

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 4, 2010
Easter Sunday**

REMEMBER THE RESURRECTION

2 Timothy 2:8-13

Remembering. It is one of the most important things we do in life. It is one of the reasons we have museums – so we can remember our roots, our history, and how we got to where we are today.

It is true, some things are best forgotten. And no doubt there are things in the life of every person here today that we would rather forget, or wish we *could* forget – things we have said or done that we wish we hadn't, or things that have happened to us that we wish we could erase from our memories. Even when you know you have been forgiven, even when you know your sin has been taken away by the blood of Jesus, remembering things you have done or said that injured someone or grieved God's heart in any way can be painful.

There is an old Irish blessing that says: "May you never forget what is worth remembering, nor ever remember what is best forgotten." May that blessing be yours.

A movie character played by Robin Williams once said that nobody takes pictures of something they want to forget. We take pictures of things – or people – we don't want to forget. So we won't forget.

Remembering is a way of holding onto what you never want to lose. It is one of God's most precious gifts to us. And it is a gift to be cherished.

Life, of course, is full of things to remember – things like birthdays, anniversaries, appointments, deadlines (think of April 15), and people's names. Remembering a person's name is a simple but powerful way of communicating to people that they are important, and that you care enough to call them by name.

Parents are forever reminding their kids to remember something:

- "Remember to brush your teeth."
- "Remember to say please and thank you."
- "Remember to clean up your room."

Throughout the history of our nation, the call to remember has been invoked as a battle cry or rallying cry in a variety of circumstances. In 1836, Texans were urged to "remember the Alamo" in their fight for independence from Mexico. When the U. S. entered World War II, one of the rallying cries to unite the American people was "remember Pearl Harbor." More recently, we have vowed as a people to "remember 9-11" so that a terrorist attack on American soil will not happen again.

Jesus understood the importance of remembering. He instituted the Sacrament of Communion (the Lord's Supper) on the night before He died to help us remember His sacrificial death for us on the cross. He told His disciples: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). He instructed us to do it so we will never forget what He did for us.

2 Timothy was the last of the New Testament letters Paul wrote before his death in Rome. In it he gave this instruction to his young protégé Timothy: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel." At the center of his message was the person and work of Jesus. For Paul, life was all about Jesus. The rest was just details. His message was first, last and always about Jesus in His saving love and resurrection power.

In this verse, Paul reminds Timothy (and us) that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. He (Jesus) was descended from the royal line of David. He was real flesh and blood, just like you and me. And, as an earthly descendant of David, Jesus fulfilled the prophetic promise of a coming king who would rule in wisdom and power over all His people.

The other thing Paul singles out for special attention here is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which is what I want to focus on today. Why is it so important for us to remember the resurrection? Why do Christians make such a big deal of Easter anyway? On this resurrection Sunday, I want to offer five reasons to remember the resurrection.

1. IT REALLY HAPPENED

The first reason to remember the resurrection is that it really happened. It is an historical fact. It is not a myth, a religious story invented to communicate some spiritual truth. The resurrection of Jesus is not some kind of hoax or lie, as some people believe. There are people today who continue to believe that the Apollo moon landing in 1969 was a hoax – that it really did not take place on the moon, but on some Hollywood movie lot. And there are people today who continue to insist that the Holocaust – the murder of six million Jews during World War II – never happened. It was all made up. In the same way, there are people who dismiss the resurrection of Jesus as either a hoax or just a nice story created to make the followers of Jesus feel better.

Not so! The witness of history is overwhelming. Jesus really did die on a Roman cross. He really did rise again from the dead on the third day, just as He said He would. God really did raise Him from the dead. There were literally hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Him alive after His resurrection. True, nobody actually saw Him rise from the dead. God the Father raised Him in secret, in the tomb where they had placed His body just two days earlier. But there were many who saw for themselves or heard from reliable witnesses that the tomb was empty, except for the grave clothes Jesus left behind. And there were many who saw Him alive with their own eyes.

In our legal system, a witness is someone who testifies to what they have seen or heard or experienced personally. After the resurrection and Jesus' ascension into heaven, when Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples, were hauled in before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and

ordered to stop teaching about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, they responded by saying: “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). They were acting as witnesses.

Here are some of the other witnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death and resurrection:

- Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary: They were the first to the tomb on Sunday morning and the first to see Jesus alive again (Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:1-18).
- The two travelers on the road to Emmaus who had an unexpected encounter with the risen Christ (Luke 24:13-35).
- Ten of the disciples, meeting behind locked doors in uncertainty and fear, who suddenly saw the Lord Jesus in their midst and received His blessing of peace (John 20:19-23).
- Thomas, the doubter, who was not with the other ten when Jesus appeared to them. When Jesus invited Thomas to put his fingers into the nail holes in Jesus’ hands and to put his hand into Jesus’ pierced side, Thomas finally believed (John 20:24-28).

The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead constituted the core, the foundation, of the message proclaimed by His followers from the very beginning. In the first sermon he ever preached, on the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd that Jesus was “handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him” (Acts 2:23-24). A few minutes later, he said: “God raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of this fact” (2:32).

Not long after this, the second time Peter and the other apostles were brought before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem because they had violated the order not to teach in the name of Jesus, Peter and the others said: “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree... We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:30, 32).

Much later in the Book of Acts, years after Paul’s life-changing encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and after Paul’s pioneering missionary journeys to spread the message of Christ throughout the world, he appeared before the Roman governor of Caesarea, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II, the great-grandson of Herod the Great, now in charge of Jerusalem. When Paul spoke about the resurrection of Jesus, Festus thought he had lost his mind. But Paul replied: “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king (Agrippa) is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:25-26).

Not done in a corner. Not a myth or a hoax or a lie. If it were a lie, it would have been easy to prove. The resurrection really happened. It is a fact of history. In fact, the death and resurrection of Jesus together are the central facts of history.

2. IT PROVES THE SUFFICIENCY OF JESUS' DEATH.

The second reason to remember the resurrection is that it proves that the death of Jesus on the cross was an acceptable, efficient, and all-sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice to pay for our sins. The Bible teaches that Jesus carried our sins in His body when He suffered and died on the cross (1 Peter 2:24; 2 Corinthians 5:21). He did it to save us from our sins and to reconcile us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, if He had stayed dead after they placed His body in the tomb, it would have been nothing more than a tragic ending to the inspiring story of an extraordinary life.

If Jesus is still dead, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, our faith in Him is folly. It is futile. It is useless. And we are still stuck in our sins with no hope of ever being set free. That is the bottom line, if Jesus is still dead.

But He is not dead. He is alive. The resurrection really happened. And the fact that Jesus rose from the dead proves that His self-offering on the cross was acceptable to the Father and sufficient to save us from all our sins. That is a huge reason to remember the resurrection.

3. IT PROVES THAT JESUS IS WHO HE CLAIMED TO BE

Here is the third reason to remember the resurrection: It proves that Jesus really is who He claimed to be. Was He a good man? The best. A great teacher? Without equal. A charismatic leader who could attract great crowds? You bet. A miracle-worker? Without question. A man of extraordinary compassion and insight? Without a doubt.

Jesus was all of these things. But He was more than these things. Was He truly a man? Yes. He was fully man. But He was (and is) fully God, too. The resurrection is God's seal on the deity of Jesus. Paul says in Romans 1:4 that Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. Jesus did not *become* the Son of God by virtue of His resurrection. He was God the Son from eternity past. But His resurrection from the dead gives proof that He really is the Son of God.

Lots of people, especially in sports, can talk a good game. But talk is cheap – unless you can back it up. Jesus backed it up. He did what He said He would do. He rose from the dead. As Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him (Acts 2:24). Why? Because He is God.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is qualified to be our great high priest (as well as the perfect sacrifice for our sins) not on the basis of His human ancestry, since priests were descendants of Aaron from the tribe of Levi, and Jesus, like David, came from the tribe of Judah. It was not on the basis of His ancestry, the Bible says, but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16).

He has the power of an indestructible life because He is who He said He is. He is fully God as well as fully man. And His resurrection from the dead gives us the proof.

4. IT TELLS US THAT DEATH IS NOT THE END.

The fourth reason to remember the resurrection is because it means that death is not the end for us. It is not the end of the story. It will not be the end of the story for any of us.

The Bible says that death is an enemy, the last enemy – the final enemy – to be defeated (1 Corinthians 15:16). No question about it, death is a formidable foe. And millions of people today (probably billions) are living in the fear of death, or the fear of dying.

We have different ways of dealing with death. One way to deal with death is to refuse to deal with it. Because we find it unpleasant to think about or uncomfortable to talk about, we don't. Or we joke about it.

Another way some people deal with death is by acknowledging it only as a theoretical possibility, instead of a certainty. Stuart Briscoe writes of a conversation with an insurance salesman who wanted Briscoe to purchase life insurance from him. Every time the salesman said: "Now, Mr. Briscoe, if something should happen to you," Briscoe interrupted him, saying: "Please don't talk that way. It upsets me when you talk that way."

The salesman thought Briscoe was uncomfortable with the thought that he might possibly die some day. But Briscoe said to him: "When we talk about death, it is not a matter of *if*, it is a matter of *when*. Death is not just a possibility, it is a certainty."

Briscoe is right. No matter what extraordinary measures we may employ to stay alive or to keep a loved one alive, no one will get out of this world alive. Death is the destiny of every person. Unless Jesus returns first, we are all going to die. Sooner or later, each of us will have an appointment with death. But the resurrection of Jesus shows that death is not our final destiny.

For everyone who believes in Jesus – I don't mean in just a casual way, or just believing the facts about His life, in the same way you might believe in George Washington, but for those who have embraced the Lord Jesus Christ in faith, trusting in His saving work on the cross –

For everyone who believes in Christ this way, our ultimate, final destiny is found in Him. Death does not command our destiny. Jesus does.

You and I were made for more than this life. There is more to life than this life. Death is not the end. The resurrection of Jesus is only the beginning. It is a deposit that guarantees *our* resurrection to eternal life with Him. That is what awaits everyone who truly belongs to Him by faith.

The downside is that there is also a resurrection for those who reject the Savior, for those who refuse to acknowledge Him as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, for those who believe

they don't need Jesus, and they don't want Him in their lives. There is a resurrection for them, too. But it is a resurrection to eternal judgment, not eternal life. It is a resurrection to eternal separation from God in hell.

Do not let hell be your final destiny. Admit your need of the saving grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus to forgive your sins, and be reconciled to the God who loves you so much that He freely gave His Son to die for you. Open your heart to Him in trusting faith today.

5. IT GIVES US A REASON FOR HOPE.

Here is the fifth reason to remember the resurrection: Hope. The resurrection of Jesus gives us a reason for hope in the midst of trying times. And we are living in trying times, aren't we? Unemployment remains high. The economy has still not recovered. Acrimony and finger-pointing persist in Washington. The threat of terrorism has not subsided. Wars and rumors of war are part of our daily existence. Our culture seems to become more crude by the day, as we continue to define deviancy downward (to use Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous phrase).

Where is hope, real hope, to be found in a world like this?

John Ortberg is one of my favorite writers (and preachers). I love what he has written about our reason for hope. He points out that people have not gathered for the last 2,000 years to say things like: "The stock market has risen. It has risen indeed." Or, "the dollar has risen. It has risen indeed." They have not gathered to say: "The employment rate has risen." Or, "the gross domestic product has risen." Or, "General Motors has risen." No. The one hope, he says, that has sustained and strengthened human beings across every continent and culture for 2,000 years of difficult times of poverty, disease, pain, hardship, and death itself is this: "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed."

In Christ alone (our) hope is found
 He is (our) light, (our) strength, (our) song
 This cornerstone, this solid ground
 Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
 What heights of love, what depths of peace
 When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
 (Our) comforter, (our) all in all
 Here in the love of Christ
 [And here in the power of Christ]
 We stand

Where is real hope found? In Christ alone. In the One who gave His life for us and rose again from the dead.

A pastor from Rwanda spoke recently at one of our EPC churches and said that when Christians in Rwanda greet one another, they say: "Christ is Victor!" Christ *is* victor. He is

victor over sin. He is victor over Satan and all of his demonic forces. He is victor over death itself.

Christ. Is. Victor. Would you turn and say that to someone near you right now? “Christ is Victor!” Yes, He is!

Because He is victor, because He has won the ultimate victory over sin and death, we have a reason for hope, even when life is hard and suffering is real.

CONCLUSION

Why remember the resurrection? Five reasons:

- Because it really happened.
- Because it proves the sufficiency of Jesus’ death on the cross to save us from our sins.
- Because it proves that Jesus really is God.
- Because it tells us that death is not the end.
- Because it gives us an enduring reason for hope.

Here is one more reason:

- Because it means that Jesus is alive. He *was* dead. But He is alive again. Really, truly alive. Right now. And forever.

Remember the resurrection, friends. Never forget it. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. Not just on Easter, but every moment of every day for all of time and eternity. And let the truth of His saving love on the cross and the power of His resurrection transform your life.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.