

Does The Resurrection Matter?

Rich Nathan
Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007
1 Corinthians 15.12-19

I want to begin today by sharing with you the story of Leo Carter. Leo was from one of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods. He was 17 years old, playing basketball with a friend, Leslie Scott, when they saw a 16 year old boy named Elijah, who had 30 arrests on his rap sheet, gun down Sam Blue outside of Sam's grocery store. Leo had known Sam Blue since childhood. "When we didn't have any food," Leo said, "Sam would always give us some. He was always real nice to my mom. So when I went to the hospital and they told me that Sam was dead, I knew I would have to tell the police what I saw."

Eye-witness testimony is powerful. One of the most dramatic moments in a trial is when a witness describes in detail what he or she saw and then is asked, "Do you see the person who committed the crime here in the courtroom?" And they answer, "I do." "Can you point him out to us?" And the witness points to the defendant and the prosecutor says, "Let the record note that the witness is pointing to the defendant as being the perpetrator of this crime."

Elijah, the 16 year old who killed Sam, knew that the only way that he could avoid prison was to prevent Leo and his friend, Leslie, from pointing him out in court. So Elijah and two of his friends tracked Leo and Leslie down as they were walking in the street. Leo and Leslie were with a third boy named Henry. They dragged all three at gunpoint into a dark alley by a loading dock. Elijah's cousin said to Leo, "Leo, I like you, but I gotta do this." He pressed a pistol against Leo's nose and pulled the trigger. The bullet penetrated Leo's face, blinding Leo in his right eye. The bullet lodged in Leo's head. The cousin fired another shot at Leo. The second bullet lodged two inches from his spine. As Leo watched from the ground, pretending he was dead, he saw his sobbing brother and friend ruthlessly executed at close range. These young criminals, Elijah and his friends, took off and Leo crawled to safety.

Somehow, against all odds, Leo Carter lived. The bullet could not be removed from his skull. And despite searing headaches that medication could not dull, Leo Carter became the sole eye-witness against Elijah at his trial for killing the grocer, Sam Blue. The jury believed Leo and Elijah was sentenced to 80 years in prison.

At a second trial, Leo was the only eye-witness to testify against Elijah and Elijah's two friends in the slaying of Leo's brother and his friend. And once more, his word was good enough to send these three teenage criminals to prison for the rest of their lives. Eye-witness testimony – people are put in prison for the

rest of their lives; people in America are executed based on eye-witness testimony.

And it is eye-witness testimony, not the eye-witness testimony of one person, or two people, but the eye-witness testimony of hundreds of people that cause us this Easter weekend to be able to confidently say, "Jesus Christ is raised from the dead!" Listen to what the apostle Paul says about the eye-witness testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

SLIDE – 1 Cor 15:3-8

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 Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Now some people say that this eye witness testimony doesn't matter. There was a German New Testament scholar named Rudolf Bultmann, who taught in German seminaries in the first half of the 20th century. Bultmann said:

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If the bones of the dead Jesus were discovered tomorrow in a Palestinian tomb, all the essentials of Christianity would remain unchanged.

What Bultmann is saying is that the resurrection doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that we have hundreds of eye witnesses testifying that Jesus was raised from the dead. Whether he was or whether he wasn't, we would still have Christianity largely intact. The apostle Paul says, "That's bunk." In 1 Cor. 15 in seven successive arguments the apostle Paul tells us that the resurrection of Christ matters! I've called today's talk "Does the Resurrection Matter?" Let's pray.

SLIDE – 1 Co 15:12-19

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others.

Does it really matter what happened to Jesus? Does it matter if Jesus' body was resurrected from the dead, or if in Bultmann's words, if the bones of the dead Jesus were discovered tomorrow in a Palestinian tomb...

The apostle Paul says Jesus' resurrection matters. The apostle Paul argues in v.

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If Christ is not risen, then Christianity collapses.

SLIDE – 1 Cor. 15:12

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

What Paul is saying is that the denial of the resurrection is not a Christian option. Some Corinthians were perhaps arguing that Christ's immortal soul continued on in heaven but his body didn't rise or perhaps that the resurrection was a spiritual experience like being born again but there wasn't a future literal hope of bodily rising from the grave after death.

You can believe a lot of silly things and still be a Christian. You can believe that Sanjaya on American Idol really does have a great voice. I suppose you could believe in UFO's and that the government is secretly keeping Martians under lock and key at Roswell, New Mexico. You could believe in the Loch Ness monster and Big Foot and that Saddam Hussein is the anti-Christ and still be a Christian. Now that Saddam was hanged, some Christian will write another book arguing why some other tyrant is the anti-Christ.

But Paul is saying that there is one thing you cannot believe. You cannot believe that the body of Jesus is still in the ground and be a Christian.

The resurrection was so important to the apostle Paul that when Paul preached the gospel to Greek philosophers in Athens, these philosophers thought that he was preaching two new Gods – Jesus and Anastasis. Anastasis is Greek for "resurrection." Paul could not speak about Jesus without speaking about the resurrection. That's how important the resurrection was. The Greek philosophers thought Paul was talking about another God named "Resurrection."

I don't know if you've ever seen one of those domino exhibitions at a shopping mall. Every so often on TV they will show this exhibition that might take place at the Great American Mall in Minnesota or some other place in which dozens of people have set up hundreds of thousands of dominoes into various patterns. And then at just the right moment someone gets to push over one of the dominoes and if everything works right over the next several minutes hundreds of thousands of dominoes fall in various patterns. They've been shaped in the patterns of flowers and they are climbing up staircases and cascading over waterfalls. The idea is that if you push over one domino, the other dominoes fall.

The apostle Paul is arguing if you push over the resurrection of Jesus, every thing else that a person believes about Christianity falls down with it. Here are the dominoes:

SLIDE – 1 Co 15:13

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to deny the uniqueness of Christ. In other words,

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If Christ is not risen, then Christ is not special.

The resurrection declares Jesus to be in a category of one. Lots of people deny that Christ is special. I read something that the actor Billy Bob Thornton said about his religious beliefs and why he doesn't pray. Billy Bob Thornton said:

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The thing is, most of the things I have in terms of mantras or meditations or anything don't really have words. They're more feelings. But I guess the Golden Rule is a good one, you know. I think that's one we should all live by. A lot of religions at their base, like Christianity, are really just variations of the Golden Rule.

You know this one, right? Basically all religions are just the same. You boil them all down and they all basically teach that we should treat each other the way we want to be treated. That's what religion is all about.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ distinguishes Jesus and distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Jesus is special. Jesus is different than every other religious founder because of his resurrection. The bones of Abraham and Mohammed and Buddha and Confucius and Lao-tzu and those after are still here on earth. Jesus' tomb is empty.

I was talking with my dad, who is Jewish, the other day on the phone. We began talking about God and he said, "Listen, Richie, no one believes in God more than me." He began telling me again the story of how he survived on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day Invasion. My dad piloted a landing craft landing Army Engineers before H-Hour on D-Day. As he lowered the ramp, one of his Navy buddies volunteered to step off into the water to check the depth of the water. And the moment he stepped off into the water, my dad's buddy was cut in two by machine gun fire.

Several years ago I visited this man's grave at the American Cemetery in Normandy, France. I was absolutely moved as I saw row after row of simple white crosses and occasionally a Jewish star.

My dad said, "That could have been me. And the next several days on the beach in Normandy, I know that the reason why I'm still alive is because God protected me." He went on to tell me about how God had provided a wonderful wife for him the past 35 years after his divorce from my mother. This wonderful wife died just a couple of years ago. So he said, "Richie, listen, nobody believes in God more than me."

I said, "Dad, who is this God that you believe in? Dad, it is not enough that you believe that there is a God watching out for you, blessing your life, from somewhere up in heaven. This God, who has been blessing your life, wants you to know him. This God wants you to know how to have a relationship with him – now and for eternity."

My dad said immediately, "Well, nobody's come back from eternity to tell us what's on the other side of the grave."

I said, "Dad, someone did come back. His name is Jesus. This is one of the reasons, Dad, that I became a follower of Jesus. Because he alone rose from the dead. And you can have a relationship with him."

My dad, I could hear him on the other end of the phone hemming and hawing, decided to fall back on ignorance and he said, "Well, I don't know; you know a lot more about this stuff than I do."

Does the resurrection matter? Yes! The resurrection marks Jesus out as being in a category of one. He is special. He is unique because of the resurrection.

No one in the history of the world, neither ancient nor modern history believes that anyone else died, was buried, came back to life fully embodied in a transformed body to be sure, but as the same person and that they lived eternally now in an embodied existence. There's only person about who you can say that and that is Jesus Christ.

It was because of two irrefutable facts – the fact of the empty tomb, and the fact of Jesus' repeated appearances to a multitude of people over the course of 40 days that finally, finally folks were convinced that this one man uniquely in the history of the world was resurrected from the dead.

You say, yes, but does it really matter if Jesus was resurrected from the dead? Isn't what matters is the impact of his life and teaching and words? There have been hundreds, literally thousands of other great men and women who have died and were not resurrected and yet their lives had continuing impact. You can read

the writings and listen to the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Abe Lincoln, or the Buddha. You can imitate the life of Mother Teresa, St. Francis, or Socrates. You can stare at photos of dead people and think about them. You can remember the dead. You can dream about the dead.

What you can't do is have a relationship with a dead person. Hundreds of millions of people around this world and thousands of people sitting here today claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Literally billions of people throughout history claim to have had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Try substituting any other dead person's name for the relationship people make claim to have by Christ and you will quickly have people suggesting the name of a good psychiatrist.

Imagine, for example, if someone said, "You know, I really felt the other day that Napoleon was leading me to reconcile my broken relationship with my mother."

Or "The other day I was really anxious, but I felt like George Washington was telling me to give him my burdens and that he would be sufficient for me."

How about, "I just really feel like Julius Caesar is going to heal my cancer."

You see, Christianity is not about some vague spirituality, or simply believing that there is a God somewhere up there, who is watching over you. Become a Christian and you will become a more spiritual human being. Christianity is about entering a relationship with a person who was dead and who is currently bodily alive because he is resurrected from the dead and his name is Jesus Christ. The best thing about being a Christian is the capacity to enter a relationship with a living person.

It is only with respect to Jesus Christ that anyone can say, "You know, I'm having a relationship with a person who died hundreds of years ago" that we would not immediately recommend that you get psychiatric care.

We read in v. 14 these words:

SLIDE – 1 Cor. 15:14

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Paul's third argument is:

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If Christ is not risen, then Christianity is boring!

Literally, he says:

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If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is empty.

Talk about a relevant comment for 21st century Americans. Let me ask you some questions:

- Why is church and Christianity in particular so boring to so many people?
- Why have so many said that they no longer believe in Christianity, but they are interested in spirituality?
- Why have so many people opted to stay home on Sunday mornings, even on Easter, to read the paper, to shovel snow, to catch up on sleep, or outside of Ohio, to lie in the sun, catch some rays, swim in a pool, or do some gardening?
- Why are church and Christianity so boring to so many?

Paul's answer is very simple. Church is boring because most Christian preaching is boring. And most Christian preaching is boring because the preacher and perhaps much of the church or denomination she or he is in have lost confidence in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so what churchgoers are listening to, in lots of places, is a person who speaks with no conviction whatever about the very heart and essence of their religion.

Look around the United States right now and what you will see is the tragic decline in attendance in many churches. Many churches have been forced to close their doors. Lots of denominations are suffering cutbacks. It has been widely reported in the news that this has been going on for over 40 years. Denominations are suffering cutbacks in central staffs. Denominational headquarters are downsizing. Churches can't get enough priests, pastors, and lay leaders to serve in various functions. The average age of the members in one denomination is between 65-70. Churches have been forced to consolidate, to close parishes and to close various buildings. Why is that?

Because people have stopped going. And why have they stopped going to some churches? Because the preaching is boring. Because people ask themselves why should I bother getting up, [I know I am being very honest and very frank here, but I talk with hundreds of people and I ask them continually: why are you not going to church? And the number one answer is that church is boring], but why bother getting up, dressing up and going to church when all we are listening to some self-help message that is often better stated in a motivational tape that we could buy at any bookstore – Barnes and Noble or at Borders, or a political speech.

Why is the preaching boring? I believe because there has been a profound loss of confidence in the part of the preacher in this one fact: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And if the pastor doesn't believe in that, there will be

a decline in preaching; a decline in proclamation; a decline in witness that will ultimately lead to a pointless, boring church.

What have we left in church if Jesus is not raised from the dead? What is left of church?

What is left is that you turn the church into a community center. In the place of the pulpit we have a variety of activities – a Boy Scout troop meeting in the church building; an AA meeting; and different meetings for political action committees, and church finance committees, chamber music, chorales, and so on. All of that is very good, but the central point, gathering together to worship Christ, to lift our minds up to someone above us and beyond us, the whole point of church – to encounter the risen Christ, is lost. And do you know at the very moment, to establish my case, at the very moment that some churches and some denominations are in decline in America, other churches and other denominations are rapidly growing and seeing explosive growth: At the very moment that some denominations are experiencing downsizing and cutbacks on staff, Christianity is growing like wildfire, worldwide.

Do you know that there is a higher percentage of people today who are Christians in the world than at any time in the history of the world. At no time in world history has there ever been a higher percentage of the world's population who are Christians than Easter Sunday 2007. Christianity is spreading all over the world. It is penetrating in Asia, especially in China, all through Africa. People are becoming Christians by the tens of thousands. Likewise in South America and India and in some other formerly thoroughly Muslim and Hindu places in the world. South Korea is more than 50% Christian.

And who is spreading this message? It is not being carried on the backs of those who say it doesn't matter if Christ is alive or dead. It is not the newspaper religion editors and the Jesus Seminar people who are spreading the gospel. People who are missionaries, who are being jailed and persecuted for their faith; who give up homes, careers, financial success and comfort are, those who believe that Christ was raised from the dead. They have confidence in this central fact: They have personally encountered the risen Christ. They are the ones who are running all over the world taking the message of Christianity. But if you don't believe it, then friends, it is all just pointless and boring according to the apostle Paul.

Let me share with you a personal story that may help you to understand what I am driving at by this business of religion becoming boring and pointless. When I was in college, I was a religion major. In one particular religion class I had a very liberal professor who was also a very prominent clergyman in the city. This particular professor was very disturbed by my faith in Christ and in particular my insistence that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really did happen. In fact, in class he used to point me out as he was making some slam against Christianity. He

would point to me and say: "Well, of course, our man of faith [he used to label me the "man of faith"] over there would object."

One day, I guess we had gotten into it. I don't recall, but I believe we had gotten into some discussion in class that upset him. And so he cornered me right after class and he said to me [he was trying, I suppose, to psychoanalyze me regarding this conviction that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead] and I remember what he said. He said to me, "What is the matter? Are you afraid to die? Is that why you believe it?"

I said, "Well, no. I am not afraid to die, at least not any more."

He said, "Don't you have any friends?"

So I said, "Well, I have lots of friends."

And after he peppered me with a few more questions, I got fed-up with his attack on me and attack on my faith and so I said to him, "Why do you bother?"

He said, "I'm sorry?"

I said, "Why do you even bother? You get up week after week in front of your congregation and you prattle on about the need for justice and our great moral duty to love each other. But you don't believe any of this. How can you stand up in front of several hundred people week after week and carry on this charade? I mean why don't you just become a social worker instead of being a clergyman?"

Well, of course, he was very offended by my suggestion that he was just involved in a big charade. But, friends, Paul is saying exactly that in this text. He said, "If Christ is not raised, all of our preaching is hollow and empty and pointless." Boring church comes from boring preaching and boring preaching comes because the preacher doesn't have confidence that Christ was raised. There is no power in many church services. There is no conviction. The point of church: to encounter the resurrect Christ has been lost.

Paul continues his argument about why the resurrection matters when he says, *More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.*

Paul is arguing:

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If Christ is not risen, then the Bible writers are liars.

You know, many people do not believe that Christ was raised from the dead. They think maybe it was a dream, or mass hysteria, or his body still lies in the ground, but his Spirit marches on. They wonder about the alternatives to believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At least they wonder, maybe you wonder, is it really true that Christ was raised from the dead? The apostles clearly believed it. They believed it because of two irrefutable facts – the tomb was empty. Nobody in the ancient world refuted that. If his tomb was not empty, if his body was still in the tomb, then it would have been the interest of the Roman government and in the interest of the opponents of Christianity to drag his dead body out of the tomb and display it and say, “Here is your resurrected Messiah.”

But everywhere Christians went preaching, “His tomb is empty.” That is the first undisputable fact!

And the second undisputable fact is that Jesus appeared alive to hundreds of eyewitnesses, who touched him and ate with him, and talked with him over the next 40 days. But if you say that Jesus was not raised from the dead, then you are forced to say that the apostles, and all the writers of the New Testament, were liars when they claimed that Christ was resurrected.

Let me tell you several reasons why I don't think that the apostles or the other writers of the New Testament were liars. Some of you are familiar with name Chuck Colson. Chuck was 39 years old when President Nixon tapped him to serve as Special Counsel. After a lifetime of scholarships and honors, Colson was elevated to the very top ranks of power in America. Limos waited to escort him. Admirals and Generals saluted him. He had everything a person could want. Yet, he said he felt curiously empty.

As the Watergate scandal unfolded, Chuck got together with an old friend, who was a wealthy corporate supporter of President Nixon. Chuck said his friend seemed different. He asked, “What's going on in your life? You seem different than when we talked last.” The friend said, “Chuck, I've accepted Jesus Christ and I've committed my life to him.” Chuck said that he gripped his chair and thought to himself, “Little old ladies standing on street corners talk like this, not shrewd, successful businessmen.”

Chuck nervously changed the subject. But he visited this businessman a few times and asked him to tell him more. This businessman told him how he started off with nothing, rose to a position of wealth and power, but felt empty inside. He began to search for God, a search that ended at Madison Square Garden one evening when he listened to Billy Graham talk about Jesus Christ. Graham was not talking about an ancient historical figure. He was talking about the Living God, who rose from the dead and is alive today. Someone who could fill the empty places in your life.

Chuck said, “My friend wanted me to pray with him that night, but I didn’t. I was too proud. I was known as the toughest of Nixon’s tough guys, the White House hatchet man. But that night I couldn’t get my car out of my friend’s driveway because I was crying too hard. I wanted more than anything to find God. I wanted more than anything to have peace with God.”

So, sitting in his friend’s driveway, with tears running down his face, Chuck Colson, Special Counsel to the President, Chuck Colson, the man who had been driven around by limos all over Washington, Chuck Colson cried out to God saying, “Just take me, God. Take me the way I am.”

Colson said the next morning he felt a wonderful peace. He knew he was born-again and that he had met the resurrected Christ. Colson wrote in his book, *Loving God*, that there were twelve handpicked loyalists, people who believed passionately in Nixon, who would sacrifice everything – lucrative careers, great law practices, privacy, family all for the sake of the president and for the sake of the president’s cause. These were men who had power and prestige of the most powerful office in the world, the office of the President. These twelve men had a leader who was victorious, who had just won the greatest landslide election victory in American history.

These were the men, who with a word, could mobilize the military, they had everything to lose from a failed cover-up. And yet, with all of their power and with all that was at stake, Colson writes that this small group of twelve men could not hold a conspiracy together for three weeks. Their natural instinct for self-preservation was so strong that one by one they deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, turned their backs on each other, turned their back on power, prestige and privilege.

Now, I want you to consider the twelve apostles. They had no power; no prestige. They didn’t have the office of the President to back them up. Their leader appeared to be dead. Each of the apostles claimed to be an eye witness of the resurrection. We learn about the death of the apostles through early church history. The gospel writer Matthew suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia. He was killed by the sword. The gospel writer Mark died in Egypt after being dragged behind horses until he was dead. Luke was hanged in Greece. John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos. He was later released. He is the only apostle to die peacefully. Peter was crucified upside down on an x-shaped cross. James was thrown down off the pinnacle of the Temple. And when he survived the fall, he was then clubbed to death. Thomas was killed by a spear in India. The apostle Paul was tortured and then beheaded.

I visited the very spot on the Ostian Way in Rome in which Paul was beheaded. None of the gospel writers, none of the apostles, none of those who claimed to be eyewitnesses ever recanted. People can be deceived, like the suicide bombers, and go to their deaths for a lie. But no one goes to their death for what

they know is a lie. At some point, every conspiracy gets revealed. At some point, every cover-up unravels.

But the Easter story never unraveled.

If you say that Christ is not risen, then you must say that the apostles and New Testament writers are liars.

And you understand, of course, that the New Testament was written by followers of Jesus, who were good and decent people, and who tried to live out the highest of Christian ethics, particularly the ethic of honesty and truth telling.

Friends, are you going to say that the apostles were just rank liars? That this book, the Bible that formed much of the moral foundation of America is just a book of fairy tales? You cannot say that the Bible is good and helpful in laying out the moral foundation for our country, the charge to us to be forgiving, to not retaliate, to not respond in kind, to offer humanitarian aide, even to a former enemy – you cannot say that the Bible is good and right there. But regarding its most basic testimony that Jesus of Nazareth was uniquely raised from the dead is false. That's the center of the New Testament. The New Testament is about Jesus and how he came to die in our place as our substitute, to pay by himself the penalty that our sins deserved, about Jesus dying on the cross to satisfy God's judgment and wrath against sin.

The New Testament at its core is about Jesus Christ dying upon a cross for our salvation, being buried and then after three days being raised from the dead and offering us the forgiveness of sins, a new better life now, and an eternal life in the future.

Paul goes on in v. 17 and says:

SLIDE – 1 Cor. 15:17

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

Here is Paul's fifth argument:

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If Christ is not risen, then there is no answer for our sin.

If Christ is not risen, what are you going to do with your sin, Paul is asking? Many people don't tie the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the problem of our misdeeds, our words that are mis-spoken, and our thoughts, things that we are particularly guilty about in the past. You know, all of us have done things that we know are wrong. Isn't that true? Can anyone say that you have never done anything that makes you feel guilty? The only people who don't struggle with guilt are the criminally insane – psychopaths and sociopaths. Normal people all

feel guilt about things we have done wrong. That is why we defend ourselves so vigorously. That's why we feel the need to make excuses for our behavior. That's why we rationalize and revise the past and minimize our part in relational failures and marital failures and child raising failures. And some of the things that make us feel guilty are quite serious.

For example, we may have not done as good a job as we now wish we would have in raising our children. Maybe you see that you spent too much time at work and you should have taken more time with your child when they were young and now you are seeing problems. Maybe discipline is unwise or inconsistent. Maybe you said something to one of your children and that really wounded them. You were neglectful or bad-tempered or dealing with your own issues.

Perhaps you weren't as good a husband or wife as you should have been or could have been. Maybe at some point in the past you had an affair. Maybe you were divorced and share at least some of the blame for your marriage failure. Maybe you weren't as good a son or daughter as you wish you would have been or could have been and now one of your parents or grandparents is dead. Maybe you have dealt pretty shamefully with a former girlfriend or boyfriend or boss or employee. Maybe you were disloyal to a friend. When someone needed you, you weren't there. You were too caught up in your own stuff.

We all of us have done and said things we should not have done. And we all have failed to do things we should have done. All of us have run up a huge debt with God that no amount of creative financing can pay off. How do you deal with your guilt? What do you do with it? The Bible says we can take our sins to the cross – that Jesus' death on the cross fully pays for our sins. How do we know that God accepts Jesus' death as the full and final payment for our sins? Understand that in the Bible the resurrection is the way that God assures us that our sins are forgiven. A lot of people don't understand what connection does the resurrection have with the forgiveness of my sins?

Let me explain that for you. You know on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus at the Last Supper picked up a glass of wine and said, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." In other words, this wine symbolizes my blood, which is about to be poured out on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. And then when Jesus was nailed to the cross, from the cross he prayed, "Father, forgive them [all of them] because they don't know what they are doing."

How do we know that Jesus' blood, shed for us on the cross, would pay the price before God for our sins? How do we know if God the Father granted Jesus' prayer from the cross and forgave our sins because of the sacrifice of the Son of God?

The Bible says that the way we know that Jesus' death on the cross really did take care of our sins is the resurrection. The resurrection is God's stamp of approval. God was saying, "I accept the sacrifice of my Son, Jesus" as the full payment for your sins. You don't need to defend yourself or make excuses for all you've done wrong or haven't done that you should have done. All you need to do is tell the truth to God. That is what confession is. Just tell the truth to God about yourself, about your life. Don't defend yourself. Just admit your failures and then trust that God has taken the enormous bill we have run up and has accepted Jesus' death on the cross as the payment for our sins. Don't try to pay God off yourself. Just trust that he has made a way for your bill to be paid. The way is the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

If Christ is not risen, friends, we all have no way to deal with our past sins and guilt. We have no way to, in the present, have the power to overcome our sins if Christ is not risen, because it is only the power of the resurrection that can break life controlling habits. And friends, in the future, when you and I go before God in judgment, understand that all that we have done in sinning against God and in sinning against another, in sinning against other people, will be read out of the books. We will see it all—all the stuff that we have done wrong. Witnesses will come forward to testify against us regarding when we have lied to them and how we have mistreated them. Children will rise up against us. Parents will speak against us. How will we ever be forgiven by God our judge?

The Bible says that there is only one way. The Bible teaches that Christ is our advocate, our defense attorney, who will rise up in the presence of God and say, "Father, let me present a defense for this poor child, this poor man, this poor woman." And Jesus Christ will defend us as our advocate by presenting to God his blood that was shed on our behalf. But if Christ is not raised from the dead, we have no advocate, no defense attorney, no one to speak on our behalf and in our favor and we will have to face God alone without Jesus. If Christ is not raised, what will you do with your sins?

The apostle Paul goes on and suggests to us the sixth reason why the resurrection matters. He says in v. 18:

SLIDE – 1 Cor. 15:18

18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

In other words,

SLIDE

If Christ is not raised from the dead, Christian funerals are a sad joke.

Let me tell you a story. Nearly 20 years ago there was a little girl in my neighborhood named Nikki, who was dying of leukemia. The children at the local

elementary school, including my son, were collecting nickels for Nikki in order for little Nikki to get a bone marrow transplant.

Because Nikki lived in my neighborhood, I decided to knock on her parents door to see if they would allow me to pray for little Nikki. So I went by her house and knocked on the door. I introduced myself and said that I was a pastor and that I had heard about their situation, and I wondered if mom would let me pray for her daughter.

Mom was pretty guarded and pretty suspicious. I said, "Look, I don't want to exploit your situation. I know that you are in great pain. But I do believe in the power of God to heal and I am not going to do anything that will frighten your daughter. But I just want to have an opportunity to pray for her and see what God might do." Well, mom saw that I was for real. She sensed that I was safe. And so I used to go by the house twice a week to pray for Nikki.

My wife, Marlene, and I went away on vacation. When we came back, I was immediately checked into the hospital for a blood clot in my leg. While I was gone, I had arranged for some women to go and pray for Nikki, but mom didn't feel very comfortable with these strangers praying for her daughter. She said she would rather wait until "Pastor Rich came back."

I was lying in the hospital bed one evening watching the local news when the newscaster said, "We have a sad story tonight. Little Nikki [he flashed her picture] died this morning after a courageous battle with leukemia." I laid in my hospital bed and wept. I checked myself out and prepared for Nikki's funeral.

I will tell you, friends, there are very few things harder for me as a pastor than when I have to conduct a funeral for a child or a teenager. When I see that little white box with a child's body go into the ground, and I stand up there and say to mom, to dad, to grandparents, and to siblings: "This is not the end; you will see your loved one again," I am not up there just offering pious, empty words of comfort. I am offering people the truth. Jesus did not tell a lie when he said in John 14.1-3,

SLIDE – John 14:1-3

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 My Father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then the idea that he went ahead to prepare a home for those who have died in him is a myth. It is just a fairytale. There is no homecoming for the dead because there is no home. And there is no home if Christ is not raised – no heaven, no hell, nothing after the grave, if Christ is not

raised. And not only is there no homecoming if Christ is not raised, there is no great reunion.

What I tell parents, what I tell siblings, what I tell grieving children, what I tell grandparents when I do a funeral is that death is not the end. There will be a great reunion. Death just means that I don't get to see my loved one right now. But death does not mean I won't see my loved one forever. For a Christian, death just means for a period of time we must bear with the ache and grief of having our loved one absent.

But if Christ is not raised, there is no great reunion. Widows will never see their husbands again. Children will not see their parents. And Nikki's mom will not see Nikki again. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the Christian answer to the problem of death.

The philosopher, Bertrand Russell, says that death is omnipotent. Death has the final say. Taking from us our loved ones and ourselves, cutting the string, turning us all back into various bits of matter that fertilizes the ground. If Christ is not risen, that's all there is.

What do you say in the face of death? Our answer, friends, must be nothing other than to try to live as long as possible. To try to preserve our health. To try to eat right and stay fit. But even though that sure relentless road to death maybe slowed, it can't be stopped. How do you not become utterly hopeless in old age or when dealing with the death of a loved one, if there is no resurrection?

Listen, if death is the final end, then the best we can do is escape from thinking about death very much. Instead of our grief being transformed into hope and faith through Jesus' resurrection, we, at best, just need to avoid discussions about death. We need to dull the pain.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you generally avoid all discussions of death? Do you always say, "Let's not talk about that?" If you really believed, really believed in the resurrection, you wouldn't have to be like that. Are any of you dulling the pain of loss, the loss of a mom or dad, dulling the pain? I have seen people turn to some substance – drugs, alcohol or affairs, plunge themselves into work, or some other form of medicating their pain, because they have no way to deal with the loss of a loved one. Without the resurrection, what else other than not thinking about death or medicating away our pain do we have to deal with the awfulness of death?

Finally, Paul writes in v. 19:

SLIDE – 1 Cor. 15:19

19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others.

What Paul is saying is,

SLIDE

If Christ is not risen, then faithful Christians are pathetic.

There is a wonderful book about Mother Teresa called *No Greater Love*. We'll have some copies of it in our bookstore next week. But in the book, Mother Teresa talks about different people that she has encountered, many in the streets of Calcutta, India – some of the poorest of the poor in the world. She talks about picking up a woman from a garbage pail where her son had tossed her, this old woman. And she nursed this woman back to health and assisted the woman to forgive her son.

Mother Teresa talks in the book about picking up a man in the street, who was covered with worms. She and the other sisters washed the man's body, cleansed him, and helped him die with dignity.

Now, if there is no resurrection from the dead, then spending your life like Mother Teresa did, carrying for the poor, sacrificing yourself, sacrificing your health, would not be a saintly thing, it would be a pathetic thing. We would say she ought to have looked out for #1. She ought to have followed the advice of the beer commercial, "You only go around once in life and you need to grab for all the gusto you can."

Are you willing to say, friend, that Mother Teresa, who spent her life among lepers, and the poor of Calcutta, that she was a poor fool; that she was pathetic?

Are you further willing to say that the people who try to do good, who spend their lives sacrificing and loving and caring – that ultimately they will receive no reward and that there will be no ultimate justice, so long as you can get away with your stuff? And the people who step on others, the users, the manipulators, the aggressive and the pushy – they are the really smart ones. The child molesters and concentration camp commandants, and spouse abusers and torturers – all these folks get off scott free so long as they are not captured and not tracked down in this life. That the abusers and users will never face a risen Christ in judgment.

What do you say to the suffering, to the sacrifice, to those who have died for the name of Jesus, to the martyrs, to those who died in the Coliseum? And what do you say to the criminals, to the oppressors, to the killers, to the murderers? If Christ is not raised, there is no justice. There is no balancing of the scales and there is no point in trying to live a good Christian life, to being faithful. If only for this life we have hoped in Christ, Paul writes, we are to be pitied more than all men. And then he goes on and says, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead."

Because Christ is risen, church does not have to be boring. It can be filled with excitement and morale and momentum because Christ is raised. The people in the church can gather, filled with excitement, with momentum, with purpose because they are encountering a powerful, living person. They can go out to all the world in his name knowing that he is with them.

But Christ is raised from the dead. And because he is, believe it and allow that fact to impact our lives, we give honor to Jesus that we accord to no one else in the history of the world. We call Jesus "Lord," "Master," "King," "Messiah." Because Jesus was uniquely resurrected, the only one in the history of the world to be resurrected from the dead, we can have a living relationship with Christ today, talking with him, being guided by him, hearing him in our hearts and no thought to need psychiatric treatment. Because Christ is resurrected from the dead, he can make a difference in your life and in your world today.

Because Christ is raised, the apostles did not lie about seeing Jesus walking around after he had been crucified and died and was buried. They were telling the truth. This book is true! Because Christ is raised from the dead, our sins can be forgiven. The sacrifice of the cross was accepted by God. Christ has paid your bill and mine. We don't need fake and inadequate ways to deal with our feelings of guilt. God answered the prayers of the cross and said, "Yes, I have heard your cries for all of the people who would put their faith in you and I will forgive them."

Because Christ is raised from the dead, death is not omnipotent. It is not the last word. It is not the final chapter. It is not the closing of the book. It is simply the turning the page. Nikki's mom and every grieving mom and dad who have lost their children in Christ, will see them again one day. Because Christ was raised from the dead, there will be a great reunion, friends. If your loved one was attached to Jesus and you place your faith in Christ, rest your full confidence in his saving ability, you will see one another again. There will be a great reunion and a great homecoming.

And yes, sacrifice for Jesus matters. It matters to God that you put yourself on the line for Christ. It is not all for naught. Mother Theresa was the wisest of women. Those who have died for the name of Jesus will be rewarded. Justice will be done. The scales will be balanced and God will be victorious because Christ is risen from the dead.

Does the Resurrection Matter?

Rich Nathan
April 7 & 8, 2007
Easter Sunday
1 Corinthians 15.12-19

I. The Resurrection and Eyewitness Testimony (1 Cor. 15.3-8)

II. The Resurrection: Why It Matters (1 Cor. 15.12-19)

- A. If Christ is not risen then Christianity collapses.
(1 Cor. 15.12)
- B. If Christ is not risen then Christ is not special.
(1 Cor. 15.13)
- C. If Christ is not risen then Christianity is boring.
(1 Cor. 15.14)
- D. If Christ is not risen then the Bible writers are liars.
(1 Cor. 15.15)
- E. If Christ is not risen then there is no answer for our sin.
(1 Cor. 15.17)
- F. If Christ is not risen then Christian funerals are a sad joke.
(1 Cor. 15.18)
- G. If Christ is not risen then faithful Christians are pathetic.
(1 cor. 15.19)