green bananas anymore." You wake up each day and you never know if it will be your last, but you can do that with laughter and joy if you actually believe that when this life is over we have a building not made by human hands but eternal in the heavens, as the apostle Paul tells us.

If you believe that Jesus really meant it when he said, "I go to prepare a place for you where there are many rooms. I will come back for you and you will be with me where I am always." That changes everything!

I found it interesting that one of the great crises in America over the past few years has been the healthcare crisis and it has come at the same time as more and more people have given up on religion or faith. A large portion of our issue when it comes to health care costs is that we spend a huge amount of money on healthcare in the last year of someone's life. We are going to spend trillions of dollars over the next 10 years trying to keep people alive an extra six months or three months or one month or one week. I'm not saying that is always a bad thing because there are moments where it is good to get an extra six months if that could be a good quality of life. I can see why we would try things because there is hope that healing might happen.

But it feels like right now in our culture that the real issue is a faith crisis. We are not sure what we think about death so we better hold on to life and we better give everything that we have and spend every heroic resource we can to stay alive for one more day because we are not really certain that what happens after this life will be better. For me, when I get to the end of my life, I want to be able to say that I've had a good run and I fought the good fight and yet I'm ready. I look forward to what's on the other side. I can't wait to see what happens. I can't wait to see my grandfather again. It's okay let me go.

I want to be clear that I don't look forward to dying and I'm not wishing for that any day soon! It would be nice to live to 100, but if I die tomorrow, not only have I had a great life, but I actually believe this stuff I preach about what's happening after this life, and it's going to be okay and I will see you again.

That's what Easter does for us when we lay hold of this truth. It allows us to sing in the end with Eliza Hewitt the old gospel song she penned in 1898.

***When we all get to heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory!***

I've been asked before by people an important question for us to wrestle with as people of faith:

SLIDE "If there was no heaven, would you still be a Christian?"

My answer is, "Of course!"

If we die and that's it, I would still follow Jesus Christ. I follow Jesus not because I think he is my ticket to heaven. I follow Jesus because I think he is the way and the truth and the life. I follow Jesus because when I'm closest to him is when I feel most fully alive. I choose to trust in Christ because when I'm closest to him I feel most authentically human and who I was created to be. When I'm in places where I feel like I'm doing the right thing in life is always because I am doing what it is he has asked me to do. When I think about the problems that face our world, I believe that almost all those problems would disappear if people actually would love their neighbor as they love themselves—if they were willing to love selflessly and sacrificially and do the things that Jesus teaches us to do. I would follow Jesus whether there was a heaven or not. I'm also grateful that Jesus taught there actually is a heaven and something happens after this life.

What's interesting is when we read John's gospel carefully, or any of the gospel for that matter, Jesus' primary interest is not in heaven. Jesus' primary focus is on how we live our lives here and now.

Beginning next week we're going to begin a new sermon series on the parables of Jesus of which there are 66. His most famous parable is one that even people who were not Christians or people of faith have heard. We even have laws that are called "Good Samaritan" laws. Is that parable about heaven? That

parable makes a simple point that when you see a neighbor in need, even if you think they are your enemy or they think you are their enemy, you stop and help them. This is what it means to love your neighbor. Jesus says this story happens when a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. When we were in the holy land we got to see that road and here's what it looks like.

SLIDE Road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Graphic)

Does that look like heaven to you?

SLIDE Sheep (Graphic)

There are several parables where he talks about the afterlife and one of them is the last judgment in the parable of the sheep and the goats. After having been to the holy land I can see why Jesus would tell parables like it because there are sheep everywhere, like this group that our bus drove through. Several times shepherds would come up to us and we got this close.

SLIDE Lamb (Graphic)

Isn't that cute? The truth is that this parable is not very cute but very challenging. Jesus tells us how it goes down at the last judgment when he says, "I'm going to look and see if you gave drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing to the naked. Did you visit the sick and those in prison? Did you welcome the stranger? If you didn't, then you should be worried. If you did then you should be excited."

Heaven is about how we live now. The most famous body of teaching which Jesus offered was the Sermon on the Mount. There is very little about heaven but a whole lot about how we take the ethics of heaven and we live them out here on Earth. That's what Jesus asks of us and that is what we find in the power of the resurrection.

It's easy to miss this part of the resurrection story if we don't fully understand the gospel of John. On one level you can read the stories in John's gospel and they make sense, but John always includes interesting details that are meant to take you deeper in the story. You might even wonder why he put a certain detail in the story and whenever that happens, you should stop and ask, "Why did he put that in the story?"

There are several things like that in John's Easter story but I'm just going to point out one of them that gives us a clear picture about how the resurrection points to how we should live our lives today. In John 19:41 we find one of these

details I want to make sure that we don't miss. I shared this with some of you before so bear with me.

SLIDE ***41 The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb, never used before.***

This is interesting because Matthew, Mark and Luke don't tell us there was a garden near the place where Jesus was crucified. They don't tell us there was a garden in the place where Jesus was buried. This detail we only find in John's gospel. Why did John care about describing the landscaping around the place where Jesus was crucified and was buried?

When you read that you are meant to ask, "Why did John tell us about a garden? Are there any other gardens in the Bible which are important? Are there?"

What would be the most important garden in the Bible other than this one? It would be the Garden of Eden that we find in Genesis 2 and 3. We are also meant to recognize that John's gospel begins with these three words, "In the beginning." What other place in the Bible begins with those same three words? The book of Genesis begins the same way. In the book of Genesis in the Garden of Eden we find that God creates humanity and places them there, along with all the other living things. He says to them, "It's all yours. You can enjoy everything in his garden because I made it for you."

The story tells us that God walks with them in the cool of the afternoon and they enjoyed the garden together. God also said, "There is just one thing that I what you stay away from. There is a tree that belongs to me and it has the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat from that tree you will experience death so stay away from it. There will be pain and brokenness and hurt. It will not be good so please don't eat from that tree. You can have anything else, but please just don't eat from that tree."

Even if you've never heard that story before, what do you know intuitively about how those first humans felt about that tree? What tree do you think they most wanted to eat from? How do you know they desperately wanted to eat from that tree? You know that because it's been your human experience. You know that when you are told not to do something, suddenly it becomes the thing you really want to do. It becomes the thing that you most want to have and possess.

That's what happened with Adam and Eve. Some people look at this story as literal history and many of us see it as an archetypal story which is meant to

teach us not so much about what happened in ancient history, but about what happens daily in our lives. This is our story.

Even though God tells them not to and there will be pain and hurt and brokenness if they do it, Adam and Eve get closer and closer to the tree. One day they actually reach up and touch it. They don't pluck the fruit at first, but they just put their hand around it. The next day they smell it. Finally, one day they lick it! Eventually, they pluck it off the tree and they bite down and eat from the fruit.

Pain and brokenness come next as Paradise is lost. A curse happens and work becomes hard after that. You understand this story because in your own life you have heard the serpent whisper in your ear to do the thing you know you are not supposed to do. You get close to it and you touch it and you smell it and you get as close as you can until finally one day you bite down. Depending on what it is, your marriage comes apart. You lose your family. You lose your job. You lose your self-respect. You feel shame. In extreme cases you can lose your freedom. Sometimes, depending on what it is, you experienced actual, physical death because you ate from the forbidden fruit. This is the curse and it's our story.

Here is Jesus being crucified in this garden and John wants us to see that Jesus is reversing the curse as he goes to the cross. Jesus has come to restore Paradise. Jesus has come to reverse the course of human history and take us back to that original garden. There on the cross Jesus takes all of the world's pain and hate and our propensity to cause brokenness and he bears that curse on his body on that tree. Jesus is laid to rest, seemingly defeated. He triumphs over the curse and announces to his resurrection that the curse is now broken.

In case you are not certain that this is what John had in mind, we get another detail in this story of the resurrection. Mary, who may have been one of the most broken disciples of all, is the first one to come to the empty tomb. When she looks around she sees a figure but she doesn't recognize him. What does she think Jesus is when she sees him in the tomb? Jesus appears to be a gardener. Jesus is not in flowing white garments, but instead he is in coveralls and his fingernails are dirty. He has dust on his knees and a spade in his hands, which is why I love Rembrandt's depiction of this scene.

SLIDE Rembrandt's Resurrection Scene (Graphic)

The image of Jesus coming as a gardener is meant for us to see that he has come to set things right. Jesus has come to restore the garden and take each of us back with him into that garden, to once again walk in the cool breeze together of

the evening.

But remember that in the book of Genesis God creates the garden and places us in the garden and then says that we are to take care of it. We find Jesus doing the exact same thing with the disciples that evening. Here's what we read in John 20:19-23.

SLIDE 19 That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. 20 As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! 21 Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."

On Easter, all of us who follow Jesus Christ, are being commissioned and sent to do what he came to do. This is why we say this church that we are called to be Jesus Christ to the world. It's why we put it at the top of your bulletin and on the doors you leave. Just as Adam and Eve were asked to tend the garden we are called to restore the garden.

Remember that when God made human beings in Genesis it says that he scooped up the dust of the earth and what does he do to animate them? He breathed on them the breath of life. In John's gospel, in that room with the disciples here is what Jesus does next.

SLIDE 22 Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Empowered by the spirit, the followers of Jesus are meant to go about creation restoring Paradise. Notice what they are doing. They are supposed to forgive which is about restoration and bringing back Paradise. This is the picture that we find in Scripture when it comes to the resurrection and what that means for us today.

This means that every day we are on a mission. Every day we say when we get up, "Here I am Lord. Send me." Every conversation we have with another human being is either an opportunity to curse or to bless. We have an opportunity to build up or bring down. Every business transaction is an opportunity to do justice and righteousness or an opportunity to try and take advantage of somebody else. Every day, in 100 different ways, we have an

opportunity to restore the garden or to keep the curse in place. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we see our mission is to offer forgiveness and set the world back in the right place.

The truth is we are not going to do that in this life and Jesus knew it. But we're at least going to give it our best shot. We are going to get to the end of each day and we are going to say, "God, I'm sorry I didn't get it right today every moment. Help me tomorrow to do better." Every day we take one more step towards loving God and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and in doing so restore Paradise.

This is why we ask our congregation to be in ministry with the poor, and the elderly and those who are in need throughout this community and throughout the world. We ask every member to commit to serving people outside the walls of the church in some way on a regular basis. We do this together because we can accomplish far more together than we can individually. This is why we have hundreds of mission projects and why we do "Love Out Loud" the first weekend in June, when we worship by going out and serving beyond the walls of this church. We look at the world and we say, "Where are the places where it doesn't look like heaven yet?"

One great way we do this is by our Christmas and Easter offerings which we give beyond the walls of this church. Our Christmas offering this last year went in part to the Manna Soup Kitchen here in Durango and in the next few weekends we are inviting you to sign up to help restore Paradise by working literally in the garden and the area around the soup kitchen.

SLIDE Manna Courtyard (Graphic)

Part of our Christmas offering went to feeding children in the slum area in Africa in which we have served the past few years.

SLIDE Spring Valley Children (Graphic)

Part of our Christmas offering went this last week to Guatemala to provide medicine and medical supplies for people who have no access to medical care if it weren't for you.

SLIDE Guatemala Clinic (Graphic)

Our Easter offering this year goes to two places. One is Sonlight Christian Camp to help kids experience God.

SLIDE Sonlight Camp (Graphic)

The other part of your Easter offering will go to Africa in two weeks with our team going to construct homes for widows in Obaga.

SLIDE Obaga Home (Graphic)

Easter is an invitation for us to live today as though we are trying to bring heaven here on earth. Easter is an invitation to be a part of restoration of the garden.

Any time I preach on this I also feel the need to give a caveat. Several years ago there was a young girl in the community in which I was a youth pastor who thought that heaven sounded much better than the life she was living. She ended her life. I'll have people ask me sometimes, "Pastor Jeff, I feel like I'm walking through hell on Earth. You have described heaven and it sounds so great. Is there anything wrong with me bringing this life to a close now?"

Let me say this as clearly as possible. The promise of the resurrection is not an invitation for you to hurry up and get there and end your life now. It is a powerful and profound word that no matter how hard life feels right now there is always hope.

The worst thing you are walking through right now will not be the last thing. Yes, there is the promise of everlasting life, but until God calls you home God has something for you to do. Even in that hard place, sometimes particularly in a hard place, your light can shine the brightest. You have the opportunity even in that moment to do God's work and to reverse the curse, to care for people and to bless others. You have a mission until Christ calls you home.

When that happens, and you been faithful, even in hard times, you hear the words of the Lord saying, "**Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your rest.**" Until that time, there is always hope and God has work for you to do.

Easter proclaims that Christ is risen from the grave. Death has been swallowed up in victory. Evil and hate and sickness and brokenness will never have the final word. The worst thing is never the last thing. The curse has been reversed. Paradise is being restored. There is always hope...and you have work to do. Let's get to work in the garden. That's the message of Easter. That's the message from the family of Reat Underwood and William Corporon as they shared these words for their congregation this Easter.

"Our family has a deep faith, and we don't believe this tragedy was God's will, but we do believe that Reat and Bill are safe in God's arms. Even in the

midst of our grief, we believe that evil will not have the final word and that good will come from this tragedy."

Every year I have ended my Easter message the same way. People ask me from time to time, "Do you really believe this stuff? You seem to be a smart guy. Do you really believe that Jesus was dead and buried on Friday and on Sunday he walked out of the tomb? Do you really believe there is a life after death? Do you really believe all this stuff? Come on, be honest!"

My answer is always the same. I not only believe it, I'm counting on it! And I hope you will too!

Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

With your heads bowed and your eyes closed I remind you that Jesus in the gospel of John makes it clear how we can experience and step into life. You trust him, and you do what he asks. You believe and you follow his commands. This is the path of life. I would like to invite you on this Easter day to say this simple prayer. You can whisper it under your breath, or pray as you have need. But if you are not sure what to say, you might simply say this.

Jesus, I trust you. I trust in your resurrection. I trust that you live and walk with me each day. I trust in your words. Help me to faithfully follow you. Help me each day to bless and build up and encourage others. Help me to restore your garden. Here I am Lord. Send me.

Lord, I thank you for this congregation and for the joy of this Easter. I thank you for what you've done today here in this place, in each heart. Bless these, your people, that the words of Easter might touch our hearts and that every day we might be used by you to change the world and bring about Paradise. We offer ourselves to you, in your holy name. Amen.