

## THE DIFFERENCE EASTER MAKES

It was June 18, 1815, the Battle of Waterloo. The French under the command of Napoleon were fighting the Allies (British, Dutch, and Germans) under the command of Wellington. The people of England depended on a system of semaphore signals to find out how the battle was going. One of these signal stations was on the tower of Winchester Cathedral. Late in the day it flashed the signal: "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N---D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D- -." Just at that moment one of those sudden English fog clouds made it impossible to read the message. The news of defeat quickly spread throughout the city. The whole countryside was sad and gloomy when they heard the news that their country had lost.

Suddenly the fog lifted, and the remainder of the message could be read. The message had four words, not two. The complete message was: "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N- - -D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D- - -T-H-E- - -E-N-E-M-Y!" in a few minutes the good news spread. Sorrow was turned into joy, defeat was turned into victory! So it was when Jesus was laid in the tomb on the first Good Friday afternoon. Hope had died even in the hearts of Jesus' most loyal friends. After the frightful crucifixion, the fog of disappointment and misunderstanding had crept in on the friends of Jesus. They had "read" only part of the divine message. "Christ defeated" was all that they knew. But then on the third day - Easter Sunday - the fog of disappointment and misunderstanding lifted, and the world received the complete message: "Christ defeated death!" Defeat was turned into victory; death was turned into life!

That is the difference Easter makes. It changes everything. I think the disciples understood that feeling. Their world had come crashing down around them. Then, in an instant, everything changed.

1 Cor 15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 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 was a cartoon of two Roman soldiers standing by the empty tomb. The stone was rolled away and one soldier was looking very worried because they had failed in their responsibility. But the other one shrugged and said, "Don't worry about it. A hundred years from now, no one will remember this." But a hundred years went by and people still remembered. Nearly 2,000 years later, God's people still gather and we remember that Jesus is alive.

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 or ever will 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 sobering: if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. If not, the cross is history's hoax – Max Lucado

## 1. A DIFFERENT CROSS – our disposition (decoration)

Because Jesus is alive the cross is different today. Our disposition or mood towards it has changed. The cross was an instrument of horrible death, rough wood soaked with human blood. So terrible was this form of execution that the Roman Empire prohibited the crucifixion of Roman citizens. Crucifixion was only for the worst of slaves & enemies of the empire. When Jesus was crucified he was placed on a hill near a road so that everyone coming and going from Jerusalem. It was the Roman's way of saying "mess with us and this could happen to you!"

I don't know if they still do this or not but does anyone remember that gross film they used to show students in drivers education? It was designed to scare us to be careful drivers. The cross was like that. It was a terrible instrument of death used to scare people into obedience.

The death on the cross was a death of suffocation. As you hung your lungs were forced open. You could breathe in but you can't breathe out. To prolong the suffering they would take a person's knees and bend them a little bit and nail the feet to the cross. A man would be hanging there in absolute agony unable to breathe until he would lift himself up on his feet that were nailed, so he could breathe. He would hold that position until He could no longer stand the pain in his feet and He would let himself back down again. Until the pain in his lungs became unbearable again. The death on the cross was up and down, up and down. Often it would take days for a person to die. When the Romans wanted it to end they would eventually break the legs of the person on the cross. They couldn't stand up anymore and then they'd suffocate.

The disciples did not at first understand why Jesus went to the cross they saw it as defeat. The one they loved who they thought would lead them out of Roman captivity was dead and all their dreams had died along with Him. It was not until the resurrection that they finally understood the truth. The death of Jesus was not an accident.

Matt 26:53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?

It was not the nails that held Him to the cross, it was love. Jesus stayed on the cross to show you His love. The depth of His pain shows the depth of His love for you – what He was willing to pay so that you could be forgiven. His death was no accident.

Today, the cross is seen as a symbol of hope, and a reminder of God's love for us. Because of the resurrection, the cross is different. Many we wear a replica of the cross as a piece of jewelry, a thing of beauty. It's like wearing a little electric chair on your neck, not because it is beautiful but because of what it symbolizes. The cross was not a crushing defeat, it was a glorious victory.

In southern Alabama is the town of Enterprise. There they have erected a monument to an insect, honoring the Mexican boll weevil. In 1895 the boll weevil began to destroy the major crop of the county, cotton. In desperation to survive the farmers had to diversify, and by 1919 the county's peanut crop was many times what cotton had been at its height. In that year of prosperity a fountain and monument were built. The inscription reads: "In profound appreciation of the boll weevil and what it has done as the herald of prosperity this monument was erected by the citizens of Enterprise, Alabama." Out of a time of struggle and crisis had come new growth and success. Out of adversity had come blessing.

## 2. A DIFFERENT CALLING – our direction

Because Jesus is alive the direction of our lives is different today. All around us we hear how the world today is in trouble. We are in the midst of an economic crisis. Dictators are building nuclear weapons. Terrorism is on the rise and battles are raging all around the world. There are diseases for which we have no cures. The news is full of problems. If you watch it and listen long enough you can begin to be filled with despair. If the only hope that we have is the hope that this world offers then we are in trouble because the message of this world is that disaster is coming.

In contrast, Jesus said he came to bring us life and life more abundantly. In the resurrection we have new hope and joy and we have a reason to live. Our lives are different because of the resurrection. We have a purpose and a mission to live for.

*Newsweek*, said, “The risen Christ is the center of the Christian faith. The mystery without which there would be no church, no hope of eternal life, no living Christ to encounter today. No other historical figure has ever made the claim that He was raised from the dead. It was this appearance of the resurrected Christ that lit the flame of the Christian faith. It wasn’t the morality of the Sermon on the Mount, which enabled Christianity to conquer Roman paganism, but it was the belief that Jesus was alive. He’d been raised from the dead.”

We do not follow a dead historical figure but serve a risen savior. Easter is not some memorial to a nice religious teacher who lived 2000 years ago. It’s a celebration of the fact that Jesus is alive today.

I started by talking about Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo. A few years before this Napoleon’s troops were marching against Austria. The huge army was preparing to attack the small town of Feldkirch. Soldiers had been spotted on the heights above the little town, which was situated on the Austrian border. A council of citizens was hastily summoned to decide whether they should try to defend themselves or display the white flag of surrender. It happened to be Easter Sunday, and the people had gathered in the local church. The pastor rose and said, "Friends, we have been counting on our own strength, and apparently that has failed. As this is the day of our Lord's resurrection, let us just ring the bells, have our services as usual, and leave the matter in His hands. We know only our weakness, and not the power of God to defend us." The council accepted his plan and the church bells rang. The enemy, hearing the sudden peal, concluded that the Austrian army had arrived during the night to defend the town. Before the service ended, the enemy broke camp and left.

What Napoleon did not understand was that it was Easter Sunday and the bells were in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. The Easter bells caused the enemy to retreat – and the same is true today. When you understand the true meaning of Easter it is God’s triumph over the enemy which had surrounded us.

After Jesus died the disciples were hiding in an upper room. Their hope was gone and their dreams were shattered. The resurrection transformed that small scared group into a force that changed the entire Roman world in one generation. That is the difference Easter makes.

Easter is the truth that turns a church from a museum into a ministry. From a social club into a lifesaving station. We are different people today because of Jesus. Years ago I made the single most important decision that I have ever made. That was the decision to invite the risen Jesus to come into my heart. Since that day my life has been different. I thank God for the victory he won in my life!

### 3. A DIFFERENT CROWN – our destination

Because of Jesus our destination is different today. Before the resurrection, death was the end. Before the resurrection, death was the final curtain call. Before the resurrection, all we could do is mourn as those who have no hope. But after the resurrection, when someone dies, we mourn because we have lost a loved one. But we mourn as people who have great hope because Jesus Christ is alive and the promise of Scripture is that if He is alive, then we, too, can live forever. Our sins are forgiven by His shed blood and we have the promise of everlasting life. It changes the whole concept of death itself.

When you change your destination everything else changes. E.g. GPS when you put in a different destination the route is recalculated. The resurrection proves to us that death has been defeated.

Max Lacado in his book *Six Hours One Friday* tells the story of a missionary teaching people not to be afraid of the water. The people had to cross a shallow river to get to a hospital to be healed but they were afraid of the water. The missionary first walked in, jumped up and down and splashed water on his face, and then dove in and came up on the other side of the river. Slowly the tribe began to cross. What had made the difference?

When Jesus walked the earth He told His disciples that they did not need to fear death.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 6:39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

The people heard the words of Jesus, but their response to His death showed that they didn't really believe it. Often words are not enough. Jesus not only told us that we should not fear death, He touched death and showed that it could be beaten. His words were followed by action.

Luke 7:12 As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out--the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." 14 Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother

John 11:39 "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days." 40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Even after Jesus words and deeds the disciples still did not truly understand. When they saw Jesus die on the cross their hopes and dreams died with Him. It was not until he appeared to them that they began to see the truth. Like the missionary who dove under the water, Jesus immersed himself in death for us. He not spoke about death and touched death, he experienced death for us. He died and He rose again to show us once and for all that death had been conquered. He shows us that where he went we can follow.

Dr. Robert Hughes' (Lutheran Theological Seminary) father was a coal-miner in north-eastern Pennsylvania. His job was to check the mines for methane gas before the miners went down into the mines. Every morning he would descend alone into the mines, taking with him the safety light, and he would check out each of the tunnels and shafts of the mine to make sure that there was no deadly methane gas present. Of course, if the light of the safety lamp would so much as flicker, he would have to run for his life because it would detect the presence of methane gas. And then after checking the mine, he would rise up to the surface, and there would be all the miners gathered around expectantly waiting for him to announce, "It's OK; it's safe; you can now go down into the mine." And as Dr. Hughes used the illustration, he said, "That's what Christ has done for us. Coming up out of the depths of death, he has announced to all who are gathered here in this life on earth: 'It's OK; it's safe. You can enter into death, into the darkness and the unknown. It's safe because I have been there and checked it out. It has not been victorious over me. I have overcome it, and I will be with you in death even as I have been with you in life.'"

That is our hope. I pray that is your hope as well. Maybe you are here today and you have never had a chance to meet the risen Christ. Maybe you have never experienced the life changing difference that Easter makes. You can experience it today. Invite Jesus to come into your life. Like Thomas you can declare "my Lord and my God."