

**Sermon for Sunday, April 4, 2010 – Easter**  
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**THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST**  
**Luke 24:1-8, John 20:24-31**

**1. The reason for the resurrection – the climax of the atonement**

Read Luke 24:1-8 which presents the essential facts of the first Easter morn.

- Roman and Jewish authorities join in executing Jesus for sedition and blasphemy.
- He was buried in haste due to Passover. "Proper" spices were not applied to his body.
- The women arrive on the first day with spices but nothing is as expected: The stone before the tomb is rolled away and the body is gone.
- While they wonder, they meet angels. The angels say, "What you *doing* here? He isn't here, but risen, as he said. It was necessary for him to be betrayed, crucified and raised." Why was it necessary?

I hope to celebrate with you by meditating on that question: First, the **reason** for the resurrection, second, the **truth** of the resurrection, and third, the **meaning** of the resurrection. We begin with the concept of atonement which stands behind everything.

*Atonement* is a dark romance set in World War II. In it, Robbie and Cecilia are in love. Sadly, Cecelia's 13 year old sister, Briony, has a crush on Robbie. She misunderstands some of Robbie's actions toward Cecelia. Torn between her dashed affections and genuine suspicion, Briony claims that she witnessed Robbie committing a terrible crime. No one steps forward to exonerate Robbie and so he is sent to jail. World War II breaks out and Robbie is offered a release if he joins the army, which he does. At the same time, Cecilia works in a London hospital tending wounded soldiers. Yet her main motive is to be near the front so she can see Robbie if he ever gets a leave from the battle.

In time, Briony becomes a nurse, too. As she sees soldiers dying, she realizes that she exposed Robbie to death because of her false accusation. Her sense of guilt and remorse is growing but she can't bring herself to confess, to tell the authorities that she made a false accusation.

Around this time, Robbie suffers a minor wound in battle. But he can't get medical care so the wound is untreated. It becomes infected and he dies before he can be united with Cecilia. Later, a bomb explodes in London killing Cecilia. In this way, Briony's lie causes the death of both Cecilia and Robbie.

We flash forward fifty years. An elderly Briony is on television for an interview about her latest novel, *Atonement*. She has news. She is dying, so this will be her final novel. Yet it is also her first, for she has been writing it intermittently for decades. In the novel, Briony reunites Cecilia and Robbie. They have a blissful honeymoon on a beach. This reunion, she says, gives their lives the happy ending they deserved. It is, she tells us, her atonement for the harm she did them.

I gasped. The novel and movie are technically excellent. But the theme is stunning. Briony realizes that there must be a reckoning for her terrible sin and atones for it by writing a novel about the people she harmed. How can a novel reverse her real-world sins and crimes? (Why did she try to *earn* forgiveness rather than asking for it?)

The writer knows something vital: after terrible evil there must be atonement. But it proposes that *we* can atone for our sins by acts of kindness or sacrifice - by writing a novel or by providing food or water to the poor.

Atonement is a vital theme for Easter, because the resurrection of Jesus is the final moment in the process of atonement. At some level, everyone understands the minimal definition of atonement: a compensation for a wrong done. Briony wanted to atone for her lies. We say criminals have to "pay their debt" to society. People sometimes give gifts to charity hoping to atone for past wrongs.

The Bible has a well-developed concept of atonement. It acknowledges what everyone knows: when one person wrongs another, it is right and good for that person to do something – apologize or ask forgiveness, for example – to set things right. But the Bible goes deeper.

The doctrine of the atonement is central to Christianity. The need for the atonement rises from two facts: First, all humans are sinners. We rebel against God and we offend our neighbors. No one meets all of God's standards nor do we consistently want to do so. This is serious, because sin alienates us from both God and man. And it leads to death - for "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Second, we cannot atone for our sins. Briony's novel cannot undo her crime. Even if she confessed her perjury in time to release Robbie from jail, he was still humiliated and falsely convicted and jailed. It is impossible for her to fully atone for her actions. And it's impossible for us, too. We may volunteer. We may give to charity to atone for financial misdeeds. It's good to give to charity, but a gift given today cannot precisely atone for a financial sin or crime committed years ago. Even if we restore funds how does that atone for bad deeds decades old?

So we cannot atone for our misdeeds. But God can. He has provided an atonement to set things right. This is surprising – the one who was wronged acts to heal the relationship. Consider this with me.

Suppose that you have a friend who likes to go camping. As he describes the cool air in the hills, the trout in the streams, you're sold. He lends you his designer tent and off you go. After a perfect day, you build a fire and doze off as you watch the embers die. Alas, shortly after you fall asleep, a breeze kicks sparks onto the tent and destroys it along with most of the equipment. Now what?

Your friend lovingly assembled his gear over a span of years. You know you should have doused the fire. You can't bear the thought of confessing what you've done. You compound the problem by lying: you say you're cleaning his gear. You avoid him, too – you don't take his calls. Sin is like this: we wronged God and we've run from him, we're estranged from him as a result.

Some think the cure is to buy terrific gear and give it to the friend. With God, people think they must do something to make up - atone for - wrongs done: say a prayer, light a candle, give a gift. Not so. God says, "You can't replace my tent because I designed it and made just one. But I'm creating a better one. When it's complete I want to take you to a great river, one you've never seen."

That is what the Lord has done. We sinned against him, spoiled his creation and ruined our relationship, but he doesn't tell us to atone or compensate for our mistakes. He made the atonement; he reconciled us to himself.

The process began long ago. God promised Adam and Eve that their offspring would crush the head of the tempter who had led them astray. Soon, he built up a family of believers: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, then Moses and all Israel. He made covenants with them. The essence: "You will be my people and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 30:22, Exodus 36:28). These were strong relationships. Like contracts, they had terms and conditions. The Lord said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless."

Because the Lord knew Israel would betray the covenant, he provided a remedy for Israel's failure: sacrifices of atonement. God told Israel to come to him for mercy seeking forgiveness for sin. Then they slaughtered and ate animals in ways that were customary at the time. But the animals' deaths were also a symbol of the death that could follow when we violate our relationship with God.

The sacrifices were a powerful symbol, but were merely a symbol of atonement for sin. We know that an animal cannot substitute for a human life. It slowly became clear that this was not the true cure for the problem of sin. The very repetition of the sacrifices declared that they were inadequate, incomplete.

Meanwhile God sent leaders and shepherds to Israel. Prophets taught, priests and Levites prayed and sang and offered sacrifices. Kings defended the nation and promoted righteousness. At least, that was the plan.

Sadly, the people refused to listen to the prophets, the priests became corrupt and the kings often promoted sin rather than godliness. Other institutions failed, too. The people forgot the law. Israel was supposed to be a beacon of justice in an unjust world. But all too often Israel was barely distinguishable from the nations around them.

This was so disappointing, yet it served a purpose. It hinted, suggested, and finally shouted that God's people needed something more: a faithful servant, a righteous king, a sufficient sacrifice. The servant is Jesus. He is God in the flesh - God with us, beside us, not just speaking or reigning from heaven. Jesus joined us. He worked with his hands and lived humbly, like his people.

In his ministry, he proclaimed the kingdom, healed the sick, taught the path of discipleship. He was popular but also so radical that the authorities became jealous and angry and they killed him by crucifixion. Peter summarized:

"Jesus was accredited by God to you by miracles, which God did among you through him, as you know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead... because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him [and] God caused him to be seen by witnesses." (Acts 2:22-24, 10:38-43).

Further, "He commanded us to testify that he is the... judge of the living and the dead. Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" for he atoned for human sin. He bore and bore away the wrath of God.

The resurrection of Jesus is the capstone of all this. It proves that his atonement was effective. He bore sin and death for us. Some of you will think, "Nice story, but is it true?" Fair question. No one doubts that Jesus died, but did he rise?

## **2. The truth of the resurrection – a word for doubters**

If you rule out the existence of God, then the resurrection accounts are hard to believe. But if there is a God, if He is personal, if He cares about His creation, then we expect that He can and will intervene to restore it.

There is evidence that He did intervene. In fact, the death and resurrection of Jesus is often called the best attested fact in ancient history. Apart from the gospels and the church, there are references to these events in Greek, Roman and Jewish histories. And everyone knows that the death of Jesus didn't quash his movement, it was the beginning of its explosive growth. How can that be? It is because his death didn't kill him. Hundreds of people saw Jesus alive. They gave their lives for his cause. The Bible names them – check it out. For doubters, no name is more important than Thomas, the disciple.

Thomas is important because he missed it when Jesus visited his disciples in the evening of the first Easter. The gospel simply says, "He was not with them." He happened to be out when Jesus showed them his wounds to prove that it was he. If you ever went to the ball game and turned your head when someone struck the climactic home run, you are in league with Thomas.

When Thomas returned, the disciples explode with the news, "We have seen the Lord!" But Thomas can't believe it: "If I do not see the imprint of the nails in his hands, if I do not put my finger into the mark or imprint of the nails, if I cannot put my hand into his side, I will never believe" (20:19-25).

The title "doubting Thomas" is too mild. He is a full-blown skeptic. But Thomas is onto something. He expects the risen Christ to show physical continuity with earthly Jesus. A ghostly apparition will not do. If this is Jesus, he expects to see proof in the healed scars where the nails went into Jesus' hands, and in his side where a soldier thrust his spear. If this is Jesus, he expects to see hinged thumbs and knees and a thumping heart beneath his chest. He spurns the concept of resurrection; he wants the real thing. Not an allegory about newness of life, like flowers coming up in the spring. That is what we have. In one scene, Jesus builds a fire, cooks a meal and eats some fish.

Thomas is right - it must be a bodily resurrection or it's no resurrection at all. On the other hand, his demands sound like plain unbelief when he swears he will never believe unless he sees signs. So Thomas dictates his terms to God and he languishes for a week staying with his friends.

Then Jesus appears again. He blesses everyone and then he turns to Thomas:

- You want to put your finger on the print of the nails? Here; touch my hand.
- You want to put your hand into my side? Reach out your hand and put it there." Stop being an unbeliever. Be a believer."

Did Thomas take up the invitation or not? We'll never know, but he heard and saw Jesus and it was all he needed. His brash unbelief melted away, he repented and believed and said, "My Lord and my God" That is, "Jesus, you are Lord and my Lord, God and my God." Thomas confesses that Jesus is God objectively and Jesus is his God (20:26-28).

The gospels were written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Thomas got the point and gained life. But Jesus looks past Thomas to us. He tells Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29).

Jesus blesses us if we believe without seeing. He saw the day when all who believe do so without physical evidence. Our faith rests on testimony from the apostles. We would prefer to see with our eyes, but the testimony of eyewitnesses is preserved. We rely on testimony so often anyway. Jesus says we're blessed, not lost, if we believe without seeing. Besides, let's not envy that first generation; their lives weren't so easy.

We just spent five minutes on the fact of the resurrection. Others have a different objection: If Jesus is alive, why does the church embarrass him with what it does and says? This is not the day to answer that question in full. But it's a valid question, one you can safely raise with us. Don't think you have to give up the truth to follow Jesus. If, for example, you believe this bodily life is important, if you treasure nature and physical joys, you might think the church is opposed. Maybe. But you aren't opposed to Jesus. He created the natural world. He took a body and lived a good physical life and cares about our concrete physical life in this world. He ate and drank and went to parties and expects us to live joyfully. All of your best values find their true home with Jesus.

But to the main point: the meaning of the resurrection. First, it's atonement for sin, which brings peace with God. Second, Jesus' crucifixion is the death of death. He exhausted death and defeated it. Jesus' sacrifice lets sinners approach God without guilt or fear. When we come in faith, we expect a smile, not a frown, blessing not discipline. The Bible describes this atonement from various angles:

- We were slaves to sin, but Jesus has set us free. (John 8:34, Galatians 4:4-5).
- We were subject to judgment, both now and at the end of this age, but there is no condemnation

for those who are united to Christ (Romans 8:1).

- God has a righteous wrath toward sin, but Jesus has turned that wrath away from sinners (1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9).
- We were caught up in the sin of Adam, our age and race, but by faith we are caught up in the life of Jesus and a new humanity (Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:3, 22).

So God has solved the problem of sin. We have a restored relationship, a better tent. It keeps us dry in the rain, warm in the mountains. We can see rivers and climb heights never known before. We can go deeper into life and beauty. But we need to appropriate it, claim the experience. Question: Have you claimed the benefits of the atonement? Let me raise it through a story from a great athlete.

### **3. The significance of the resurrection – embracing the gospel**

Andre Agassi, tennis champion, recently retired and wrote his autobiography. It's largely a story of redemption. An angry and lost young man, Agassi found himself, found true friends and a happy marriage. But I also noticed that the Agassi kept talking about "revenge" and realized the tale was incomplete.

For example: Jeff Tarango cheated Agassi out of a match when they were kids, ten and eight. They met often as pros and Agassi thumped him again and again, screaming within, "Take that, cheater!" Jimmy Connors was rude at their first meet and was crushed on court as punishment, etc.

In 1989 at the French Open, Jim Courier beat Agassi in a quick match. Afterward, in the locker room, Courier made sure everyone saw him lacing up his running shoes. Message: Beating Agassi didn't provide enough cardio. A year later they met on the same court and Agassi got his revenge. Agassi was known as "The Punisher" on tour. He would take control of a point and then, instead of winning it, he would run his opponents side to side until he exhausted them, until they cramped and collapsed. When he was angry, he did it all the more. That's what he did to Courier, side to side until he collapsed, losing the fourth set, 6-0. Agassi says: "I hope that was enough cardio for you." Revenge.

The story intrigues us. We store up grudges; we want to avenge slights and insults. Others have been on the receiving end of someone else's vengeance. Some of us people think God is angry at us, and wants to punish or avenge something we did when we were ten, twenty or forty. But no, God provides atonement. We wronged Him, but He works to restore the relationship. He rebuilt the tent and invited us to go camping with Him. If we accept His offer, we need to live it.

There is another feature of Agassi and revenge: he claims to be a Christian. Pastors have played a vital role in his life; one of my friends was his pastor briefly. He reads C.S. Lewis, etc. I judge no one, but I know this: if we understand the gospel, revenge shouldn't be a guiding principle. God is gracious, not vengeful. If we understand it, we live it. And if we don't live it, we suffer.

Boris Becker was one of Agassi's chief foes. Agassi thought Becker was a snob. Becker tried to flirt with Agassi's wife Brooke Shields during matches. In 1995, what Agassi called "The Summer of Revenge," they met in the semi-finals of the U.S. Open. During the match Becker kept blowing kisses to Agassi's wife between points to enrage him. Agassi was enraged. On match point, Agassi swung so hard, to punish that he tore cartilage between his ribs. He won the point and the match but the next day, in the championship, he was in so much pain it was hard to stand up let alone win. We hurt ourselves when we forget the gospel, when we live to punish others.

I told this story to a friend. He asked, "Have you ever wanted revenge on a tennis court?" I wanted to say, "No," but I had to say, "Yes." What about you? Do you ever want revenge? Do you ever live in a way that contradicts the gospel? If we believe the gospel, we should embrace it, live it in all we think, feel and do.

The death and resurrection show that the Lord did not avenge himself on us, but pursued reconciliation. We should do the same, as we aim to live the gospel. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, full of mercy, abounding in love. (Exodus 34, Psalm 103). That is why Jesus died and rose – to satisfy the demands of justice and to inaugurate a life of compassion and grace. If we say we believe it, we must live it

That I say I have faith cannot free me from sin. How could something I say be my deliverance? Not that I say I have faith, but that I exercise faith, that saves me, brings me God's grace, and is my righteousness before God. He has given me life, and that means he has planted a will in me that can act, must act, with unalterable necessity. I thank God that I can act as one who trusts.

### **So we come to the great question: What do you think of the Christ?**

The question was in the air in Jesus final week. When he entered the city with shouts of praise, "Hosanna to the Son of David", the city asked "Who is this?" The crowds replied, "This is Jesus, the prophet" (Matthew 21:10-11). "Prophet" is a true, but incomplete answer. So Jesus brought it up again and asked some leaders, "What do you think about the Christ?" (22:41). Jesus didn't ask because he needed their input, he asked because they needed to reconsider. It's a question Jesus still asks: What do you think about the Christ? It's the most important question we'll ever answer.

What do you think? The gospels say he is the true prophet, the good king, the priest who offers a sacrifice, his life, to make atonement, to reconcile us to God. And when he finished, he died and after that he rose, to life, life for him, life for us. What do you think? We offended him, but he made an atonement, that we might live, now and forever, by trusting him.