

Date: March 31, 2024 ● Speaker: Spence Shelton ●

Title: There's Hope for Sinners

Good Morning and Happy Easter! Happy Easter to Pastor Darrick and our Mercy Northeast Campus! Happy Easter to Pastor Mike and our Mercy Union County Campus! My name is Spence and I serve as the lead pastor of Mercy Church. I imagine a lot of you are new here to church so let me just say welcome. We are one church that gathers for worship in three locations on Sundays and we are so glad you are here. We've been praying for you. Man I'm excited for this morning not only because it's Easter but because we are celebrating BAPTISMS this morning! Praise God!

It's funny by this time in the service most people newer to church are thinking either, "ok this place is alright," OR, "Oh lord what have I gotten myself into?" Well, good news - First we have plenty of exit doors at all three of our campuses. I know you have already looked for them. So if you need to sprint out, you can and we will still love you.

BUT, I do want you to know if you are newer that Jesus built his church with you in mind. Jesus talked about his own ministry like it wasn't a VIP Club for the super holy, but instead was a hospital for sinners. So that's what we want to be like here at Mercy Church because after all, we are all sinners here. If you think we are like the super put together always do everything right crowd...nope that's not us. Jesus intended his church to be a place where the weary find rest. Where the hurting find healing. Where the fallen find redemption. Where the outcast finds community. Where the fakers find freedom. Where everyone, no matter your story, can find hope through Jesus.

So, you are very much welcome here and we want to help you take your next step with Jesus, whatever that is.

Let me orient you to this weekend. If you are newer to Christianity we actually observe two holidays on this weekend. The first is called Good Friday. It's where we Christians gather for worship to remember the death of Jesus. And we had a wonderful Good Friday service where we remembered why Jesus died.

Good Friday: Jesus died to save sinners he loves

Well today, Sunday, is the other big holiday and it's our biggest one of the year. Bigger than Christmas. Because our whole faith hinges on what we celebrate today. Today is what we call Resurrection Sunday, and it's where we celebrate the news that Jesus - who was dead and buried in a tomb - came back to life. Resurrected from the dead.

And that's big because listen either the tomb is empty or Christianity is empty.

And what I'm gonna ask you to do today as we walk through the account of Jesus rising from the dead is to consider what it means for you if its true. What are the implications for your life if he really did rise from the dead.

If Good Friday's message is "Jesus died to save sinners he loves" then the big idea here on Easter Morning...on Resurrection Sunday is simply this:

The Risen Jesus offers new life to sinners

You've heard me talk about sinners a good bit so let me clarify. There are only two kinds of people in the world - Sinners...and liars. We all sin. And we all suffer from other people's sin. Lemme define sin. Since Las Vegas is Sin City and there's something called chocolate sin cake. Even a nail polish brand called sinful colors. Well the Bible basically says,

Sin is choosing our way over God's way

God designed the world so that if we follow his design we can flourish but my real life experience is not ALWAYS FLOURISHING. Even if you have no prior knowledge of Christianity before walking in here you can agree with the basic Christian claim that the world is broken. And Christianity not only offers an explanation for that, but it offers the solution!

And what the church announces on Easter Sunday (and really every Sunday) is the greatest news the world has ever heard is that the tomb is empty so there's hope for sinners. All kinds. Whatever kind you are - that's who there's hope for. Let's get into it and I'll show you why we believe he did get out of the grave and why it matters to us. Good Friday was Luke 23, So today Easter Sunday we move over to LUKE 24.

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb. 3 They went in but did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were perplexed about this...

Perplexed - like what are the possible rational explanations for there not being a body. Let me tell you the common theories then and now: First - someone broke in and stole the body. An idea that Matthew's gospel tells us was created by the priests who bribed the Roman soldiers to spread as a cover up because they were confused & pretty alarmed by the whole thing. [1] Of course the huge problem is...Roman guards were at the tomb. Guarding it. That's what guards do. Bunch of disciples aren't getting in. They are holed up in hiding. We'd know if they raided the tomb because Rome would have mounted an attack on them. So what else could have happened? Maybe he wasn't dead when we put him in here? This is called the "Swoon Theory." But that's preposterous. He died a gruesome death. They even stabbed him in the side to make sure he was dead. These guys were pros at killing people. This isn't the princess bride where he's MOSTLY DEAD but not all dead. Here's why this theory is popular still today - Because of what is at stake. If Jesus recovered...he can still just be a good teacher. But if resurrected...he's something different. We have to respond to him differently. If he rose...LIKE HE SAID HE WOULD...then it gives him credibility to WHO HE SAYS HE IS. And he says he's God. And maybe you don't want to believe he's God. that makes sense. So a theory that he wasn't fully dead is comforting to you.

We'd rather believe irrational explanations that deny God than rational explanations that accept him.

[1] *Matthew 28.11-15*

Because if he really did get out of the grave...THEN we gotta rethink who he is. Cause he cant JUST BE A GOOD TEACHER if he got out of the grave. He's more than that. He's God. Which means logically you and I must approach him as God, not simply a teacher.

Third idea - Everybody just lied about it. And the lie outgrew the truth. Problem - There were 500 eyewitness testimonies of Jesus appearing to people for 6 weeks after his resurrection. This isn't one guy saying God told him something like Mormonism. Or even 12. It's hundreds. And they have nothing to gain by knowingly lying. Most of them were killed for saying Jesus rose from the grave. Peter was crucified upside down. John died in prison. Several were burned at the stake & others were beheaded. If they weren't killed they were ostracized for it. They didn't GET anything for preaching about a resurrected Jesus.

Dr. Thomas Arnold, professor of Modern History at Oxford University, author of the widely acclaimed 3-volume history of Rome, said, "The evidence for Jesus's life, death and resurrection has been shown to be satisfactory (according to the standards of any historian). It (holds up) according to the common rules for distinguishing good evidence from bad. Tens of thousands of persons have gone through it piece by piece as carefully as any judge reviewing the most important case. I have myself done this many times over, not to persuade others but to satisfy myself. Throughout my life I have made a career of studying the histories of times and events, examining and weighing the evidence for what was written about each of them, and I know of no other one fact in history which is proved by better and fuller evidence than this one: Jesus Christ died and rose again from the dead." [1] - Dr. Thomas Arnold

Listen I know you may have other reasons for not believing than the truth of the resurrection. Maybe its because Christians haven't always lived up to the name of Christ. That's for sure true and I'm the first to admit it. Maybe its something else but what we are saying is you gotta start with the resurrection. Because if this is not true, nothing else matters.

[1] History of Rome, (3 volumes, 1838-42). See also here for similar claims from contemporary scientists and history professors. (borrowed from J.D. Greear "Alive in Me" sermon on Matthew 28.1-20).

Which is why Paul says, “17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Those, then, who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. 19 If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone. -- 1 Corinthians 15:17-19

He’s right! If Christ didn’t rise from the dead - Christians should be more pitied than anyone on the planet. But If Jesus rose from the grave - there’s hope for sinners. Why?

Because The Risen Jesus offers new life to sinners.

So I am staking everything on the fact that he got out of the grave. And I’m saying as hard as it may be...ask yourself the question - what if its true? Even ask it as a prayer in your heart while I’m preaching...GOD...is this true?

See here’s the thing. I cannot make you believe he rose from the dead. And in fact, That’s not my job as a preacher. I’m not God’s salesman. My job is to announce it to you & to plead with you to believe it. And I say plead because of what is at stake in this news. But all I can do is put it before you and make the case and then whether you choose to believe it or not is going to be between you and God. But if its true...then there’s hope for us. There’s NEW LIFE offered to us.

4 While they were perplexed about this...suddenly two men stood by them in dazzling clothes. 5 So the women were terrified and bowed down to the ground.

Ok. Just to be clear. These are angels according to the gospel of Matthew. Not like Cupid though. Think more like...warriors clothed in light. Usually, when they show up they have to tell the people they appear to...fear not. And if they showed up to you...you’d probably be terrified and fall to the ground like these women did. And I want you to hear the question they ask these women. Because it is the question for us today.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” asked the men. 6 “He is not here, but he has risen!

Why are you looking for the living among the dead? That's a really simple but also deeply profound question. The surface meaning of course is that the answer to their question...what happened to Jesus...is that he has risen! And what in the world would a living person be doing in a tomb? Why are you looking for the living among the dead? But I want you to hear the angel asking you that same question. Have you noticed how we keep going back to empty tombs to try and find life? I mean can you imagine if these women....having found the tomb empty... came back an hour later EXPECTING JESUS TO BE THERE? And they saw it was empty AGAIN. And THEN they came back The next day LOOKING FOR HIM? Still Empty. And yet every day for the next 20 years they kept coming back to THE SAME EMPTY TOMB? Is he here? You'd think they were insane. And yet - that's us. We keep going to things, over and over, hoping to find LIFE. But they are tombs that hold nothing but death. Listen to me - LIFE WILL NEVER BE FOUND IN A TOMB. TOMBS ARE FOR DEATH. And I want to plead with some of you stop looking for life in empty tombs.

A tomb is the thing you go to for security, comfort, or meaning but it doesn't deliver because it wasn't made to give you that. The ESCAPE tomb - Pornography, Alcohol, Drugs...I've watched addiction to these escapes bring nothing but destruction. It's not truly an escape, its a tomb. The FEAR tomb - you keep working and working for approval of others. OR you don't live your life because you are afraid they won't like you. And though people say their opinion doesn't matter...YOU DESPERATELY want them to like you & accept you. What is under all of that? Fear. It's a tomb. We make good things into tombs. Things like work, relationships, families. I do this with work. It should be a good thing God gave me to do but I turn it into the thing I find my significance in. Good news - The Risen Jesus offers FREEDOM from that. NEW LIFE. TRUE LIFE .

You fill in the blank. What is your tomb? You may not have ever realized it but I'm telling you right now...that thing you keep going back to that never gives you sustained LIFE...is a tomb. And the very shrewd lie we believe is that even though all I found was death last time...I'll go back again.

Remember how he spoke to you when he was still in Galilee, 7 saying, ‘It is necessary that the Son of Man be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and rise on the third day?’ 8 And they remembered his words. -- Luke 24:1-8

What the angels are saying is - don't you remember? Everything that happened in the life and death of Jesus...went according to God's plan. Jesus told them this was going to happen. And that's how it happened. Just like he said. And that is true to this very moment. God is fully in control of every single minuscule detail that got you to where you are sitting right now. Isn't that crazy? The friend that invited you, the situations in your life that created that friendship...that right now you are wondering how in the world you EVER became friends with them...Yes, all of that is happening just like God planned. Because he's in control. And Easter is telling you...God planned for Jesus to die. He had to. To pay for your sins and mine. But God also planned for Jesus to defeat death. So that we could have LIFE free from those empty tombs.. And that's what we celebrate on Easter.

I'm going to jump a little ways down to verse 36. The disciples are all at dinner and I love Easter dinner. Jesus shows up. Like appears out of nowhere while they were talking about the rumor of the resurrection.

36 As they were saying these things, he himself stood in their midst. He said to them, “Peace to you!” 37 But they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. 38 “Why are you troubled?” he asked them. “And why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself! Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” 40 Having said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 But while they still were amazed and in disbelief because of their joy,

Hey catch that last line. It's a great picture of what happens when you become a follower of Christ. Your JOY is so great - you are amazed and in disbelief because it.

These followers went from mourning their murdered savior to having dinner with him. Jesus coming back to life brought new life to them too. And joy. Man, that's what characterized the early church and it's what comes to all believers. JOY. And I want that for you. Fullness of Joy. They are experiencing Psalm 16.11 – "In your presence there is FULLNESS of JOY."

Empty tombs offer empty lives but the risen Jesus offers new life to sinners

I promise you. My life is not MISSING OUT because I chose Jesus. I don't envy the world of sin that God saved me from. I am tempted to it. All the time. And sometimes I still go back to those tombs. Don't look to me for perfection. BUT...I'm telling you...Jesus is better than those empty tombs of death. You've BEEN THERE. There is nothing for you there! But there is the JOY of new life in Jesus.

He asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42 So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

Again making sure they don't think this was just some apparition or ghost. This is a fully human person.

44 He told them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

Listen church – The resurrected Jesus keeps going back to the Bible to teach these disciples. Like, I would think him standing there would be the main point of attention. But no The angel at the tomb said...remember how Jesus talked about the Bible? And Jesus on his way to this dinner met a couple of guys on the road...disguised himself...and taught them how the whole Bible pointed to himself. And here at dinner, he's saying...LOOK AT THE BOOK! It's all in there! If you knew my word, then my resurrection would not be a surprise. It would be an expected victory.

Maybe you are here on Easter because you want an experience with Jesus to validate if he is real. Yes, he shows them the scars but more importantly, he shows them the scriptures. You need the scriptures. GUESS WHAT WE open here every week? The Scriptures. And the resurrection is this big stamp of proof that God keeps his promises. He does what he says. And do you know his promise to you? If you will receive Christ's death as payment for your sin, your sin is removed from you as far as the east is from the west. The resurrection guarantees you God has the power and desire to forgive you from your sins and give you new life.

46 He also said to them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day, 47 and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.

HE DID WHAT HE SAID HE WOULD DO! The Gospel is an announcement of Forgiveness of sins! Of Freedom from Bondage! Of Life forever! Of Salvation for ALL no matter your past.

When Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross he said "it is finished." What was finished? Well...justice was finished. Every single one of us is a sinner. Which means we chose our way over God's way at some point in our lives. And it is our sin that separates us from God. We rebelled against God like a rebellious child does against their parent. But because God is a just God, sin must be paid for.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 6.23

Your wage - what you owed for your sin - is death. Been that way since the first sin. God isn't just going to let sin slide. You'd hate a god like that. No, we need a God who will bring justice to every wrong. Including our own wrongs. That sin has to be paid for. Here's an easy way to explain it: If you come over to our house and we are outside playing driveway basketball. And you get mad cause you are too into March madness and you sling my basketball into my passenger car door & dent it....we have a problem.

That dent costs money to fix. And the Hyundai sonata...lovingly called the blue bullet...is maxed out on acceptable number of dents and scratches. I can either make you PAY. OR I can forgive you....but if I forgive you...the car is still dented. SOMEBODY still has to pay. My forgiveness transfers the burden of paying for the dent OFF OF YOU...who deserve to pay it...and onto me who did not do it. The same is true with the gospel. Sin is a breaking of God's commands. And incurs a debt. Because the sin is against an infinitely holy God, your debt is death. Eternity apart from God. Either you gotta pay it (which you cant). Or he takes it on himself and forgives you. And the reason we Christian's get so hype is because in the greatest act of forgiveness of all time...God paid the price for your sin and extends forgiveness to you. If Jesus Got out of the grave...there is hope for you!

Empty tombs offer empty lives but the risen Jesus offers new life to sinners like you and me.

6 For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. -- John 3.16

You must believe. I want to offer you the chance to believe today. I want you to receive the new life Jesus offers you. You have to believe. It's not enough to know it. The bible says even the demons know who Jesus is. You must receive the gift of forgiveness and new life God offers you. Eternal LIFE in Christ Jesus our Lord. And you can do that today.

Invitation (KEEP JOHN 3.16 on the screen)

Our worship teams are getting in place. Want to invite you...

- Accept Christ's Gift of forgiveness and new life.
- Be Baptized - about to see people baptized. Baptism is your next step after belief. Maybe you've never taken that step & you can take that today.
- Take your next step - Easter is about celebrating and maybe recommitting...

PRAY to close