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What If Jesus Had Not Risen?

Easter 2002

1 Corinthians 15

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Years ago when Patti and I lived in California, someone came to us and said, “You know, there’s a place down the beach that says they have Chicago pizza. Do you want to go?” Well, I lived in Chicago three years, and while I was in Chicago I felt it necessary to do the “when in Rome...” thing. So I felt an obligation to figure out Chicago pizza. As soon as we were invited, I thought, *Yeah, this is great. Chicago pizza—there’s nothing quite like it!* So we went. It was down on the beach and, sure enough, the sign said “Chicago Pizza.” We went in and I had my game face on and I was ready, as it had been quite a while since I’d had Chicago pizza. We ordered it and waited and talked about it. And then they brought this “thing”—it was a piece of dough, and it had some sliced tomatoes on it and some cheese, and that was pretty much it. I thought it was a cracker for an appetizer or something. It was very disappointing. I felt obligated to inform the waitress, “This isn’t Chicago pizza; I don’t know what this is.” Only Californians would believe that thing they brought us was Chicago pizza.

I suppose if you had never had the real thing, that would do. But if you’ve ever tasted the real thing, a cheap substitute just will not do. And sometimes it’s hard to figure out what’s real and what’s the substitute. If you were to talk to most people, they would say they believe that what’s real is what they experience in this life. They think what’s “real” is what they know—what is here. But that isn’t necessarily true. Those people in California experienced what they thought was Chicago pizza. If you were to stop them and ask, “Do you like Chicago pizza?” they’d say, “Oh, we’ve tried it. It’s not very good.” But the reality is—they’ve never really even tried it. They just thought they did. So sometimes what we think is real isn’t necessarily so.

If you were to take a survey and ask people, “Do you believe that there is life after death...some type of heaven?” the overwhelming majority of people would say, “Yes.” Survey after survey puts that response somewhere in the 90th percentile. I would suggest to you, though, that most people don’t believe that. Because I think ultimately your core beliefs are manifested not by what you put on the survey, but by how you live. Core beliefs flow out of how we live day by day. And let’s face it, most people live for the here and now. They live for this world, as if this world is all there is. Look at how people spend their money and how people spend their time—how people order their priorities. And look at how, on a day-to-day basis, people focus their attention. There is no question, but the overwhelming majority of people live as if this life is all there is.

If this life is all there is, then we would say, “Go for the gusto. Live it up. Get all you can get. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” I would suggest to you that I think that is a great way to live. I think that’s the right way to live. As a matter of fact, I strongly encourage you to live that way...if Jesus is still in the grave. If Jesus is still in the grave, there is no life after death. So eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow you die.

Have you ever thought about all the implications if the reality was that Jesus is still in the grave and there is no life after death? Frederick Nietzsche was a German atheist who started the “God is dead movement” that was so popular in the middle part of the last century. Nietzsche believed that there is no God and all this religious God-talk was of our own making.

He declared that God is dead and started really going through the implications of how life would change if we would come to grips with that. But in his own journey, he began to understand more and more what it means that there is no God and how that affects daily life. And ultimately he could not process that. Frederick Nietzsche spent the last couple years of his life in and out of an insane asylum because he could not process life... if there is no God.

I spent a lot of time this week just trying to think what life would be like if Jesus were still in the grave and there is no life after death. I don't even know how basically to process life that way. I don't know how to think; I don't know how to live day-by-day if that's true. It undercuts everything I believe to be true. Life becomes like a lottery and one out of a million people happen to pull out a winning ticket. The rest of us don't have a winning ticket, and there's a word for that: "loser." You have one winner and you have a million losers. And in a crowd this size, between this auditorium and those in the Upper Room, it's very likely there would not be even one winner among us.

Do you know what a winner would be? A winner would be someone who has had life by the tail and everything has gone great, from beginning to the grave. But for most of us, that isn't how life is. Life is hard; it has peaks and valleys and you go through struggles and trials. But if Jesus is still in the grave and this life is all there is, how do you process those struggles and trials? The only answer is, "Sorry, you drew a losing ticket. You had a one-in-a-million shot and it wasn't you." So basically you lose in life.

A couple weeks ago I was in the hospital visiting a wife from this church, whose husband was in an accident some time ago, and she has been on a very difficult journey with him. He was back in the hospital and she was trying to process life and death decisions, because it was very uncertain which way he was going to go. But she was also facing the reality that even if he lives, what lies ahead is going to be very, very hard. And as I sat and talked to her and her two teenage daughters, if Jesus is in the grave and this life is all there is, what would I tell her? What do I tell her that makes even one day more worth living? What do I tell her that gives her even a slightest bit of hope? What do I tell her that can bring any comfort? I don't know what to tell her ... if Jesus is still in the grave.

If this life is all there is and Jesus is still in the grave, life has no meaning. Life has no purpose. There is no reason for character or virtue. There's no reason for compassion and lovingkindness. The ultimate virtue would be raw selfishness, survival—"get what you get because this is all that matters."

During the last year there was a period of time where, in just a couple of short months, I buried two teenagers and two children under the age of 8. When I look into the eyes of those grieving parents, what do I tell them, if this life is all there is and Jesus is still in the grave? What do I tell them? Do I say, "Sorry, you just drew a losing ticket; that's it. That's the way life is"?

A couple weeks ago I sat for several hours in the hospital while a friend of mine watched his dad die. What do I tell him? What do I tell him, if this life is all there is?

On 9/11 the terrorists attacked, and brave firemen and law enforcement people went into those buildings and they perished. We've been processing that as a nation now for several months. We call them heroes. But if this life is all there is, what was it all for? They were heroes, but they're dead ... and that's it... what's the point?

I was watching the history channel one evening this week and they were talking about the Battle of the Bulge during World War II. It was a terrible, terrible battle. They were talking about it and showing footage and interviewing survivors. At the end of the program, they were interviewing one of the officers and they asked him, “How would you like your fellow soldiers who died in that battle to be remembered?” He kind of fumbled around trying to find some words, and then he looked at the camera and started to cry. He said, “As I look at the world today, I’m not sure what they died for.”

If this life is all there is, I’m not sure what they died for either. It isn’t hard for me to understand why Nietzsche went insane because of what he believed. If this life is all there is, there’s no hope...there’s no meaning...there’s no purpose. What’s the point? I have no way to process the tragedies, the struggles, the trials, the difficulties of life. It’s nothing more than drawing a losing ticket...sorry.

Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 12: “Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised.” Paul is kind of going in a circle there; but what he says is that if there is no life after death, then Jesus is still in the grave. And if Jesus is still in the grave, then there is no life after death. If that’s true, what are the implications?

Verse 14: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain...” That word “vain” is a Greek word which means worthless. It’s empty; it’s just a bunch of hot air. Now, that kind of strikes me right where I live. But what Paul is saying is that if this life is all there is, and if Jesus is still in the grave, then a preacher has nothing to say. Let’s take all the preachers; let’s lock them up and be done with it.

The other thing Paul is saying is: If there is one preacher today who stands in the pulpit who does not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, he has nothing to say. He has nothing to say, and you waste your time if you listen. But not only is the preaching vain, but your faith is vain. That’s the next thing he says: Your faith is worthless. Everything that you believe, everything that you hold to, everything that you use to draw comfort is worthless. It’s make-believe. It’s nothing. Sigmund Freud said that there is no God and we invent religion just to make ourselves feel better. Paul says if that’s what your faith is, it’s worthless. It’s empty. It’s a waste of time.

When I was attending the University of Nebraska I had a professor say in class one day, “Religion is okay—just don’t take it seriously.” Paul disagrees with that. He says that’s a big waste of time. If Jesus is still in the grave—if this life is all there is—then faith is empty. It’s worthless; it’s a waste of your time.

He goes on in verse 15: “Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.” He says we are false witnesses; we’re liars. We’re deceivers. This is all a big scam. In fact, this is the most diabolical scam in the history of mankind. It’s called the church. It’s all fake; not any of it’s real. If that’s the case, then let’s close the doors. Let’s turn this into a mini-mall and let’s go fishing. Let’s go golfing. Let’s eat, drink and be merry. Let’s go after the things of this world. Let’s accumulate wealth and success, because that’s all that’s left. Let’s live it up...if Jesus is in the grave.

Verse 17: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” Have you ever found great relief in the fact that your sins are forgiven? No matter what you’ve done, you can be made clean. If Jesus is still in that grave, it’s not true. You’re still in your sin; you’re still in your guilt. You’re still in your shame. There’s no hope of forgiveness. Failure is final. You’ve blown it... that’s the way it is...sorry.

Verse 18: “Then those also who have fallen asleep {*meaning died*} in Christ have perished.” There is no life after death. They’re just gone. I’ve found over the years that when loved ones die people become very religious and very spiritual. People who otherwise live for this world and seem to believe that this world is all there is, suddenly become very concerned about life after death when a loved one dies. There’s something within us that drives us to think death cannot be the end: “Tell me that’s not the end; it can’t end in a box in the ground. There’s got to be more than that.” But if Jesus is still in the grave, then that’s it. That’s it—you die; it’s over. And what was it all for? What was it all about?

Verse 19: “If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied.” If all we’ve done is tried to add some religion to our lives in order to make this life better, Paul says we’re a pitiful people. We’ve been wasting our time. We should have been out there eating and drinking and making merry. We should have been out there going for the gusto. People ought to look at us with pity.

If Jesus is still in the grave and this life is all there is, I don’t even know how to think. I don’t know how to process. I don’t even know how to go about my daily life. It undercuts everything I believe. It isn’t hard for me to understand why Nietzsche went insane. Because life is absolutely meaningless and there’s no way to process that... if Jesus is still in the grave.

Thank God for verse 20: “But now Christ has been raised from the dead; the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” Jesus did rise from the dead, and because He did, there is life after death. There is a resurrection of the dead. Because the tomb is empty, everything radically changes. Life has meaning and purpose. There is a way by which we can process the trials and the struggles and the difficulties of life.

You say, “How do you know Jesus rose from the dead? I mean, isn’t this just kind of like the Bible’s version of stuff; and how do we really know it happened?” That’s a good question; and the answer is at the beginning of this chapter. Look back at verse 1: “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved.” Saved from what? Saved from a life of meaninglessness, a life with no purpose...saved from our sins... saved from condemnation and judgment...saved from eternal death ...saved!

Paul goes on in verse 2: “...if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Paul is talking about historical events. He’s not talking about some story he made up. Jesus was a historical person. He lived; He was crucified; He died. And Paul says He rose again. How do we know that’s true?

He goes on (v5): “He appeared to Cephas {*which is Peter*} ...” How do you explain how Peter was so radically transformed? Peter was such a coward that the night Jesus was

arrested he denied Jesus three times. And in a matter of a couple months, he was the dynamic leader of the New Testament church, standing before magistrates willing to die for his faith. Peter would live out that faith and he would die by being crucified upside down on a cross because he believed that Jesus rose from the dead. How do we explain that, other than Peter saw the risen Christ?

But it wasn't just Peter. Paul says he also appeared to the twelve. Peter was the bravest of the twelve. He followed Jesus farther than any of the others. They fled and they hid; and yet in just a matter of a couple months, they were dynamic leaders standing before magistrates willing to die. Every one of them, except one, would die a martyr's death because of his faith. To their death, they were affirming the resurrection of Jesus. How do we explain that, other than they witnessed the risen Christ and were convinced?

But there's more than that. Verse 6: "After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep." Paul is saying, "He appeared to more than 500 people at one time as the risen Christ, and most of them are still alive. If you don't believe it, you can go talk to them. There are 500 eyewitnesses who can affirm the truth!" You say, "Well, that's just the Bible. How do we know that Paul wasn't just making this up?"

The answer to this was written about 20 years after the death of Christ. There were thousands upon thousands of people who witnessed the life/death of Jesus. And there were over 500 witnesses at one time who witnessed the resurrected Christ. If this were not true, there were many people who could have said, "It's not true. He's still in the grave." Do you realize that in the first century there were thousands of people who wanted to stop the movement of Christianity? And Christianity hung on one truth, and that was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If one of those people could have demonstrated that Jesus is still in the grave, the movement would have ceased to exist. With all those people trying to find that one piece of evidence, why could no one find evidence that Jesus was still in the grave...other than the fact that the overwhelming evidence was that He had risen?

Twenty years after Jesus' death...that would be like me today writing about Ronald Reagan. What if I would write a document that said President Ronald Reagan was assassinated while he was in the White House? Do you suppose I could get people to believe that and start a whole movement built on that? There's no way, because there are far too many people who have lived in that era who would say, "I know that's not true."

The four Gospels and 1 Corinthians were all made available as historical documents and they could not be discredited. They could not be disproved. Because there were far too many witnesses who were able to stand up and say, "I know it's true. I was there."

You see, sometimes the skeptics convince us that we need to defend the resurrection. I think that's backwards. I think the overwhelming evidence of history supports the truth of the Scripture and the resurrection. It's up to them to prove otherwise. How do you explain how this movement, from Christ's resurrection to the present, has been built on a belief of the resurrected Christ if it didn't happen? Why didn't somebody produce a body? Why didn't someone stand up and say, "It's not true!"? Why was no one able to discredit the Gospels and 1 Corinthians? There is only one explanation: because it's true.

Because the resurrection is true, it radically changes everything. Life has meaning and purpose. I have a way to process the struggles and the trials and the tragedies of life. Our preaching is not empty and worthless. It's filled with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Your faith is not vain; it's not empty and worthless. It's your victory that overcomes the world. It's everything you hold dear that gives you a reason to live and a way to process life.

We're not deceivers. This isn't a scam. This is the truth. This is the Church. You're not still in your sins. God has granted you forgiveness—to be made clean and whole. When someone dies, that's not the end. It is simply the translation into the most magnificent life you could ever imagine. And we are not, of all people, most to be pitied. We are, of all people, most to be envied. Because we have discovered what's real. We've discovered what's true. The people to be pitied are those people who think that this life is where it's at—those people who think that this life is what's worth pouring their passions and their energies and their resources into. That's a pitiful way to live. Those most to be envied are those who have tasted that which is more real than anything this world has to offer.

When I sit down with that wife in that hospital room, knowing what she's going through is going to be very, very hard, I have something to say to her. I have something that can fill her heart with joy—that can bring peace to her life even though she's going through something very, very difficult. I can tell her that this life isn't heaven. It's not supposed to be. That she hasn't lost the lottery of life. That there is coming for her a life that is so wondrous and so magnificent she can't even begin to imagine. A life with no pain...a life with no sorrow...a life with no tears...where everyone will be made whole. And it's promised and guaranteed through Jesus Christ, if you believe.

When I sit with my friend who watches his father die, I have something to say to him. I have something that can put peace in his heart. I have something that puts a smile on his face, so he can walk out of that hospital with joy in his heart because this life is not the end.

When I look into the eyes of those parents who have just laid their child into the ground, I have something to say to them. I have something that puts joy in their heart. I have something to remind them that there is coming a day when they will be reunited in a place unlike this world offers.

Several years ago when we were living in Broken Bow, Patti and her sister and our girls all went to Montana where Patti's parents live. They were up there a week or two before I was going to go up and join them and take a couple weeks of vacation. So I remember the night I was waiting for Patti's brother-in-law to come up from Kansas to pick me up so we could head to Montana. And I had my vacation face on—I was packed and ready to check out for a couple of weeks! I decided to take a hot bath before he picked me up, just to kind of relax. So I started the water, but then somebody honked out front, so I went out front... and we talked and talked ... technically, I listened and listened. About an hour later, it dawned on me, *I think I started some bath water.* (Now given enough time, I'll figure these things out.) So I dashed back into the house and, sure enough, the water was flooded out into the living room, and I could hear it down in the basement. I ran down to the basement and it was coming through the floorboards and through any place it could leak. It was just a huge mess with water on the floor. Do you know what I did? I laughed. I just laughed.

Now, if that would have been the end of a long day, with another long day after that, and another long day after that, I probably wouldn't have laughed. I probably would have been

really irritated. But I had my vacation face on thinking, *My bags are packed—I'm out of here!* So I unplugged everything that needed to be unplugged and we headed for Montana. And quite frankly, I didn't care. I got to Montana ... and Patti cared! (But that's another story.) I didn't care. I mean, I was so locked into this vacation thing and getting out of there that I figured it would be dry when we got home.

You know, in many ways, that's how God calls us to live. When we realize that there's coming a life that is so much more real and dynamic and wondrous than anything this world has to offer, we can process the tragedies of life. We can process the struggles and the trials because we don't have to settle for this.

I don't have to settle for this, because this world isn't my home. I may have to go through some deep water, but I'm not going to settle for this. Because in my heart I know that I'm going to a better place. When that's where my heart is and that's where my passion is, and that's where my life is, then I'm able to process the things of this life. And I have to be honest with you, more days than not, I find myself very, very homesick. I want to go home. I'm tired of looking at people's eyes and seeing their pain. I'm tired of this world—I've had it up to here with it. I want to go home. I want to go home to a place with no more sorrow...and no more pain ...and no more suffering. You know what I'd like to do? I'd like to take you all with me—let's just go home.

You say, "That sounds kind of morbid." But it isn't morbid at all. It sets me free! It sets me free to let loose of the junk of this world—the stuff of this life that offers me nothing—and focus on that which is real and eternal. I can focus on that which lasts, and it gives me a reason to live. It fills my heart full of joy and it is what gives me hope.

That's what Easter is all about. Jesus arose from the dead that we could have life which is eternal. To those who are willing to believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, that he was buried and rose again, He offers salvation and forgiveness of sin. He offers a life with Him forever—to those who simply reach out and receive Him.

Do you know what the great thing is about the Easter message? The wonderful thing is that you can experience joy in your heart and you can have a smile on your face, regardless of your past, regardless of what you're going through right now, and regardless of what you may experience tomorrow. There's every reason for joy.

There is every reason to celebrate, because Jesus is alive! This world isn't all there is. We're headed to this most glorious place, and that's the ultimate reality. Never settle for a cheap imitation when God has offered you that which is real.

Father, we're thankful. We're thankful that the grave is empty. We're thankful that Jesus died on the cross, that we might know forgiveness of sin, that we might know an eternal relationship with you in a place too wondrous for us to even begin to conceive. Lord, thank you that we can go through the struggles and the trials and the difficulties of this life knowing we're headed to a better place. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.