

## INTRODUCTION

Easter is a special experience in every church. I was told this story by a Methodist Pastor friend of mine who claims it really happened. It was Easter Sunday at a small Methodist Church in West Texas. To add to the pomp and dignity of the day, the small choir filed in from the back down the center aisle singing, “Low in the grave He lay...” This little church had a single furnace in the center aisle that had a metal grate covering it. Fortunately it wasn’t being used that spring day. Because as one of the ladies passed the furnace grate, one the ladies got one of her high heels stuck in the grate. But she was a quick thinker, so she just simply stepped out of her shoe and kept on walking. A few members behind her was a quick-thinking man, who reached down to retrieve her shoe. But when he picked up her shoe, the entire grate came up as he walked forward. Unfortunately, the guy behind him had his nose in his music, and when he stepped where the grate had been, he disappeared into the furnace. The choir finished singing “Hallelujah, Christ Arose.” There was a moment of awkward silence until the man in the furnace, whose only injury was to his pride, shouted, “If the song is over I’m coming out now.” And right on cue, a little girl who hadn’t seen what happened shouted, “Hallelujah, Jesus, come on out!”

I’ve been pastoring for about forty years, so I’ve preached at least forty Easter messages, but I never get tired or talking about the Resurrection. And today I’m using a text from Revelation that I’ve never used on Easter before. Before we read it, let me give you the context. Tradition tells us that all the other original disciples had died martyr’s deaths. The Apostle John is an old man. Tertullian writes that John was placed in a cauldron of boiling oil by the order of the Emperor Domitian. But John survived this execution attempt. He was exiled to a small island in the Mediterranean called Patmos. While John is there, God gives him a vision that we call the Book of Revelation. And in the first chapter, John is praying on the Lord’s Day when he hears a loud voice behind him. John turned around and saw Jesus, but he didn’t recognize Him. This wasn’t the earthly Jesus with the long hair, robe, and sandals. This was the glorified Christ. His hair was whiter than snow, and his eyes were flashing fire. His face was shining like a million suns. So what do you think John did? He did the same thing we’d do. Let’s read about it. “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.’” (Revelation 1:17-18)

To the world, the death of Jesus seemed like a terrible setback. But in His resurrection, Jesus accomplished the greatest comeback in history. In fact In November of 2001, *Sports Illustrated* was focused on the World Series in which the Arizona Diamondbacks had come back from being down to the New York Yankees and won the final game with a walk-off homer. That same *Sports Illustrated* issue also noted the ten greatest comebacks of history. They called it Bouncing Back Big-Time. They listed Elvis Pressley revived career, and even Michael Jordan returning to basketball after trying baseball. But their top “BOUNCE BACK” was, “Jesus Christ, 33 A.D. Defies critics and stuns the Romans with his resurrection.” For once, the mainstream media got it right!

But the Resurrection of Jesus is more than the greatest comeback of history. The fact that Jesus is alive today has a great impact on our lives. Let me share with you three Easter benefits we have because Jesus is alive.

## **1. BECAUSE HE LIVES I DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID**

When John fainted from fear, we read, "He placed his right hand on me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'" This world is a scary place. And it's getting scarier. Every time there's a terror attack in Paris, Brussels, or San Bernardino, we are reminded that there are evil people who are trying to make us live in a state of constant fear. In Luke 21:26 Jesus predicted, "People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world." But the constant message from God's Word is "Do not be afraid!" There will always be scary people and scary things in the world, but Jesus has told us to not let our hearts be troubled.

Fear is the opposite of faith, and you can't have fear and faith operating your life at the same time. You'll either walk in fear, or walk by faith. Fear can make you sick and do more damage than the thing you're afraid of.

The late Paul Harvey loved to tell the story of the Arkansas farmer who kept losing hens to a nocturnal predator. He suspected it was a fox; so one night he left his loaded shotgun beside his bed. When he heard a commotion in the henhouse, he jumped out of bed and wearing only his nightshirt, grabbed his shotgun. As he approached the dark henhouse, fear began to take over. He began to worry, "What if this fox is rabid and it bites me before I can kill it? Or what if it's not a fox, but a wildcat?" He was literally shaking with fear as he approached the henhouse. He paused to listen. At that very moment, his trusty hound dog, Blue, crept up silently behind his master and decided to show his affection. Old blue stuck his nose under the nightshirt and "cold nosed" the farmer. "KABLAM!" Thirty hens lost their lives that night. Paul Harvey used to say, "It wasn't the shotgun that killed them...it was fear."

So what are you afraid of today? God has a word just for you. For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, "Do not fear; I will help you." (Isaiah 41:13)

You don't have to be afraid because He has promised He will never leave you or forsake you. God notices when a tiny sparrow falls to the ground, and He knows about all the details and needs of your life. You may not always be aware of His presence, but He is with you.

I once read a story about a tribe of Native Americans with a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Before that night, he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. One particular young man was blindfolded and led many miles into the wilderness. He was instructed not to remove the blindfold for an hour. On this particular night, dark clouds obscured the moon and stars, and when he removed the blindfold all he could see was utter darkness. Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. He spent a terrifying night on the edge of panic, but he didn't leave. After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight began to lighten the eastern sky. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the

path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing beside a tree just a few yards away, armed with a longbow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long. If the young man had known his father was there, he could have slept in peace instead of being terrified at every sound. And that's why you should be able to let go of your fears.

Say, how do you spell fear? Zig Ziglar used to say there are two ways to spell fear: Forget Everything and Run; or Face Everything and Rise. The choice is yours.

Would you care to guess how many times God says, "Do not be afraid?" I'm going to give you the answer, so you might want to write it down. How many times does God say, "Do not be afraid?" Maybe you thought I was going to give you a number, I'm going to give you something better than a number. Here's the answer: God says "Do not be afraid every time you are afraid."

Because He lives, you don't have to be afraid!

## 2. BECAUSE HE LIVES I CAN LIVE FOREVER

Jesus said, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever!" Most people think there is an afterlife, but they have the wrong idea about how to go to heaven. If you ask the average person on the street how to go to heaven, they're answer is probably going to be something like, "Be good, or do good." They think that if you do more good things than bad things that God will let you into heaven. But the problem with that is that God requires absolute perfection. He says, "The soul that sins, it shall surely die." If you have lived a perfect life, then you might have a chance of earning heaven. Anybody here qualify?

There are some things in life that you have to do perfectly. Take email addresses. If you miss one letter or character, it won't go to the correct recipient. You must enter the address perfectly or it won't work.

A businessman flew one cold winter from Chicago and landed in the warm weather of Miami. His wife was scheduled to fly down the next day. As he was checking in the hotel he used the lobby computer to send an email to his wife to let her know he had arrived. He didn't have his email contacts, so he tried to remember his wife's email address, but he got one of the letters wrong. Instead of sending it to his wife, he accidentally sent it to a pastor's wife in Kentucky, whose husband had died a few weeks before. When she read the email she fainted. The email said, "Dearest Wife, Just got checked in in. Everything is prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Your loving husband. P.S. It sure is hot down here!" Email addresses have to be perfect, but thankfully, you don't have to live a perfect life to go to heaven when you die. You just have to put your faith in the only perfect man who ever lived.

There was only one man who ever walked on this planet who was perfect. His name was Jesus. He was perfect in His birth, born of a virgin. He was perfect in His life. The Bible says He was tempted every way we are tempted, yet He never sinned. Can you imagine that? Think of the worst temptations imaginable—the temptations to steal, rob, lie, cheat, lust, or kill—He faced them all. Yet He resisted temptation 100% of his life. He was perfect in death. Even though He was innocent of any crime, He died the worst kind of death imaginable, the death of being nailed

to a cross. The Bible even says in Hebrews 2:10 that God made Jesus perfect through suffering.” As God, Jesus could have called down 72,000 angels to rescue Him from suffering, but He endured the cross, despising the shame. And Jesus was perfect in conquering the grave. He’s the only person in history to enter a tomb and walk out alive forever. A few weeks earlier, His friend Lazarus had been in a tomb for four days, and Jesus called him out, but Lazarus died again. Jesus is the only perfect victor over death.

A few days before the cross, Jesus said, “Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:19)

Jesus is the only man to conquer death. This world is littered with the graves of millions of people. You can travel to Medina and see the tomb of Mohammed. You can go to Sri Lanka and visit the Temple of the Tooth, where a tooth from the corpse of Buddha is enshrined. The pyramids in Egypt and the Taj Mahal in India are all just fancy tombs. I’ve stood in wonder as I gazed at the elaborate tombs of the Ming Emperors in China; each tomb taking up more than 100 acres. But when you visit a garden outside of Jerusalem, all you find is an empty tomb. Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb, because He knew He wouldn’t need it long!

Other religious leaders said, “Follow me and I’ll show you the truth.” Jesus said, “I AM the truth.” Other religious leaders said, “Follow me and I’ll show you the way to salvation.” But Jesus says, “I AM the way.” Other religious leaders say, “Follow me and I’ll lead you to enlightenment.” Jesus said, “I AM the light of the world.” Other religious teachers said, “Follow me and I’ll show you one of the doors to God.” Jesus said, “I AM the door.”

I recently heard a Muslim who had become a Christian share his testimony. He said, “I was looking at the lives of both Mohammed and Jesus. Then I came to a fork in the road. One led to death and a tomb in Medina. The other led to an empty tomb and a resurrection. I decided to follow the living way.”

When Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Communist Party who died in 1971, had fallen out of favor with some of the Communists in Russia, some of them did not want to bury his body in Russia. It is said they even asked President Nixon if Nikita Khrushchev could be buried on American soil. He said, “Absolutely not!” They asked several other countries and no country wanted to let Nikita Khrushchev be buried on their soil. They contacted Golda Meier, the Prime Minister of Israel, and she had a tremendous sense of humor. She said to the Russian official, “Sure, we’ll be glad for you to bury Nikita Khrushchev in Israel, but I must warn you, our nation has the highest resurrection rate of any nation on earth.” The Russians decided, “No, thanks. We won’t take a chance.”

No matter how far you’ve wandered from God in your past, it’s never too late to come to Christ and trust Him to give you eternal life. When I was growing up, Steve McQueen was one of my favorite actors. He starred in movies like “The Great Escape” and “The Magnificent Seven.” He was called the King of Cool. He lived a pretty rough life, and in his late forties he was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a rare form of lung cancer. Steve was befriended by a Christian who was his airplane mechanic and he shared the Gospel with Steve. Steve started attending his church and sitting alone in the balcony. At some point, he told his wife and friend that he had accepted

Christ, but he was struggling with the idea that someone as rotten as he was could truly have eternal life. He planned to visit Mexico for an experimental treatment, and asked his pastor if it would be possible to meet Billy Graham. This pastor called the Graham organization, and there was an opening in his schedule, so Billy Graham spent a couple of hours talking to him alone in the airport. Steve asked Dr. Graham how he could know for certain he could have eternal life. Billy said, “Because God doesn’t lie.” Then he opened his Bible and read Titus 1:2 which says, “This truth gives them confidence that they have eternal life, which God—who does not lie—promised them before the world began.” Steve asked for a pen to write that verse down, but instead, Billy Graham gave him his personal Bible. Steve traveled to Juarez to a clinic where he died four days later at age 50. When the attendants found his body, he was holding that Bible clutched to his chest. Steve McQueen’s wife still has the Bible and it is a cherished possession and a testimony that anyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ can have eternal life.

### **3. BECAUSE HE LIVES I KNOW HE’S IN CONTROL**

Jesus said, “I hold the keys of death and Hades.” An airliner made a really hard landing at DFW. The first officer turned to the captain and said, “That was the worst landing you’ve ever made!” The Captain said, “Me? I thought you were landing the plane.” It’s important for pilots to know who’s in control of the aircraft at all times.

And it’s important for us to know who is in control of the universe at all times. God is. This is called the Sovereignty of God. One of my favorite singers is Twila Paris. She has written a song entitled, “God is in control.” She sings, “History marches on; There is a bottom line drawn across the ages; Culture can make its plan, but the line never changes. No matter how the deceptions fly; There is one thing that has always been true. It will be true forever: God is in control. We believe that His children will not be forsaken.”

Here’s how God describes His unchanging plan. The Lord Almighty has sworn, “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen... This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations.” For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14:24, 26-27)

We are living in a crazy world – there are terrorist attacks, political attacks, oil prices are fluctuating. Things seem almost out of control. But they aren’t out of control. God is in control. As the song says, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” He’s not causing these crazy things to happen because God allows people to make choices—bad choices or good choices. But when you look at the big picture, God is controlling where His creation is going. He knows everything that will happen. As Corrie ten Boom used to say, “There is no panic in heaven, only plans.” One thing you’ll never hear God say is, “Uh Oh.”

What does it mean when it says Jesus has the keys of death and Hades? That means He’s in control. When you hold the keys to something you have ownership and authority over it. When you sign on the dotted line for that car, that’s when the salesman gives you the keys. Jesus signed the dotted line with His precious blood to pay the price for our sinful condition. You use keys to do two things—to lock up, or to unlock. Since Jesus is in control, one day He will throw the

devil and all his demons into a bottomless pit and they'll be locked up forever. He's in control. And Jesus has the grace and mercy to unlock the doors of heaven for all who trust Him. In fact, He doesn't just unlock the door of heaven; He is the door of heaven!

## **CONCLUSION**

“Because He lives, I don't have to be afraid! Because He lives, I can live forever! Because He lives, I know that He's in control!” I borrowed the title of this message from a song written by Gloria Gaither in the 1960s. Gloria has written that she and Bill were going through a very tough time in their family and church. She was expecting her third child and Bill was recovering from mono. They had been the targets of some vicious untrue accusations from some church members. It was a time of unrest in our nation with people rioting in the streets. The God-is-dead movement was picking up steam.

She wrote: “It was New Year's Eve that I sat alone in the darkness of our living room, thinking about the world and our country and Bill's discouragement and the family problems—and about our baby. Who in their right mind would bring a child into a world like this? I thought, ‘the world is so evil. What will happen to this child?’ I can't quite explain what happened at that moment, but suddenly I felt released from it all. The panic that had begun to build in me was dispelled by God's reassuring presence and peace. I knew I could have that baby and face the future with optimism and trust. The words to the song came easily after that.”

Let the words she wrote give you a sense of hope about your future: “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; Because He lives all fear is gone; Because I know who holds my future; And life IS worth the living, just because He lives!”

## OUTLINE

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes



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