

The Death Of Fear by Jeff Strite

Hebrews 2:14-2:15

OPEN: I'd like us to start out with a couple of powerful Resurrection Songs from the past. Join me as we sing:

"I know, I know, that Jesus liveth, and on earth and again shall stand
I know, I know that life He giveth, that grace and power are in His hand."

"I serve a risen savior; He's in the world today
I know that He is living, whatever men may say
I see His hand of mercy; I hear His voice of cheer
And just the time I need Him, He's always near.

CHORUS:

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me; He talks with me along life's narrow way
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart
You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian, lift up your voice and sing
Eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King
The hope of all who seek Him, the help of all who find
None other is so loving, so good and kind."

(Introduction to the Sermon)

When I was 5 years old, my grandfather died.
He was my favorite person in the whole world, and I was his favorite as well, But at 5 years old I didn't understand death. I just knew he was GONE and he wasn't coming back.

In those days, funerals were different than they are today. For example, the viewing was held in Grandpa's house and family and friends would pass by his casket in the living room and gather in the kitchen for refreshments.
And then when we gathered at the cemetery the grave wasn't covered like it is these days (to avoid having people fall in the hole). You could come right up to the grave itself and look right down into the place where the casket was to be lowered.

At 5 years old I knew that was where my grandfather's body was going to be buried. And my mother said I spent a great deal of time looking down into that hole. At one point, she said, I looked up at her and I asked a question only a 5 yr. old would ask:
"How is grandpa ever going to get out of there?"

I didn't understand.
I'd never seen anyone die before and it puzzled me.
In fact all of mankind has always been puzzled by death.

More than that, they've feared it.

- Aristotle called death the thing he feared most because "it appears to be the end of everything."
- Jean-Paul Sartre (an existentialist philosopher) said death "removes all meaning from life"

For men like them, death was the end of everything.

It was like walking into a dungeon and throwing away the key.

It was like being trapped in a room from which they'd never escape.

When they entered the grave... they weren't EVER going to get out of there.

But as a child, my folks had always taken me to church. And though I didn't know why I knew, I KNEW that grave wasn't going to hold him. I just couldn't figure out the how God would do it with all that dirt on top of grandpa.

How could I be so sure that grandpa would ever get out of the grave?

And, more than that, why would Christians believe so strongly in the idea of our resurrection?

- Well first, because promised it in the Bible.

It's a repeated theme throughout the Old Testament Scriptures that those who believed in and belonged to God do not have to fear death.

The song we sang at the beginning of this sermon was based on a passage out the book of Job:

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes— I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Job 19:25-27

In Hosea 13:14 God promised His people: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction!"

And the 23rd Psalm has these comforting words:

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the SHADOW OF DEATH, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

ILLUS: A few years ago, I'd be driving my kids down the road and as we approached a bridge they would hold their breath. I asked them why they were doing that, and they said that holding their breath would keep them from dying as they went under the bridge.

Now I thought that was "cute" at the time but then I read about a 19-year-old man who fainted while holding his breath (for the very same reason) as he drove through a tunnel northwest of Portland, Oregon causing a 3-car crash.

His car drifted across the center line and crashed head-on with a Ford Explorer. His car then bounced off the tunnel walls and collided with a pickup.

The 19 yr. old was cited for reckless driving, 4th-degree assault and 3 counts of reckless

endangerment.

(<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/man-holding-breath-in-oregon-tunnel-causes-three-car-crash/>)

What a silly superstition – to be so afraid of the darkness of the tunnel that he thought holding his breath would make him safer!

But the Bible tells us that it's just as silly for us to be afraid of the "shadow of death".

We don't have to be afraid of that shadow, because God has promised us that the grave can not hold us.

So, the Old Testament is filled with the belief in a resurrection,

And in the New Testament Jesus adds to these promises.

In John 5:24 Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

And in John 6:40 He said "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

And, of course, one of the most famous quotes in Scripture is found in John 3:16

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Now, of course, the question is this: Why would OUR hope of resurrection be tied to our believing in Jesus?

And the answer is: because He was the one who did it first.

As Revelation 1:5 says: Jesus Christ... (is) the firstborn from the dead..."

Now, granted, there had been others raised by the dead in Scripture, but each and every one of them would die again. Jesus rose from the dead... and never went back. He was the first that ever CONQUERED death.

But, how do I know Jesus rose from the dead?

Well – there's the empty grave.

(At this point I moved to one of the doors in our sanctuary)

For example, 500 years or so after Jesus walked the earth there was a man named Mohammed. He taught things that built a new religion and gathered many adherents to his faith. And then he died. He was buried in the city of Medina, and you can visit his grave to this day. In fact, millions of worshipers have done just that.

(Open door) If you were to go Medina today and look inside the place where his body was buried... guess what you'd find?

That's right – his body is still there.

(I began walking towards another door in the sanctuary)

About 500 years BEFORE Jesus was born, another man formed a religion. His name was Siddhartha – but we know him as Buddha. He taught a great many things, and gathered

many adherents. Eventually, of course, he died and they cremated him. But they did keep a tooth. It's stored in Sri Lanka in the Temple of the Tooth.

(Open door) If you were to go to Sri Lanka today and visited the Temple of the Tooth... guess what you'd find?

That's right – his tooth is still there.

(I began walking toward the stage)

No matter which founder of which religion you may want to name they're all in their graves. But not Jesus. If you were to visit the place where Jesus was buried (I opened the door to the baptistery) what do you think you'd find?

That's right... His body's not there.

It's gone.

He rose from the dead.

And that's how it's supposed to be.

Jesus repeatedly claimed He would rise from the dead.

In Matthew 16:21 we're told that "From (the time His disciples saw Jesus transfigured on the Mountain) Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

In fact, Jesus mentioned it so often, that the Jewish leaders went to Pilate and said: "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day.

Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

Matthew 27:63-64

Roman guards were placed at the tomb to make sure grave robbers didn't take the body. And Roman soldiers were not anyone to mess with.

They were the best fighters of their day.

Any grave robber would think twice before trying to get past them to get at the body of Christ. Roman soldiers were the equal of any mortal who would challenge them.

But how could Roman guards possibly stop God from stepping out of His own grave?

They couldn't.

They weren't prepared for that kind of power, and there was no way they could stop Him from rising from the dead.

But if Jesus HAD BEEN in the grave all the critics had to do was to furnish the body. The church began a mere 50 days after Christ's crucifixion. All their enemies needed to do was just show the corpse... and Peter and John and all the rest would have been shown to be liars, and this upstart religion would have been discredited before it began.

But they couldn't do that... because they didn't have the body.

He HAD risen from the dead.

And then... there's the witnesses

Apparently, there were skeptics back in the days of Paul, and so he wrote:

"...what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." I Corinthians 15:3-9

Essentially, Paul was saying: I saw Jesus.

And the Apostles saw Jesus.

But if you don't believe us... there are nearly 500 witnesses of His resurrection still living.

GO ASK ONE OF THEM!

The Biblical presentation of the evidence of Jesus' resurrection is so compelling, that it's even in our day, that evidence has been known to convert some of Scripture's harshest critics.

There was a man named Dr. Simon Greenleaf. He was a skeptic from Harvard law school who wrote 3 volumes on the laws of legal evidence, and mocked Christians in his law classes.

But he was challenged by Christian students to apply his own books to the resurrection of Jesus. So he did. He began to study the Scriptures and critique their statements according to legal evidence.

And guess what?

The evidence was so convincing, he became a believer.

He later wrote, "The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best established facts of history."

Then there were two men from Cambridge Dr. Benjamin Gilbert-West and Lord Littleton. They were so fed up with Christianity they wanted to destroy it.

So they took a leave of absence to study and write a book to refute both the resurrection and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

And guess what?

They couldn't discredit the witnesses of Scripture.

As a result of their study, they too became ardent believers and wrote:

"Reject not, until you have examined the evidence."

Another lawyer and engineer was Dr. Frank Morrison.

He liked Jesus well enough, but thought the resurrection was a myth that was tacked on later.

He, too, wanted to write a book to refute it.

But he couldn't.

In the process of writing his book, like the others, he committed his life to Christ.

He wrote about his struggles with his conscience in the book "Who Moved the Stone"?

So there are the witnesses - both past and present - who tell us they're convinced that Jesus rose from the dead.

So the promise of resurrection is given in the Old Testament.

It was given by Jesus.

It was attested to by witnesses.

And it has converted even the harshest of critics.

But there's one more evidence for us... two powerful images Christ left for us.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He met with His disciples in an upper room and ate a meal with them and began what a tradition that we now observe every Sunday: the Lord's Supper. When Paul wrote about Communion, he explained that "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." I Corinthians 11:26

And I always thought that was a bit odd.

To think that communion focused almost entirely on the death of Christ... but not His resurrection. But as I began to think about this Sunday's sermon, I began to realize that wasn't entirely true.

The meal that Jesus ate with His disciples the night He was betrayed was the Passover meal. When the Passover was first observed, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and God had sent Moses to them to confront Pharaoh and bring God's people out of their slavery. Part of the way God "convinced" Pharaoh and Egypt that it was a "good idea" for them to release the Israelites was through the 10 plagues.

The last of those plagues was the death of the firstborn of every household that did not have the blood of a spotless lamb painted on its doorposts and lintels. The people of Israel were commanded to slaughter an innocent spotless lamb, paint its blood on their doorposts and lintels... and to eat the meal that ever after would be known as the "Passover" because God had told His people, that when He saw the blood of the lamb on their homes... He would pass over their homes and death would not visit their families. And they were to eat their Passover meal dressed to leave the next day. Because on the next day they would be leaving the land of their slavery and entering into freedom.

A lamb died so that they might live.

Our lamb (Jesus Christ) died so that we might live.

A lamb died so that they might be freed from the fear of enslavement.

And our Lamb (Jesus, the Lamb of God) died so that we might be freed from the slavery of our fear of death.

Even in Communion, there is the message of freedom from the grave.

CLOSE: But now, one last thing.

Years ago, someone shared with me a test Psychologists sometimes use to help their patients deal with their fear of death. They tell them to imagine being in a white room, filled with white furniture. EVERYTHING is WHITE.

Then the patient is asked to describe how they feel. What emotions do they connect with

being in the totally white room?

And they found that many of their patients would speak of feelings of anxiety, fear... even terror.

Then the psychologist explains that the white room represents death

And how they feel about that room speaks to their fear of death.

With that thought in our minds, I want you to watch this video with me:

(At this point we showed a video called "Indeed" {<http://www.sermoncentral.com/church-media-preaching-sermons/sermon-video-illustrations/indeed-5680-detail.asp>}

The video shows a stark room with several men seated and not looking comfortable. In the background the song "I've got the joy, joy, joy, down in my heart" is sung in a minor key indicating sadness and anxiety.

On the screen there are several phrases to drive home what would happen if Jesus had not risen from the dead: "we are lost," "death is all", "sin remains", "hope is gone." For all appearances it is as if the men in this room are awaiting death. A hand appears off to the side indicating it is their time to go.

When the last man leaves this room, the next shot you see is of him stepping down into the waters of a baptistery and rising up with arms extended in victory in Christ.)

The imagery of baptism, speaks not only of death – a death of our past and of our sins – but also of the promise of resurrection. We go down into the water a dead soul, and rise from the waters to newness of life and the hope of a future.

Baptism not only is a promise that our past sins are buried in those waters

It's also a promise that when we die – the grave will not hold us.

That's the promise we find in I Corinthians 15

"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." I Corinthians 15:51-57

That's the message of Easter.

And that's the message of EVERY SUNDAY that we gather as believers.

It's the message that death has been conquered, that the grave no longer stings.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are filled with hope and expectation.

Because death no longer has power over us.

We will rise, because Jesus rose from the dead.