

“He is Risen!”

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18

April 17, 2022

In 1906, something momentous happened in the world of American football. The first legal forward pass was thrown during a game between St. Louis University and Carol College. It's important to those of us whose blood runs Carolina blue that I should point that that was the first *legal* pass. We here in North Carolina know that a year earlier in 1905 one of the Tarheels threw the ball forward for a completion to break a tie between Carolina and the University of Georgia winning the game 6-0. Sadly, the toss was overturned, we lost the appeal and the forfeited the game a few months later. I don't know for sure but it might have been the last time the Tarheels beat the Bulldogs like EVER. As you may well imagine, the forward pass changed everything in the game of football. First of all, it likely saved the sport. Prior to the legalization of forward passing, 1905 had been a bloody year in the game. No less 18 deaths had occurred and over 159 players seriously injured during games in 1905. In fact, things had become so violent, that moves were being made to abolish the sport altogether. I was quickly becoming a more violent variation of rugby and we all know how boring rugby can be, don't we? Believe it or not, it took the intervention President Teddy Roosevelt himself, to save the game of football by pushing for the forward pass to be legalized. In that one act he thereby saved Saturday and Sunday afternoons for generations of Americans as well as proved the bane of pastors across the land. Can you even imagine January without the College National Championship Game or February with the juggernaut that the Super Bowl has become? The forward pass is just one example of a game changer from the world of sports. If we look closely, there are so many advancements that have been game changers during the last 100 years. Would eating dinner be quite as easy if it weren't for the microwave? Would giving tests to kids be nearly as simple were it not for the invention of the copier machine, a vast improvement over the old mimeograph? No, of course not. Things come along and they alter the way that we do things. They're game changers. But one thing is certain – *Game changers always upend the status quo. They quickly and radically alter the way we do things. They change our tastes and proclivities until we can only barely remember life before they came along.*

This morning, is of course, Easter morning, a day in which we put on our finest clothes and huddle together in the pews to celebrate the greatest game changer of all time, an Easter Sunday over two thousand years ago that began just like any other day. John's Gospel records that it began for Mary Magdalene just like any other day in which a loved one had died. You see, since no work was allowed on the Sabbath which, at the time, was on a Saturday, Mary Magdalene wanted and come to Jesus' tomb to do her duty early. At the time, burial practices being what they were, the dead body would lie in-state until someone, some member of the family or friend, could come and anoint them with herbs and spices. This was generally done to hold down the decay of death until the bones of the deceased could be placed in an ossuary. An ossuary was meant to be a final resting place. As we all know, dead men tell no tales but their bones need someplace special to be stored. Typically, this storage was done in a family cave. There, as soon as the decay of death had ended, Jesus would be placed in box besides His ancestors. Over time, He, like those others in the cave with Him would gradually be forgotten.

So, Mary, no doubt saddened by the events of the previous day came to do her duty. But then, as she arrived at the tomb, *something was amiss*. As we know from the Gospels, Jesus' brother Joseph, had collected Jesus' dead body from the Cross, and placed Him in that cave. At this point, a roughhewn stone was placed in front of the entrance. Not only that, Pilate, worried about Jesus' followers stealing the body commanded guards to go and secure the tomb until the third day, just to make sure no shenanigans were done with His corpse. But on the third day, the centurions had fulfilled their duties and well, dead is dead, so they left their post with the rock safely securing the door behind His corpse. If Jesus hadn't knocked on the door for three long days, hadn't stirred from His eternal slumber to ask for a drink of water, what was there to worry about after all? So off they went to the warm campfires of their companions. On the third day they left. Their orders followed to the letter, no worry of reprisal from superior officers. No, it was time to eat and forget all about this trouble making Nazarene with his Galilean rabble. Who cared if one of His followers came and performed his last rites?

And so, Mary arrives fully expecting things to be exactly as they were when Joseph put him in His tomb and rolled that rock in front of the entrance. But what she discovers is far from anything her limited imagination could've possibly conceived. The stone was removed from the tomb. It must've been so shocking she dared go

no further. *Change can do that do us, can't it? Make us want to bury our heads in the sand and forget all about things for a bit.* Without any further investigation, Mary runs as quickly as her feet can carry her back to Peter and another unnamed disciple declaring - *"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."* Notice, she assumes others have removed the Lord. She has yet no concept that He's simply removed Himself.

Again, when the game gets changed, people are slow on the uptake. Can you imagine the looks on people's faces when that first pass was thrown? Wait a second, right. We can imagine something quite similar happened to Mary Magdalene. Likely more incensed by a potential grave defilement than having any idea what was really in store for them, Peter and the beloved disciple go racing off towards the tomb. Inside, they discover Jesus' burial wrappings and the cloth placed around His head rolled up perfectly. But, strangely enough, there was not a single trace of Jesus' body. Here's the point where you'd figure that they'd add all the pieces of the puzzle up. After all, throughout His ministry, Jesus had been telling the disciples all about this particular day. From Luke's Gospel, Jesus says directly to them all - *"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and Jesus said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'"* But when the game gets changed in such a radical fashion, you can understand Peter and Mary and the beloved disciples' skepticism, their doubt. When your mind has no category for what's happened, it's forced to think inside the box, for example.

Preaching professor David Lose puts it like this - *"One of the common elements of the resurrection stories across the gospels is that no one expects the resurrection. Even though Jesus predicted His death...and resurrection...several times across His ministry, no one greets the news that God has raised Jesus from the grave and defeated death and the devil by saying, 'Praise God!' No one shouts 'Hallelujah' when they hear that their friend and Lord has been raised to life. And absolutely no one, upon hearing the news that death itself could not hold the Lord of Glory captive, says, 'I knew it - just like He said!'"* In fact, John's Gospel records that all of the apostles and disciples that arrived at the tomb that Sunday morning returned home, likely scratching their heads. Did Pilate remove the body? Did someone else, Simon of Cyrene perhaps wish to deny the Romans their final justice. Peter and the rest of the disciples were likely trying to figure out what in the world of human possibilities could have come of Jesus. Completely absent from their minds was the possibility of the Resurrection. It was so far removed what the realm of normal, everyday human events that it didn't even cross their minds. *They just couldn't fathom it.* Can we blame them? If I truthful about it, sometimes the implications of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ are daunting, even for me. So, what are the implications for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ? What does it mean other than an occasion to wear bonnets and find eggs with candy? Well, the first thing it does is change the relationship we have with suffering.

Y'all it's amazing I'm still married. You see, when Ben was about to be born, Natalie and I were waiting with her in labor at the hospital at like 3am in the morning. As they were attending to Natalie, an emergency pregnancy came in, like some woman gave birth in the parking lot but it left Natalie and I unattended for some time. I was, of course, freaked out but Natalie was in labor. Then, something I'd heard once in a seminary class came to mind and I thought it was just the perfect thing to say to Natalie. So, I put on my most compassionate face and said, "Natalie, contemplate the sufferings of Christ." Like I said, it's amazing I'm still married, or alive for that matter.

Even though my timing was horrible, my theology was correct. One of the most significant things that the Resurrection does for us is that it redeems suffering. Through the power of God, Jesus' suffering was transformed into new life, for Him, for all who believe. It means that suffering isn't sometime of disconnected misery. That it can and does have meaning. But, best of all, it can bring about positive change.

As I reflect on my life, it was the period of time following the unexpected death of my sister that was probably the most suffering-filled time of my life. Believe me when I tell you, neither me nor any member of my family would like to travel back to those difficult days. But even as we went through them, we knew something. As scripture reminds us and Jesus makes clear to us, Psalm 30:5b - *"Weeping lasts but for the night, joy comes in the morning."*

The Resurrection is a game changer in that it radically demonstrates the truth of something the Bible goes to great lengths to assure us of – that all things are possible with God.

In our Bible study on Sunday night, we've been learning more about David. David's defeat of Goliath serves as a foreshadowing of Jesus victory over the power and hold of death. What was once thought to be an undefeatable juggernaut is brought low by the power of God. What are the areas in your life where you think victory isn't possible? Could it be an illness, a job situation, your weight even? By the power of God, these changes are possible.

I met Crandall doing prison ministry in Kairos. When I first met him, Crandall was most concerned about getting out and seeing whether or not he could eat a buzzard. No kidding, that was his goal. To kill and see if he could cook and eat a buzzard. Not exactly an auspicious goal. But over the course of the Weekend walk, something happened – Crandall met the Lord. He was transformed that weekend. Crandall is now a happily married father of three living life free of the drugs which led him to jail and free of the desire to see whether or not he can eat a buzzard. But I gotta tell you, I'll bet there were a lot of people betting against Crandall. They were wrong.

But here, on an Easter morning, we gather to be reminded that such fears and worries are without merit. Here, on Easter morning, we recall that computers and copiers and even the forward pass in football pale so greatly in comparison to the game changer of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that they hardly should bear mention in its stead. Days will come where even though other technological advances will make those things we prize so much seem archaic in comparison to the latest and greatest and newest advancements that we gobble up presently in the labs of Google and Apple and Microsoft. But no matter how cool those things are or may be, one advancement will never be overshadowed. *One game-changer in the history of the world will never be diminished in its importance not only to ourselves but to the entire world.*

That is the event we celebrate on Easter Morning. That on a Sunday morning, just like today, God displayed to the world His deep and amazing love for us in the most spectacular way. Jesus Christ, His life bled away at Calvary. Dead to the world on a Roman Cross by three pm just a few days prior, emerges from the tomb in His glorified body. In the days prior to his Ascension into heaven, Jesus talks with His disciples, breaks bread with them, even shows Himself to be a capable fireside cook for his apostles in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. Death cannot hold Him for the Lord our God through the Holy Spirit has power and ability even to nullify death itself. Perhaps Saint puts it most clearly in First Corinthians – “*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We're victors, not just today but every day. And in that victory, we need not fear while we live nor fret over what will become of us after we die. In Christ's victory in emerging from the tomb, our Lord shares with us freely through Grace, His love and His providence. Friends, we need not worry over good deeds left undone or the bad deeds we've done with only passing concern for God or others. For we believe that Jesus Christ has atoned for our sins on the Cross, redeemed us from eternal death in the Resurrection and prepared a place for us in that eternal Kingdom that waits for us at the end of the age through His Ascension into heaven. When that glorious day comes, when the trumpet sounds and the archangels call is heard around the world we will be raised into new life. We'll be given resurrected, imperishable bodies to enjoy communion with God and all the other faithful forever and ever. And that, my friends, changes everything. It's a game changer of the ultimate dimension. Far more so than the latest iPhone contraption. You see, the game of life with its rigid rules of conduct and the hardness of heart which lays at the bottom of it need no longer restrain us.

We can be those people who care enough to tend to the sick. We can be those people who fearlessly walk into prisons proclaiming the Gospel. We can even tread into those places inhospitable to the Gospel, carrying that Good News of Jesus Christ even where the forces of evil stand resolutely opposed to its reception. *In short, the Resurrection means that we can be those people God created us to be for we no longer fear the death of our bodies, but rest confidently that we will live forever, glorified as Christ was glorified emerging from the tomb.*

Resurrection means we can be more generous, more loving, more kind, more hospitable, more of everything good this world has to offer because at the end of the day we look forward the never-ending Kingdom has in store for us. Resurrection, in other words, throws off the balance, upsets the apple cart, and generally turns our

neat and orderly lives totally out of whack. But it does so in a good way. We may struggle with the implications and changes Christ's rising from the dead contains for us, the earliest disciples surely did. It can't be overlooked that the earliest disciples and gospels viewed the Resurrection with a fair degree of skepticism. But the more closely that followed Jesus, the more and more they found their lives being changed.

The same is absolutely true for us. The more closely we follow Him, our lives, more and more will reflect His light to a world shrouded in darkness. The more ardently we try His way of doing things instead of our own, the fuller our lives will be because we'll be surrounded not only by His love, but also by the love of the people whose lives we change for the better, forever. Christ emerged from the tomb over two thousand years ago rising from the grave even to the disbelief of His closest friends and disciples. But over time, their lives were changed forever and ever by Him.

May we be that same kind of people, many years removed from the first believers. Days may come and with them doubts about the absurdity of it all. But the closer we follow Jesus, the more we believe and the more we believe, the more we'll live life as it's meant to be living. We'll glorify God more and more so that the name of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ might resound in everyone ears, leading them all in the power of the Holy Spirit into eternal life.

Resurrection, dear friends, is and always will be, the ultimate game changer. Believe in in your heart and confess it with your lips and *you will be saved*; from worry, from dearth, from hunger and, ultimately, from death itself. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. Even though we die we live and everyone who lives and believes in Him will never die.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.