



Theme – Reconstruct:
Building on Solid Ground in an Unstable World
“Hope that Leads to Life.”

Easter sermon preached by Jeff Huber, April 8-9, 2023, at Summit Church, Durango

VIDEO Reconstruct Sermon Bumper

SLIDE *“Hope that Leads to Life.”*

As Grandpa Bob drove into the driveway, he could see his 4-year-old granddaughter, Julie, and a couple of her friends playing in the backyard. It was almost Easter and he wanted to know how much these children knew about the Easter story. Approaching the three little girls he asked, **“Who knows why we celebrate Easter every year?”**

One friend chirped up first: **“Oh, that's when you go sit on the big bunny rabbit's lap and tell him what you want in your Easter basket.”**

Her second pal's answer was not much better: **“No, no, no! It's when you get a tree and hang eggs on it—and you wake up on Sunday and there's presents under it and ...”**

At this point Grandpa interrupted and gently said, **“Those are good guesses. Julie, do you know why we celebrate Easter?”**

Julie nodded her head. **“It's when Jesus was crucified. He died, and His disciples put His body in the grave. Then, on the third day, the**

stone rolled away ...”

Grandpa was really encouraged that Julie knew so many details.

“... And then the entire town would come out by the grave,”
Julie continued. ***“And if Jesus came out and saw his shadow, they knew there would be six more weeks of winter!”***

The Easter story really can be confusing for kids, given that so much focus is on bunnies and chicks and chocolate and eggs. But the Easter story can be equally confusing for us as adults. The real question for us, in the light of where we live today and what is happening in our world is...

SLIDE What does this story mean for us?

What is the significance of the Easter story for our lives? I want to start today by acknowledging how hard it is to believe in this story. Many of you are thinking people, and what I hear as a pastor from many thoughtful people is, ***“You know what? I like the idea of Christianity; I think Jesus is okay; but boy is it hard to believe some of this stuff!”***

We must acknowledge that there are some things in the Christian faith that are just hard to believe, and this is one of those things for many people. So, I want to talk a bit about how we can at least **HOPE** on the way to **BELIEF**, and then apply Easter to our lives today as we **GROW** in faith.

First, let’s simply remember the Easter story as John tells it in his Gospel. Each Gospel tells the story a bit differently, but here’s John’s account. On Friday, Jesus was crucified after being tortured nearly to death by the Romans. It was a very painful death and by 3 in the afternoon or so his death had occurred. They take his body down from the cross, and quickly prepare it for burial. It is done hastily because sunset marks the beginning of a Sabbath and a Jew was not allowed to touch a corpse on the Sabbath, so if they did not prepare Jesus’ body

for burial quickly, Jesus would have to lay there in the elements until after the Sabbath. They wrapped his body in shrouds, using spices and ointments, putting a separate one around his head. Then, Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb. They rolled the massive stone in front of the tomb, and there he lay for the next two days.

The disciples went into hiding and were afraid for their lives. If Jesus, their leader, had been put to death then who was to say that they would not be captured and put to death themselves? So, they waited in a safe place with the doors locked. All day Saturday and through that night the disciples sat and waited, living in despair and darkness.

Early Sunday morning, some women went to the tomb. John's gospel only names one of them, Mary Magdalene. But Mary says "we" which implies there were others. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us the names of those other women. Notice it wasn't the male disciples who had the courage to go to the tomb, but it was the women who go early on Sunday to grieve publicly for Jesus. But when Mary Magdalene arrives, she discovers to her horror that the massive stone has been rolled away. When she looks inside, Jesus is not there.

She is certain that someone has desecrated his tomb. Someone has defiled him and stolen his body to mock him and humiliate him further, even after his death. She runs to find the disciples in their safe house to tell them the tomb is empty. Mary still does not know what has happened. John arrives first, but he allows Peter to enter the tomb before him. We're not sure if John is scared or simply honoring Peter as the leader. When Peter walks into the tomb, what he finds is Jesus' burial shrouds, his grave clothes, lying there just as though his body had passed through them. The shroud that was around his head is lying there, folded neatly, as it would have been around his head but without his head in it. His body is simply gone, missing, but his shroud is still there.

As they walk out, John tells us he believes, but **we are not told WHAT he believes**. Peter is certain someone has stolen his body, so he heads back to the disciples to tell them. Meanwhile, Mary waits at the tomb, and after a short period of time she sees two angels inside. These were not winged creatures as you might imagine, but rather looked like human beings in white clothing. Probably only in hindsight did Mary understand they were messengers from God. She sees them first and turns to find a gardener sitting there. **She asks the gardener, “What have you done with him? What did you do with Jesus?!”**

The gardener speaks and says, **“Mary.”** Instantly she knows that this is Jesus. She touches him and wants to cling to him. Jesus says, **“Mary, don’t cling to me. Go and find my brothers and tell them that I am alive.”** She runs to tell the disciples, but according to Luke’s gospel they don’t believe her. That afternoon, Jesus finally appears in that locked room with the disciples and they finally come to see that Jesus has risen from the grave.

What a powerful day that must have been. What an experience to be there as they saw the risen Christ. **How that must have shaken their worlds and filled their hearts with utter hope, after experiencing and plumbing the depths of despair.** Let’s remember a couple of things about the Gospel of John and its account of the resurrection. Instead of telling the story straight forward, John always includes details in his story that are meant to point to a deeper meaning. **I want to share one detail with you from this story that you don’t find** in Matthew, Mark, or Luke – and then explore with you what this detail means for you and me.

All four gospels tell us there were angels or messengers from God at the tomb. **Only John tells us that there two messengers**, and they were inside the tomb seated at the **head and the foot** of where Jesus’ body should have been. So, John tells us they were in the tomb, AND he tells us where they were sitting. Whenever John gives us a detail that

seems like it's more information than we need, this is supposed to point to a deeper meaning. John could have just said there were angels there, but instead he tells us how many and where they were seated. Almost always these details are meant to teach us something more significant than what appears on the surface. So let me take a minute to give you some information about this.

When you read that there was an angel at the head and another at the foot of the ledge where Jesus' body had been laid, you are meant to remember something that the Jews in Jesus day could not forget. In the Temple in Jerusalem where the Jews went to worship was a place called the **Holy of Holies**. The Holy of Holies was only accessible by the High Priest, and then only once a year. The High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies where a box was laid. The box was 2 feet by 2 feet by 3 feet. It was covered in gold and was called the **Arc of the Covenant**.

You may have read the stories about the Arc of the Covenant in the bible, but if you haven't you will AT LEAST know that Harrison Ford went searching for that Arc in 1981. It's pretty exciting that he will come back this summer for one last time as Indiana Jones.

GRAPHIC Raiders of the Lost Ark

It was this box that we are talking about. This box was the place where the High Priest would come once a year to make a sacrifice of an animal and sprinkle blood on this gold box to atone for his sins. Then he would go back out and bring in a goat. He would sacrifice that goat on the Day of Atonement, our Jewish friends call this Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would slay the goat and pour the blood of the goat there at the foot of the Arc of the Covenant. This sacrifice would atone for the sins of the entire nation of Israel. The High Priest would do this once a year and repeat it year after year.

What we need to know, and what John was pointing towards when he tells you there was an angel at the foot and at the head of

where Jesus' body had been, is that at the foot and the head of the Ark of the Covenant, there were angels sitting. Gold angels were sitting at either end of this box, and it was known as the mercy seat.

GRAPHIC Ark of the Covenant

The Ark was thought to be the temporal throne of God on earth. More than that, it was here that mercy was achieved for God's people each year. One of our members gave me this replica of the Ark last year. What John wanted you to get was this:

SLIDE As you look at that place where Jesus body had lain, this was now the mercy seat.

Jesus died and was buried here. He was our High Priest and sacrifice, not only for the Israelites once a year, but for all humankind for eternity. This is now the mercy seat of God. Our altar table is meant to remind us of this. On Easter, this image of the angels on the empty ledge where Jesus' body was laid, is meant to remind us of that mercy; God's grace for you; atonement; was achieved because of what Christ did. We are meant to look at that and remember his resurrection from the grave. I hope you think of those things when you walk in this Sanctuary and see this table and that cross.

I want to move from there to the question that many of us have as we come to worship on Easter which is...

SLIDE How can I really believe this story?

When I was in college, I took a class on the Bible as Literature at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Our professor was passionate about the Gospels and when he talked about them, he could bring them to life. One day I asked him, since he was so passionate about the stories of Jesus if he was a Christian. He said, "I can almost be a believer. I believe that Jesus was born, and I love his teachings because my heart resonates with them. I love the things he did, and I believe he was probably a wonder worker. I think he probably touched people and

healed them. I have no doubt the Jewish Sanhedrin was involved in having him arrested. I know the Romans must have tortured him and put him to death. I believe all those things. **The one thing that keeps me from being a believer is the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. I just can't believe it.**"

He captures for many of us the struggles we have in wrestling with this idea of the resurrection. I was thinking about this doubt, and I realized that the gospels give us great encouragement. The gospels recognize the fact that we will struggle with belief. Here's what I want you to remember from the story in John's gospel. Mary Magdalene shows up at the tomb and the tomb is empty and what does she think? She doesn't think Jesus has been raised from the dead. **She thinks Jesus' body has been stolen!** His body is missing, and she says these words twice.

SLIDE *"They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."*

She goes and gets Peter and John, who then have the holy foot race to the tomb. They go inside and see the tomb is empty, with the grave cloths lying there. **Peter and John had even heard Jesus say he was going to die and rise again, but they also said that someone must have taken his body.** They can't believe it has happened. Peter and John leave and go back to the room where the disciples are hidden, and while they are gone Jesus appears to Mary. Mary goes and tells the disciples, **"I have seen him...He's alive!"** But they think she is telling a **tale** because she is overly emotional and distraught. They don't believe it.

They had an empty tomb. They had the grave clothes lying there. And they had Mary Magdalene's eyewitness testimony, and they still did not believe! So, if they didn't believe after all of that, how hard will it be for some of us to believe in these things? After that,

Jesus appears to some of the disciples in the upper room in which they had locked themselves away. **Matthew tells us that when Jesus appeared to the disciples most of them believed, but some still doubted, even after seeing him!** In Luke 24:41 we read these words about two of Jesus' followers who saw him and talked to him on the road to Emmaus.

BIBLE ***⁴¹ Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder.***

If all those people struggled with doubt, how much more so can we expect that we might struggle from time to time with doubts? This is just part of life and being human. Part of the reason the next story you're about to see from John's gospel is included in this gospel is in recognition of all of those who are going to struggle with doubt. This is the story from a week after that first Easter of a disciple who is immortalized for his capacity to doubt. You remember that his name was...Thomas. I love this scene from the 2016 movie "Risen" which imagines a Roman Soldier, Clavius, experience the risen Jesus with the disciple Thomas as described in John 20:24-29.

VIDEO **Risen – Clavius and Doubting Thomas meet Jesus**

²⁴ One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. ²⁵ They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

²⁶ Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said. ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my

side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"

²⁸ "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

Clavius, in many ways, is us, struggling to believe. He was even there, in the story. While he may not be an historical figure, it is powerful to imagine what that would have been like. I believe his story was recorded in the gospel of John specifically for those of us who wrestle with doubt. Thomas was able to touch, and because he touched, he believed. But listen to what Jesus says to Thomas next.

BIBLE *²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."*

That's all of us – believing though not seeing. Why would we believe in the resurrection? Is there any evidence that it really happened? The earliest Christians believed there was. The Apostle Paul was the first one to give us a written account of the resurrection. The gospels were written down after Paul wrote his letters. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says this writing to the people in the Corinthian church with these same doubts. He says...

BIBLE

³ I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. ⁴ He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. ⁵ He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him.

What an interesting passage of scripture. Paul says, "You want to know whether he was raised from the dead? There are 500 people who saw him at one time and most of them are alive. **You can go and**

interview them yourselves. You have heard from the Apostles what they experienced. You know how they went from fear to courage. They were **locked up behind closed doors and then they went out courageously in the streets to proclaim Jesus** was raised from the dead. You know there was an empty tomb with grave clothes, but the body of Jesus was no longer there. You know all these things, but in the end, this is what I can tell you. I used to persecute Christians. I put them in prison because I thought they were lying about the resurrection. I put them to death, until I saw him for myself.”

In the end, there are many things that help us come to a place of belief. Louis Pogeman was professor of Philosophy at West Point Military Academy. He has a scientific mind and writes about his struggle in believing in the resurrection with these words:

“I need proof. I need to touch. I need evidence. What I’ve discovered is there are some things I will never be able to have evidence for, but I need to believe in. In the end, what I have found is that if I cannot believe just yet, my first step towards believing is simply hoping. I hope in certain things. I hope they are true. Even if I don’t have evidence, I hope they are true, and I live like they are true, and then sometimes I find out they are true.”

Let me give you a couple of examples of this from my own life. I hope to retire someday and get to spend my retirement years with my wife doing some traveling. To that end, I act upon that hope by putting money into a retirement account every month so I can afford to retire someday. I don’t know for certain that will happen, but there is a good likelihood that it will, so I hope in it, and I act upon it.

I was visiting recently with some members from our church who recently adopted children and became a forever family. They had been hoping for this day for a long time and working towards it. It reminded

of 20 years ago when my wife and I were hoping to adopt a child from Ukraine. We worked on it for years, hoping that it would come to pass. We now hope that our daughter will continue to grow and become an even more beautiful young woman. We hope she will continue to find work that is rewarding and meaningful. We hope she will have a family of her own someday, if that is what she wants. We hope she will love God and love others and so we plan for that. I don't know if all that will happen, but we will hope good things for her future and plan for it as best we can. We hope in certain things and then we act upon that hope. We had those same hopes for our son before his life was cut short when he was 19. I find Pogeman's words so important and powerful for things that we hope for and hopes that are dashed.

“This is how I see religious hope functioning in the midst of doubt. The honest person recognizes the tragedy of existence, that unless there is a God and life after death, our lives lack a grand purpose and have no deep value. But if there is a God and life after death, that meaning of human life is glorious. There is just enough evidence to whet his or her appetite to inspire hope, a decision to live according to Christianity, as an experimental hypothesis.”

Some of you are here today and it's difficult to believe, so I would encourage you to **start with hope**. **Of all the possible outcomes in the world, why not hope in this one: that in the end good will triumph over evil; that God has provided a way for you to experience forgiveness and grace; that life has triumphed over death; that the death we experience is not the end but only the beginning.** There are so many blessings that come from this, that you might simply start by saying, “I hope that this is true.”

SLIDE “I hope that this is true.”

Then we can begin to live like it is true. I believe I can make you

this promise. **If you hope like it is true, and live like it is true, then you will find before too long that you will experience it to be true.** You will come to experience Christ in your life. If it is true, then the question we ask is this.

SLIDE “What is the importance of Easter?”

If I do hope it is true, then what does it matter? **What does it mean for my life today?** The earliest Christians answered this in 3 ways. First, they said...

SLIDE Because Jesus lives, we believe in him.

Because he lives, we know he's the Messiah. His resurrection vindicated everything he said and did, so we trust him. **We trust what Jesus said and we pledge to follow him with our lives.** Had Jesus stayed in the tomb, the disciples and those early followers never would have gone on to follow them with their lives. They would have never continued to proclaim his word. He would just have been a “wannabe” messiah. He would have been laid to rest and that would have been the end. **Let's be honest. If the story was not true and the disciples would not have experienced the resurrection, then they would have gone back to fishing!**

But Jesus' resurrection vindicated his claims to be messiah and they continued to follow him because of his resurrection. More importantly, because of the resurrection of Jesus, they believed in this profound truth.

SLIDE Ultimately, God would prevail over all evil

The cross for them was a symbol for the most evil and atrocious things that happen in the world. They looked at the cross and remembered Jesus being tortured. You can see it in today's world on the moment-by-moment news cycle where people fly planes into mountains and gunman attack unarmed students at campuses all over the world and leaders of nations attack other countries unprovoked. I

vividly remember movies like Hotel Rwanda, where we see the depth of evil we humans are capable of. When I saw innocent people gunned down and killed in cold blood because they are Hutu or Tutsie, I remember the scourging of Jesus. In both cases those who were doing the torturing and killing seemed to enjoy it, almost laughing in the process.

These are just a few snapshots of how awful things can be. We see and read story after story of what happens to good people sometimes. **People can be terrible to one another, and sometimes, because people will use anything to justify evil, it is done in the name of God.** I remind you that just because you put something in the garage, it does not make it a car, and just because says they are a follower of Jesus, it does mean they are. Please don't judge by his so-called followers when they misuse God's name. We must start with Jesus and how he lived and acted in the world. That is our clearest picture of God and **Jesus' resurrection changes EVERYTHING.**

If Jesus had stayed in the tomb, death and evil would be the final word. It would be a tragic tale of one more good person whose life seemed to be cut short and lived in vain. But the disciples recognized when **Jesus rose from the grave that no matter how dark things may seem for a season, God will ultimately overcome all those dark moments as he is the Lord of light and life.** God's Will will be done and good will we wrenched out of evil.

This is what Christians believe. Those earliest Christians looked around and saw their friends being persecuted for their faith, and they experienced tragedy. But they experienced those things with an optimism that would not go away because they knew that Christ was raised from the dead. And if Christ was raised from the dead, then God was in control, even if darkness seemed to prevail for a season.

This is how we Christians face life today. We look at the world

around us and we wonder about natural disasters like tsunamis and tornadoes and earthquakes. We wonder about the students in Kenya just trying to go to school to get an education, being gunned down in cold blood because they follow Jesus. We hear about children living in poverty and we worry about global warming and the cost of gasoline and the stock market and the value of our investments. This is the new world we live in. We wonder and worry when we board an airplane. We wonder what will happen next. This is the world of the 21st Century.

It would be so easy to crawl in our shell and say, ***“I don’t know how I can live in a world like this!”*** But Christians don’t do that. Christians don’t do that because we look at the world and **we see all those things as a call to action, not a call to despair.** We Christians respond this way because we know that the One who overcame death by the resurrection will overcome in our lives. **We don’t know what tomorrow holds, but we know that God holds tomorrow** in his loving hands, and that good will ultimately triumph over evil.

Some of you enjoyed reading or going to see “The Lord of the Rings” and “Hobbit” trilogies. In those films, you see the good guys, Bilbo Baggins and Frodo and the Fellowship of the Ring fighting against the forces of evil. At every step they seem to be outnumbered a hundred or a thousand to one. There is no way they can win this, right! There is no way good can triumph over evil because evil seems too powerful. Yet, they continue to press on, believing that there is a way they cannot see and good will triumph over evil. In the end, this is exactly what happens. Tolkien wrote those books because he was a deeply faithful follower of Jesus Christian. He said this about his books.

SLIDE *What inspired me in these stories is what I find in my faith. The resurrection gives us the ultimate hope that good will, in the end, triumph over evil. –J.R. Tolkien*

SLIDE Life will triumph over death

In the end, what the disciples said about the resurrection was that it also deals with the greatest crisis all of us will experience. **Personally, every one of us will experience this...and that is death.** We will experience the death of people that we love. We will experience mourning and grieving and the pain that feels like your heart has been ripped out. All of us will experience this.

Every religion or philosophy is designed to deal with this in some way. Even atheism tries to come up with ways to deal with this pain. The earliest Christians said that God had planned from the very beginning that you would have the opportunity to live forever with him. This life is only temporary. We are like pilgrims passing through. This body is like a tent, or clay jar, and it is not meant to be ours forever. God has prepared a place for you, a wonderful place, where you can be with him forever. This is God's desire, and God offers it to each of us, his children, as a free gift. God sees death from this perspective, but we can't see it that way.

So, how does God convince us not to be afraid? How does God help us so that we have peace during the storm? God walks among us in human flesh. He tastes death just like we taste it, then on the third day he rises from the dead. I found this list several years ago that can help us keep life in perspective as we grow older.

SLIDE (have them fly in)

- Death is the number 1 killer in the world.
- Good health is merely the slowest possible rate at which one can die.
- Don't worry about old age; it doesn't last that long.

Death is a persistent foe that will not leave us alone. Several years ago, I told you about a Google search I did on "death" and there were 107 billion pages about death. Today there are 4.5 trillion pages! The

first one that comes up is still www.deathclock.com. This web site will tell you when you are going to die! I was kind of curious, so I filled in my birthday, the year I was born, some information on my lifestyle, AND my body-mass-index or BMI. Then up on the screen appears your personal death clock! This is mine.

GRAPHIC Death Clock 1 – August 25, 2060 – 1,179,831,518 seconds

GRAPHIC Death Clock 2 – Sept 27, 2049 – 835,527,497 seconds

GRAPHIC Death Clock 3 – August 9, 2062 – 1,241,521,105 seconds

Just for fun, I tried his the “Check your death clock” box again, and a new date popped up. I did NOT like that date as much, so I hit the box again and got about the best I could get, living to be 99!

I did these calculations on Wednesday, so today it’s even less! Should I be freaking out or what! If you leave it linked here, this is the first thing you see every time you turn your computer on. When you come back to your computer later, **it’s a real pick me up when this is the first thing you see!** I shared this with a friend this past week and they suggested I **pull the plug**...kind of gives new meaning to that phrase. We also wondered if they would make a **computer that will even live that long!**

We know this is very inaccurate and a bit silly, but it really made me stop and think. I have lots more sermons to write; I have places I want to go; I better get going; and the seconds are ticking away... tick... tick... tick... tick. It’s relentless. So how do you live that way? **How do you face that clock if you don’t have hope in the resurrection?**

I do want to be clear that Easter and the resurrection do not take away grief for families who lose loved ones. I have buried hundreds of people in the last 30 plus years of being a pastor. I will tell you that every family grieves. But amid grief, the resurrection can give us hope. I have been with many people in nursing homes and in hospice care who were facing death, and many of them were anxious. That’s a part of life.

We're moving to someplace we've never been before and we don't want to say goodbye. We don't want to give up this life because it's all we've ever known. Easter doesn't take that away, but what it does is give you hope and peace in the face of that. The apostle Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15...

BIBLE *Death has been swallowed up in victory.*

Doug and Hanna Kurtz have been faithful followers of Jesus for many years. They both are leaders in their church and had spent much of their adult lives serving God. Their son George was tragically killed in an accident when he was 22. George was active in the church youth group. He graduated with honors from Stanford University. He was working on his Master of Religion and then had planned to get his medical doctorate so he could be a medical missionary. George loved to hike and lost his footing on a hike in the hills of California where he lived. He slipped and fell to his death.

Doug and Hanna's pastor recounts that when he called them on the phone upon their arrival in California, their voices was what he (and most of us pastors) had heard from families who have lost children. It's a sense of terrifying, unbelievable grief, and pain and shock. There are no words to say and nothing that will make it all better. Then Doug said to his pastor there was only one thing sustaining him. They were words he was saying repeatedly. It was all he was holding on to. Do you know what those words were? They were the words of the Apostle's Creed that we have said or sung before in this church. He said...

**SLIDE I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit;
born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate;
was crucified, dead and buried;**

**But on the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty.
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the
dead;
I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic church;
the Communion of Saints; the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.**

This is what has sustained me in moments like those faced by Doug and other parents who have lost children. **This is what I hold on to.** This is what I believe.

What do you believe? What do you hold on to? What sustains you at the darkest moments? Where is it that you go to find hope and strength in the midst of intense grief and loss, if not the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? What does Easter mean to you this year? If you remember nothing else from this sermon, maybe you will remember his powerful words.

SLIDE Easter means living without fear.

George Thomas was a pastor in a small New England town. One Easter Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying a rusty, bent up old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Eyebrows were raised and, as if in response, Pastor Thomas began to speak...

"I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me swinging this bird cage. At the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, 'What you got there, son?'

"Just some old birds," he replied.

"What are you gonna do with them?" I asked.

"Take 'em home and have fun with 'em," he answered. "I'm gonna

tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a real good time."

Pastor Thomas replied, "But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do?"

"Oh, I got some cats," said the little boy. "They like birds. I'll take 'em to them and they'll eat 'em."

Pastor Thomas was silent for a moment. "How much do you want for those birds, son?"

"Huh? Why, you don't want them birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They don't sing. They ain't even pretty!"

"How much?" Pastor Thomas asked again. The boy sized up the pastor as if he were crazy and said, "10 bucks?"

Pastor Thomas reached in his pocket and took out a ten-dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone.

Pastor Thomas picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, setting them free.

Often in our lives it can feel like we are in a cage, trapped by fear, anxiety, depression, past hurts, tragic moments, a world that seems so broken. We can huddle at the bottom of that cage and wonder if there is any hope for us or for our world. It's in those moments we are invited to hope in the Easter story. Jesus' death, his two days in the tomb when all seemed lost eventually lead to Easter morning when God says from the empty tomb, ***"DONE! Now my people can be free to experience life to the full, free of the cages of death and fear."***

Life really is a journey. We begin being totally dependent and we have no problem believing in things like resurrection and that our pets or grandparents or parents are in heaven. Then we grow and as we

become more independent, we start to question those beliefs, and rightly so because part of growing is asking tough questions and then looking at how to solve them. Pretty soon, we can find ourselves inside cages of fear and guilt and doubt. Some things are harder to believe than others. For some of us, the first step to believing is simply hoping that we can be set free.

I happen to believe there is enough evidence to believe in the resurrection. But even if you do not, then know this. There are some things we believe in, not because there is enough evidence, but because **the very belief itself sustains us and transforms** us, giving us life. We can grow into life and into faith, especially as we begin looking at the end of our lives. This is exactly what John was saying with the last line of his Gospel in chapter 20.

BIBLE

³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.

I want to end this sermon by answering a question some of you ask me from time to time. “Do you really believe this stuff? I know you are paid to say it, but do you deep, deep, down in your heart—do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead?” My answer to that question is simple and I give it to you every year. **Not only do I believe it, but I am counting on it. And you can too!** Please bow your heads with me.

SLIDE

Prayer

As your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I want you to hear and know this last thing. God offers you eternal life. God wants you to spend forever with him. God wants you to not be afraid of death. God wants you to know that no matter how dark things can be in this world, there is life and hope. God wants you to have the peace he offered

Thomas and the disciples, but he won't force it upon you. God won't force you to live with hope instead of despair. God won't force you to have peace instead of fear. God will not force you to have eternal life. God offers it to you as a gift, and it's then your choice to respond.

We each receive this gift simply by saying, "Lord, I want this. I want to hope in you. I want to believe. I want to live with you forever. I want to have peace and not fear. I want life."

As you trust and receive the gift of life Jesus offers; as you put your hope in him, and you begin to follow, you begin to discover this eternal life is yours as well. So if you are here today and you would like to accept this gift of eternal life from Jesus Christ—if you would like to have that hope—I invite you to say quietly under your breath the prayer I am about to pray...Thank you Jesus for what you have done for us, for suffering, for dying, and for the resurrection from the dead. We pray that we might live as your people. Lord, I believe, and follow you. Help my unbelief. I trust my life to you, and I receive the gift of life you give me, in your holy name."

Lord God, you know each person sitting here and you love them more than they can imagine or believe. I pray you will bless them and encourage them and fill their hearts with your hope and your life this Easter weekend, in your holy name. Amen.

April 8-9 Order

1. Easter video in the dark
2. Two songs.
3. Jeff welcomes.
 - a. Invite people to greet each other, however we are comfortable.
4. Announcement Video - **QR codes and food ministry donation, ushers, kid's boxes and family room, the easter offering, how to give, meditation moments, and that we have more information about the church on the back table.**
5. Sermon and Prayer
6. One Song
7. Prayer and Lord's Prayer
8. New Sermon Series VIDEO
9. Offering SLIDE and Focus (Easter Offering and Missions)
10. Care Ministers (If any are present)
11. Closing Prayer
12. Prayers focus for April is Missions.