

How Easter Changes People's Lives

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John 20, 21

I want to welcome those of you who are guests today, especially friends and family from out of town. It is important for all of us today to understand that Easter is absolutely central to the Christian faith. In America today Easter is a poor imitation of Christmas. Folks tend not to get together with their families as much as they do at Christmas time. The Easter Bunny is not really an adequate substitute for Santa Claus. Our homes are decorated much less for Easter than for Christmas.

And yet, as you look at the New Testament, it is really apparent that the centerpiece of the early Christians' message was not the birth of Jesus. In fact, it is only mentioned in two of the four gospels. Rather, the centerpiece of the early Christians' message was the death and resurrection of Christ. Everywhere that the apostles went preaching, they preached about Easter.

Why is Easter so significant? One of the main reasons Easter held such prominence in the life of the early church was because Easter addresses the perennial issue for men and women – that is, how can we experience life change. In every time and in every culture men and women, teenagers and old people, have looked inside themselves and recognized that something is wrong. From the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich, a perennial question through the ages has been how can I change my life? How can I be happier, and more full of peace, less stressed, less addicted, more fulfilled, and more hopeful? How can I find purpose for my life, meaning in this meaningless world? In short, how can I change my life for the better?

There's never been a time in history where the question of life change has been asked more frequently and with more urgency than in 21st century America. One way to find out the question people are seeking answers for is to simply log onto a major bookseller like Amazon.com and find out how many book titles reference a certain issue. Do you know how many book titles there are currently that reference life change in the title? How many do you think there are? 10,000? 15,000? 20,000?

There are 111,670 book titles that offer the promise of life change. I won't read all 111,670 titles to you, though. Let me just offer you 9-10 titles:

1. Super Foods: 14 Foods That Will Change Your Life
2. Change Your Voice: Change Your Life – A Quick Simple Plan for Finding and Using Your Natural Dynamic Voice

3. Change Your Aura, Change Your Life – A Step-By-Step Guide to Unfolding Your Spiritual Power

Do you know anyone who is absolutely lazy? Here are two books that you can put on their birthday list:

1. Change Your Life Without Getting Out of Bed – The Ultimate Nap Book.

If you are really lazy, you can buy:

1. How To Change Your Entire Life By Doing Absolutely Nothing

Of course, celebrities have gotten into the act. Suzanne Sommers' wrote:

1. 365 Ways to Change Your Life

Or:

1. Feng Shui: Arranging Your Home to Change Your Life.

But my all-time favorite is this book:

1. Change Your Underwear, Change Your Life – Quick and Easy Ways to Make Your Life Fun and Exciting

Does anyone really think that the deep issues of your life are going to change by changing your underwear or rearranging the furniture in your living room, or napping?

Pastor Tony Evans tells the story about a morning he woke up and found a big crack in his bedroom wall. He hired a painter who came in and pulled off some of the old plaster, patched and repainted his bedroom wall. Everything was fine. He paid the painter and was happy with the job. A few months later not only did the crack come back, and as Pastor Evans puts it, it had invited some of its cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters to join him. There were huge cracks all through the wall. So he called in another plasterer to come in and fix the wall. The plasterer came in and assessed the situation. He studied it for a while. He pulled away parts of the plaster. He took some measurements.

Then he looked at Pastor Evans and he said, "You don't have a problem with cracks in your wall."

Tony Evans looked at him and said, "I'm sorry?"

The plasterer said again, "You don't have a problem with cracks in your wall."

Pastor Evans said, "I was looking at the cracks and I was looking at the crackpot in front of me, and I said, 'Every one of God's creatures could tell by looking at this wall that I have problems with cracks in my wall. You are telling me that I don't have a problem with cracks.'"

The plasterer said, “No. The problem is not with cracks in your wall. The problem is that your foundation is shifting. I can come in and fix these cracks in your wall, but in a month they are all going to come back again. You are just going to have to keep repairing cracks over and over again unless you repair the foundation of your house.”

In the United States right now we are spending billions and billions of dollars patching cracks and patching walls. We have all kinds of government proposals that are all about plastering over cracks. We’re going to plaster over the drug problem. We’re going to plaster over the educational crisis in our schools. We’re going to plaster over the issue of substance abuse and teen pregnancy. People are always trying to fix the cracks in their relationships with their kids and in their families, and the cracks in their own psyches by patching over them.

We spend billions and billions of dollars on self-help and therapy books. We work and strain to fix the cracks and then they come back with their cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters. The problem is at the foundation. The foundation of our lives needs to be fixed, if we are going to experience real life change.

Let me tell you a story. This is a true story of a couple that attends this church. They gave me permission to use it. In fact, I never tell a story here without first asking for permission. The story is that this wife one evening while making dinner received a phone call. The voice at the other end was unfamiliar. He said, “You don’t know me, but my wife and I graduated with your husband.”

She said, “okay.” She asked if he wanted to be transferred to her husband’s office phone.

The man screamed, “No! Not yet. I just want to verify some information with you. Are you familiar with either of these telephone numbers?”

She replied, “Well, one of the telephone numbers is my husband’s.”

At that point the man asked to speak to her husband. After he spoke with her husband, she went into her husband’s office to see what the call was all about. Her husband’s face was ashen, all the blood was drained. He said he didn’t want to talk about it. Later in the evening he confessed that he and his high school sweetheart had been calling each other regularly, talking about their emotional need for each other. Her husband also said that this woman was the only woman who had ever understood him and for months he had been contemplating leaving his marriage and reconnecting with his old high school sweetheart.

This woman was absolutely devastated. They went in for counseling, but the counseling didn’t really seem to fix anything. It was more crack repair than

anything else. This Christian woman began praying that God would do something that God would intervene.

Things got much worse before they got better. Her husband confessed that even though he and this other woman had stopped the phone calls, they were secretly emailing each other and he was still contemplating leaving her. She said to her husband that she loved him and would fight for their marriage, but that she would not share him with another woman. He needed to make a decision about what he wanted to do.

A few days later, through a series of providential circumstances, this couple met with our former marriage and family life pastor, who told them that our marriage and family ministry was starting up a new session of a program called Begin Again. Begin Again is a program we have for couples whose marriages are in crises. Before throwing in the towel completely, we encourage them to participate in this program. The Begin Again program has literally rescued dozens of marriages from breakup and has resulted in dozens of marriages becoming completely healed. In fact, we're hosting another Begin Again weekend in just a few months. If you think it would be valuable, you could call our Marriage and Family Ministry and find out more about the program.

But they decided to go to Begin Again. A few days later this couple was here at church and the husband felt like God was speaking directly to him through the message. He responded by going forward here at this church and truly committing his whole life to Christ. The following weekend they attended Begin Again. At Begin Again couples share their stories and very often their stories of brokenness and God's healing are extremely relevant for those who are listening. Couples who tell their stories are able to look other couples in the eye and say, "We were once where you are now. We were going to throw in the towel, but here is how God changed our lives."

During the second story, this man heard some things, which brought him to tears. The very issues that were spoken about were like a spear into his soul. He began to weep and he poured out a heartfelt prayer of repentance. Over the next several weeks this marriage went through the most remarkable transformation. Let me read to you her concluding statements. Here is what this Christian woman in our church wrote under the title "Where We Are Now."

God has changed us. He is renovating our marriage and rebuilding our love for each other. My husband treats me so lovingly and considers how his decisions would affect me prior to making them. He says that I am more attentive to his needs, that our dialogue is honest, and that he now considers me to be his very best friend. Through this process my husband said that he now realizes that his problems had to do chiefly with his relationship with Christ. Instead of looking at his own needs and blaming me for not meeting them, he began to look to Christ to meet his needs. For the first time in his life he said he began to understand

his responsibilities as a husband. He has joined a men's group where he sees that his struggles are not unique and he receives hope and direction through discussion, example and prayer. He said he now knows that his heart was always empty because he never allowed Christ to enter it and fill his heart.

She finishes with this statement:

There is absolutely nothing that God can't do. He loves us more than anyone else could ever love us. He wants what is best for all of us and he can be trusted. I am so grateful for his extravagant love and grace.

Friend, Easter is all about life change. Belief in Christ changes people not at the surface, but at the foundation. And when your foundation is healed, then everything else can come into line—your family, your relationships, your inner struggles, your marriage. I've called today's talk, "How Easter Changes People's Lives." Let's pray.

SLIDE – John 20:1-2

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary of Magdala went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

One of the things that you quickly discover as you read the gospel accounts of Easter is that the possibility that Jesus was raised from the dead was not on anyone's radar screen at all. His resurrection was utterly unexpected by everyone. You won't read about anyone in the gospels, who was encountered by the risen Christ, who said, "But of course. We knew all the time that you, Jesus, would come back to life." His appearances came to people as shocking intrusions.

It would be as if you went to a funeral home and bid your last respects to your deceased grandmother, who is lying there in an open casket, and as you are pulling out of your spot in the funeral home, there is a tap on your car window. You turn to the side and who is it, but your grandmother, only she is alive. Or you've just buried your favorite aunt and when you return from the cemetery, who emerges from your front door to greet you as you are putting your key in the door? Your aunt!

No one in the gospels had any expectation that Christ would be resurrected from the dead. N.T. Wright, who is one of the foremost biblical scholars in the world today, wrote an award-winning book last year titled "The Resurrection of the Son of God." In his book, Wright makes a major point that nowhere in the ancient world do we have even a single story of the bodily resurrection of a dead man. Death was considered a permanent, one-way street to the underworld. There

were no U-turns. Once you died, your destiny was to go down and you were not coming back up. The present existence of the dead in the underworld was variously understood. In general, it was thought that the dead existed in a dark underworld as shadowy figures something like ghosts, or disembodied souls. But death was all-powerful, and it was a problem for which the ancient world had no solution.

The idea that before Christianity there were lots of stories of resurrected gods is completely false. You have stories of nature gods that follow the seasonal cycle, gods who die every fall and come back to life in the spring every year. But you have no story in any ancient literature, the literature of the Egyptians, or the Greeks, or the Romans, or the Babylonians, of a man who died, who came bodily, back from the dead in some kind of transformed body.

In Judaism, the idea gradually began to emerge through the Old Testament period that because God's love is so strong at the end of time he would raise all of his people from the dead. But no one in Judaism, before the resurrection of Jesus, ever thought that God would raise one person from the dead in the middle of history. There was the idea that at the end of history, on the great Judgment Day, God would raise all of his people from the dead. But one person, in the middle of history, no one ever thought that that would occur.

The encounters of the risen Christ with people were utterly unexpected. And friend, this unexpected element of Easter is the way life change often occurs. Listen. We live in a world that regards any idea that God would intervene in someone's life to change him or her radically as almost preposterous. People take it as a given that God does not intervene. If something is going to happen, you are going to have to make it happen yourself. That's why we have so many self-help books. And that's why some churches say that God has no mouth other than your mouth and that God has no hands other than your hands, and no feet other than your feet. He uses the church to get things done in the world, and apart from the church God doesn't do anything. That is the sort of world we live in, a world in which life change is something you do to yourself.

Well, let me challenge that assumption by telling you about a friend of mine named Diane. Diane came from a broken family. Her parents divorced when she was a baby. Sadly, Diane was abused as a child and was very sexually promiscuous during her teen years.

After high school, she moved to Los Angeles where she became an exotic dancer. She used men and drugs to fill the holes in her life. Eventually, she became pregnant and had a little girl. She raised her daughter on her own. Thoughts of God or a relationship with God were the farthest things from her mind. Because Diane is very pretty, she made a lot of money as a dancer and had lots of boyfriends.

When her daughter was just 3 years old, Diane was driving home from work one evening and was hit head-on in a terrible car accident. Her head injuries were severe and she was in a coma for almost two weeks. The doctors didn't know if Diane would live or die. If she did live, they didn't know if she would ever come out of the coma, or what her life would be like when she came out of the coma.

Apparently, a nurse read the Bible to Diane while she was in the coma. Diane came out of the coma, and when she did, she said that Jesus visited her during her coma. Diane's life was radically changed, not by her own doing, she was in a coma, but simply because of the intervention of Christ. When she woke up, she surrendered her life to Jesus. She immediately changed the course of her life. After going through rehab, Diane moved from Los Angeles to Columbus with her daughter. She got a legitimate job and she joined the Vineyard. Here at Vineyard she's been growing in her relationship with Christ over the last five years. She is a completely different person now than she was in Los Angeles.

It is not just that the cracks in her life have been patched over. God has changed Diane at the foundation of her life. He restored her innocence. Diane today is a pure, beautiful, godly woman. God has given her a church family that loves her dearly and cherishes her. She has been reconciled to her parents. If you met Diane today you would not find one trace of the person she used to be.

Diane's story is mirrored by this gospel story of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene met Jesus while she was in crisis. It is likely that Mary Magdalene was financially very well off. The area that she was from, Magdala, was a wealthy community. It would be like saying Mary from Upper Arlington, or Mary from Bexley. We find her in the gospels as being financially independent and able to contribute to support Jesus and the other disciples as they went around Israel announcing the gospel. What we also know about Mary Magdalene was that she was tormented by forces within herself that she could not fix. It says that Jesus cast seven demons out of her.

There are some of you sitting here this Easter morning that have things in your life like Mary Magdalene, or like my friend, Diane, that you cannot fix. There may be forces within you – an addiction, a depression, or struggles with anxiety that you desire to be free of, as Mary Magdalene desired to be set free, but you can't release yourself from these things. You may have a feeling right now of being overwhelmed by your life situation and you are working as hard as you can to patch up the cracks as they appear. But there are too many cracks and they go too deep.

Let me ask you a question, do you need your life changed? I'm not asking you what your religious views are, or what your church background is. I'm not asking how long you've attended church. I'm just asking you this simple question this Easter, do you need your life changed?

What is it that changed Mary Magdalene's life? We read in verse 10,

SLIDE

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

Some people, by the way, have seen in this picture of the two angels, a fulfillment of the Old Testament picture of the mercy seat that sat on top of the Ark of the Covenant where the atonement was made in the Old Testament. The mercy seat had on either end two carved angels. Well, here is the real mercy seat: the place where God accepted the sacrifice of the perfect Son of God and demonstrated his acceptance by raising Jesus from the dead.

Verse 13 reads,

SLIDE

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

We find Mary standing outside of the tomb of Jesus weeping. She is weeping because the person who loved her is dead and she thinks his body has been stolen. She is weeping because she has lost the person who changed her life. She is weeping because she thinks the only one in this world who ever treated her as being valuable, the only one in this world whoever gave her a sense of dignity, the only one whoever made her feel worthwhile and gave her back her self-esteem is dead. And to compound it, his body has been stolen.

What changed Mary? It wasn't a "what" that changed Mary, it was a "who." Look at Jesus' words in verse 15,

SLIDE

"Woman," he said, "why are you are crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

People are changed when impersonal religion turns into a personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus doesn't say, "What are you looking for?" as if the thing that will change her is discovering a dead, lifeless body. Jesus, who is alive, asked Mary, "Who are you looking for?" And then Jesus addresses this woman personally by speaking her name.

SLIDE

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

There is nothing more personal than hearing your name. You can be in a crowded party with dozens of people in the room and someone can mention your name from across the room, and you will turn around. People change when they go through this shocking transformation from thinking about Christianity and God as impersonal, distant ideas and concepts and they discover Jesus as a living, real person with whom you can have a relationship today.

Easter changes everything. It is often said that becoming a Christian is not adopting a religion, it is entering a personal relationship with Jesus. Friends, let me ask you a question. Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? I'm not asking if you have an idea, or a concept, or a belief system about God, but do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? That's what changed Mary. That's what's changed hundreds of people like you in this church.

I'll tell you one way you can tell the difference between someone who has religion and someone who has a relationship with Christ. One of the best tests is to listen to them pray. When you just have religion, you become incredibly aware of a lack in your life when you pray with someone who has a personal relationship with Christ. I don't mean when you say grace over a meal, but go to the hospital with a sibling or a friend who is a real deal Christian and listen to them pray for the person in the hospital bed. I'll tell you, you will be unsettled by it if all you have is religion because you will quickly realize that this real-deal Christian has a relationship with Christ that you know nothing about. There will be an intimacy in the prayer. You will hear someone speaking directly and personally to Christ, as if Christ was sitting right next to him or her as a friend. Religion produces stiff, formal prayers. If you listen to a real-deal Christian pray, you will be put in touch with the fact that they have something you don't have, but that you want.

It was not only Mary, a woman in crisis, whose life was changed by Easter, it was also Thomas, the hard-headed skeptic. We read in John 20:24,

SLIDE

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he declared, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

There are some people who approach Easter with their heads first, and their critical faculties working overtime. Maybe you are an attorney, a scientist, or a professor, or teacher. But you approach the whole subject of Jesus' resurrection with the desire for some proof, evidence, something that will satisfy your mind and your intellect. We're not all wired the same way. Some of us are soft-hearted. Some of us are hard-headed. The hard-headed types need thoughtful explanations.

You know, among the world's religions, Christianity is absolutely unique in lots of ways. But one area that it is unique concerns the issue of proof and evidences. If you took the world's religions, only Christianity stakes its claim to truthfulness on historical events that are subject to investigation. Other religions are believed without any claim to have historical and objective evidence that can be investigated for their truthfulness.

I was a comparative religion major in college. Buddhism does not claim that it is based on historical objective truths that you can discover by investigating history. Hinduism does not claim to be based on historical, objective truths that you can discover through historical research. Neither does Islam. Only Christianity and Judaism, from which it sprang, claims that it is testable and verifiable through historical investigation. And it is this capacity to be tested and verified that has led many skeptics over the centuries to faith in Christ.

In the 1930's a rationalistic English journalist named Frank Morison attempted to discover the real Jesus. He was convinced that historical investigation would undermine the faith that was taught in many churches. Morison, the journalist, was dogmatically opposed to the miraculous stories that we read in the gospels. He believed that Jesus was a noble, good man, whose teachings had been corrupted through later church mythology. As he writes in his book, he decided to look at the last phase in the life of Christ and to strip it of its overgrowth of primitive beliefs and dogmatic suppositions, to find Jesus as he really was.

Well, as Frank Morison dug into the evidence, he came to a shocking conclusion. And the book Morison ended up writing was not the book that he intended to write when he set out. He proceeded in his book to write one of the best defenses for the resurrection of Christ that has ever been written. His book, which has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, is titled "Who Moved the Stone?"

In the late 19th century an archeologist named Sir William Ramsey, who was a professor at Oxford and Cambridge University in England, who had awards from prestigious institutions all over the world, he was a profound skeptic about Christianity, he was convinced the Bible was fraudulent. He spent years heading up an archeological expedition in Asia Minor and Palestine to prove that the Bible was not some book from heaven, but rather was written by later Christians who

put all this mythology together. He spent 15 years literally digging into the ground and traveling around to the very spots that the Bible claimed the apostle Paul traveled to.

In 1896 he published a large volume titled “St. Paul, The Traveler and The Roman Citizen. The book was totally unexpected because it was completely contrary to the intention of the author announced 20 years before. The book caused absolute dismay among skeptics around the world because Sir William Ramsey detailed down to the minutest point the accuracy of the New Testament in recording the events that it speaks about. For Ramsey, the evidence was so overwhelming that he became a committed Christian.

I had the same experience in college. I gave my life to Christ as an 18-year old freshman. But then as a junior and a religion major in college, I went through a period of severe doubt. My college professors communicated to me over and over that the Bible was full of mythology. My next door neighbor was finishing his Ph.D. in philosophy. He had been raised in a Christian home and liked nothing better than to argue with Christians about how impossible it was to believe in Christianity.

I went through a very dark period where I began to wonder whether I simply believed in Christ because of a psychological need, because I was weak. I began to wonder how do I know that this book called the Bible is really true? And so for about a year I read literally everything I could get my hands on concerning the reliability of the scriptures and the historical evidence that supported the claims for Christ. I spent literally thousands of hours pouring over issues of evidence until my mind was convinced. I came to a solid conviction that the Bible was the Word of God and that it reliably reported the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

You know, some of you may, at some point, have been told don’t investigate, don’t ask questions, just believe. I think nothing could be said or be more farther from the truth than “don’t investigate, just believe.” I would challenge any hard-headed skeptic to investigate, dig into the evidence, and search the issue out. I think doubt and questioning can be the growth edge of a genuine faith.

Sometimes, of course, the issue is not intellectual doubt. Sometimes the issue is really locked into a person’s will. We know that Thomas not only had an intellectual problem, he had a will problem. In verse 27, Jesus says to him,

SLIDE

Stop doubting and believe.

In the original Greek it could actually be read more literally, “Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Or “Stop being an unbeliever, become a believer.” Jesus is addressing Thomas’ will. He is telling Thomas that he needs to repent

and turn from his unbelief. To intellectual doubters, who have genuine questions, Jesus gives genuine answers. If you are a willful doubter, Jesus challenges your choice.

What might have accounted for Thomas' willful doubt? It says in verse 24,

SLIDE

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord...

Some of you this Easter are in the position of Thomas. You've had someone in your life telling you that they've had an encounter with Jesus that changed them. And they've told you that you could have a similar encounter with Jesus or that you need to have the same experience that they've had. Maybe you are here at this Easter service because you've been dragged to Vineyard as part of your fulfillment of a family obligation. Your brother, sister, parents, or children are all going to Vineyard and you've been dragged along. Everyone else is going to church and you have to for the sake of the kids, your spouse, or your mother. Perhaps you have someone at work who is acting towards you as the disciples acted toward Thomas. They are trying to get you to believe. They are talking your ear off about Christ.

Again, the original Greek said, "The disciples kept saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord.'" They didn't just say it once. They told him over and over again. From their Easter Sunday encounter with Christ to the following week they said, "Listen Thomas, you need to believe. You need to believe. You need to believe."

Is there someone in your life, maybe your spouse, your parents, your roommate, someone at work, a family member who keeps saying to you over and over again, "We've encountered Christ. He is real. You need to believe."

Some of you were raised in Christian homes but walked away from the faith of your families. There are a number of you who were raised in church but have walked away from church. Or you went to Christian school and have walked away or rejected the faith of your teachers. Is there someone in your life, maybe your spouse, or your father, or your roommate, or your former church or school that has been telling you over and over again, "We've encountered Christ. He's real. You need to believe in him, just as we do"?

Perhaps for Thomas, the issue of faith had to do with who was telling him to believe. "Come on guys. I know what you're like. Peter, I know you blow hot and cold all the time. Don't talk to me about faith. You are the one who denied the Lord three times when he needed you most. Come on, guys. We all ran away when Jesus was arrested in the garden. Don't talk to me about faith. I

have lived with you for three years. I know your lives in detail. You are trying to witness to me?"

One of the things that keep many people from surrendering to Christ is the bad behavior of Christians. Maybe you have had a past experience with a Christian that left a bad taste in your mouth. Your parents pushed church on you and Bible reading and prayer, but there was in their lives none of the reality of those things. It is incredibly sad when I hear stories of kids being raised in homes that are supposedly Christian and Bible believing, but Dad's got a drinking problem, or there is an abuser, or Mom is simply crazy. She is always off on some religious crusade, but she really doesn't know how to love her kids or her husband. Or kids who are shipped off to Christian school where the school has all the right words, but none of the melody of Christianity. They constantly sing it off key with lists and rules and do's and don'ts. It is all just behavioral control. It's these very few people who love God or love other people. Maybe you have had a past experience of other Christians that left a bad taste in your mouth and for that reason you are holding God at arm's length this Easter.

I know that some kids grow up in churches where the only message is hell, fire and damnation. Where there doesn't seem to be any welcome to struggling people with real problems. There is no acknowledgement in the church of weakness. We are totally right and everyone else in the world is going to hell in a hand basket.

If past associations and past experiences are keeping you from Christ this Easter there are two things that I want you to keep in mind. First of all, the fact that a person who talks about Jesus a lot and is a bad Christian doesn't mean that his or her *message* is necessarily false. There are lots of bad messengers who are bringing a true message.

It is absolutely the case that Christian faith ought to make people nicer, more loving, and more forgiving. It is absolutely the case that Christian faith ought to lift each one of us above what we were before. For many, it does. But simple logic tells us that true messages can come from bad messengers. You might still carry an umbrella when you hear the weatherman announce that it is going to rain tomorrow, even if you discover that the weatherman is secretly an adulterer. He might still be telling you the truth about the weather. And a bad Christian might still be telling you the truth about Jesus.

Here's the second thing to keep in mind. The fact that Christians in your past were often bad Christians is simply a testimony to the power and reality of sin. Sin is powerful. And the power of sin may have ruled your father's life or your mother's life or your former church's life or the life of the Christian teachers at your school or a co-worker or friend, much like the power of sin that ruled in the life of the other disciples who spoke to Thomas. If you see a bad Christian, that's the testimony to the power and reality of sin.

But friends, there are good Christians, millions of them who do good. They aren't perfect, but there are millions of people who do live out the reality of their faith and who have been changed. They may be people in your own immediate circle who you have seen changed. And this is a testimony to the power of God's grace. You need that same grace in your life. Don't let past bad experiences with some bad Christians or bad churches keep you from trusting in Christ this Easter.

Last of all, as we consider how our lives are changed by Easter, we look at Peter, the man who had failed Jesus. We read in John 21:

SLIDE

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

One of the interesting things about Jesus' band of followers is that you don't see a religious type of guy among his followers. His followers were not the sort of people who spend their lives in a monastery praying or reading religious books. There were no philosophy majors, or as far as we know, Bible scholars. What you encounter among Jesus' disciples are men who own their own businesses, a few guys from big cities, some from small towns, government workers, political radicals who were trying to overthrow the government. There were a few well-educated people.

And then you have just fishermen like Peter, a working stiff. Peter is a guy who when you read the gospels, the word "big" comes to mind. He went after life in a big way. He was probably a big man physically. He had a big mouth. He also probably had a big heart. When I read about Peter in the gospels, I think about a man's man. He is a loud, backslapping kind of guy with a hearty laugh. He probably liked to sit around the fire telling off-color jokes, the kind that Christians shouldn't laugh at, but are really funny.

I want you to hear this. Never say you are not the kind of man or woman who could be a follower of Christ. There is no kind of person who becomes a Christian other than the human kind. In this room seated around you today are people coming from virtually every religious background. There are people coming from every single Christian denomination. There are lots of Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals. There are many, many people who came from an entirely unchurched background, or a religion other than Christianity. We have Muslim believers, and we have Hindu background believers. We have Buddhist background believers. I myself was raised in a Jewish home and was not

particularly interested in religion. We have a number of Jewish believers in Jesus in this congregation.

Maybe a family member has dragged you here. Your brother or sister, your parents, or your children were all going to Vineyard and they just dragged you along. Never say, "Well, because of my background, because of my family history, because of the sort of person I am, because of my wiring, I could never become a Christian. Jesus is for everybody.

But Peter, this big man with a big laugh and a big heart, failed Jesus miserably. Jesus predicted at the Last Supper that all of the disciples would forsake him. Peter replied in Matt. 26:33,

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"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."

As it turned out, during Jesus' trial, Peter did deny Jesus three times. And the most painful thing was when they were standing in the courtyard where Peter denied Jesus a third time, and Jesus turned and looked at Peter and Peter could see in Jesus' eyes the hurt, the pain, and the sadness of having his closest friend, Peter, turn his back on him.

Someone told me a story several years ago of getting in a massive fight with his father when he was a teenager. He said to his father out of teenage rebellion, "I hate you. You've ruined my life. I hate you." That very evening, their dad was out driving and he was killed in a car accident. The last memory before Dad died was of those hateful words. The last memory Peter had of Jesus was Jesus looking at him with pain-filled eyes. And Peter went out and wept.

How are you restored when you've failed God and failed others and denied what you knew was right? How do you get restored? Jesus is not interested in patching over cracks. Jesus works at a foundational level in Peter's life. Christ entered the place of shame and pain and forced Peter to confront his past. We don't get well when we lock bad memories off in a closet and refuse to deal with them. Some of you have painful, shameful memories, memories of hurt and abuse, memories of wrongdoing and of sin, memories of being hurt by a church or wounded by a supposed Christian. You've never really dealt with those things. You've never truly brought them to the surface and had Jesus heal them. Instead, you've buried them away like radioactive waste in the basement of your soul.

Jesus enters Peter's memories. It says in verse 4,

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Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your nets on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did they were unable to haul in the nets because of the large number of fish.

Do you understand what Jesus is doing with Peter? He is recreating the scene when Christ first called Peter three years earlier. He is standing on the same shore, the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have fished all night and they've caught nothing. It is the same situation, the same circumstance. Jesus issues the same command as three years before, "put out the nets." He directs them to where the fish are. They get the same big catch. It's like Christ is saying, "Peter, let's go back in time. Let's go back to where our relationship began. Let me remind you that I never called you to be a great man. I never asked you to be flawless. I never asked you to carry the world on your shoulders. I never asked you to be more loyal than any of the other disciples. I never called you to be better than they are. All I ever asked of you was that you follow me."

And that is all that Jesus ever asks of any of us. He doesn't call us to be flawless, to go over and above our abilities, to fix the whole world, to manage every single problem of everyone around us. He doesn't even ask us to fix ourselves, to repair all the cracks in the walls of our lives by ourselves. All he says to us is, "Follow me. Give your life to me. And I will repair you at a foundational level."

We read in verse 9,

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When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it and some bread.

He had a charcoal fire made. Jesus is probing even deeper into Peter's memory. At the time Peter denied Jesus, there was a charcoal fire going, by which he warmed his hands. And now, again, the smell of charcoal on the beach as Jesus is cooking fish.

You know, there is nothing that reaches into our memory more than smells. I was just back in New York where I grew up. I went there with some friends at Christmas. Walking through the streets of Manhattan and smelling chestnuts roasting and being sold in those pushcarts pulled me back to childhood memories of buying bags of chestnuts with my dad when I was 8-9 years old.

Jesus is interested in repairing the foundation of Peter's life. He is going into the depths of his memories. Jesus probes deeper and asks a question in verse 15,

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Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?

Peter had previously claimed that if everyone denied Jesus, he loved Jesus more than all the others and would never deny him. Finally, Jesus recapitulates the three denials by Peter, three questions of Peter's love. What is Jesus doing?

Let me share with you Jesus' method of restoring us after failure. Jesus is not deliberately rubbing Peter's failure in his face. He is not bringing up his past in order to shake his finger at Peter as if to say, "I told you so. I told you so. Look at you. You are a failure." He is not rubbing his nose in it. What he is doing is being a surgeon who is cutting deeply to make sure he gets all the cancer out. Jesus forces us to face painful incidents in our life so that we can give them over to him. He probes our souls deeply and reminds us of things that we said, people we hurt, vows we've broken, and lies we've told not to shame us, but to heal us. He is not interested in patching over cracks. He is interested in fixing the foundations of our lives. He wants to change our lives. Let's pray.

How Easter Changes People's Lives

Rich Nathan

April 10-11, 2004

John: The Passion of Christ Series - Easter 2004

John 20, 21

I. A Need For Life Change

II. People Whose Lives Were Changed

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B. Thomas: A Hard-Headed Skeptic (Jn. 20:24-28)

C. Peter: A Man Who Had Failed (Jn. 21:1-14)