



Series: Emmanuel – Celebrating God’s Gift to Us
Sermon: “Christ Is Risen”
Scripture: John 20:1-8
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Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church
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So is anybody confused? We have singing Christmas songs, we have been listening to Christmas music and then we hear an Easter text—is anybody confused? This season as we have been walking to Bethlehem, as we have been making our way to Christmas Day, we have been talking about the key events in the life of Jesus. We believe that the life of Jesus—His birth, His death, His resurrection—is the most important event in human history. And they are all connected—you cannot have one without the other. Jesus never talked about His death without promising the resurrection. And if it had not been for the resurrection of Jesus, we would never be remembering His birth.

Two weeks ago, we talked about the incarnation—how God became flesh and dwelt among us. The language we used was “God moved into the neighborhood” at Jesus’ birth. Last week, we talked about how we tried to evict Him out of the neighborhood by putting Jesus to death on the Cross. We talked about what the Cross means to us. Today, we remember that the resurrection of Jesus shows us that God refuses to go back home. Once God moved into the neighborhood, He would not be evicted. He is here to give us life. This event is central to the preaching and teaching and life of Christ-followers from the very beginning. In Romans chapter nine, verse ten, it tells us that if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, and we believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead, then we will be saved. Today—on Christmas Sunday—we want to take a look at the resurrection.

So let me begin the way I have started all of these messages by asking you the question: what really matters in your life? When you take a look at your calendar or your day-timer, or your credit card receipts or your checkbook ledger—as you daydream and plan, as you consider all the ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’, the ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’—all of the things that clamor for your attention—what really counts? What really makes a difference in who you are and who you are becoming?

I share this story with you with permission...after last Sunday’s message, I was talking with a member of the congregation who said he was having a hard time answering those questions at the beginning of each sermon. I asked, “Why?” and he said, “Well, because I live in fear...all the time.” I said, “What are you afraid of?” He said, “I am afraid of death—not only for me, but for all of the people that I love. I am crippled by death.” It reminded me that sometimes we get stuck in thinking about life because we are crippled by our fear death—whether it is our own or someone else’s. I want to tell you that this fear of death is something that our faith can deal with—our faith can speak to some of this so we can get on with living. So I want to spend some time talking about this.

How do you feel about death? I know some of us don’t wake up in the morning thinking about this; but I want you to think about this—how do you approach this? Do you see it as an end—or as a beginning? There have been times in my life when I have been reading the Greek classics. And there is a story in Greek mythology about a man named Oedipus who was traveling on the road to Thebes. On this road, there was a very dangerous mountain pass and Greek mythology says that a Sphinx was

on that road—a mythical figure that was part lion, part human. And that Sphinx would ask anyone who passed by a riddle, and that riddle was this: what creature walks on four legs in the morning, and on two legs in the daytime and on three legs in the evening. For years, no one could solve the riddle and the Sphinx would throw them over the cliff to their death.

Until one day, Oedipus—our hero—came walking along the road. And the Sphinx came down and stood before him on the path and asked Oedipus his tried and true riddle. Oedipus looked at him and replied, “Why, it’s a human being who walks on four legs in the morning when they crawl around, and two legs as they walk around in the afternoon of their life, and they walk with a cane in the evening.” In that moment, the Sphinx was so terrorized that it threw itself over the cliff to its death; and the road to Thebes was safe to pass from that point on because of the hero, Oedipus.

Now, we know that is a mythological story—but I want you to know that we do have a Hero when it comes to solving the riddle of death—and our Hero is Jesus. He has solved the riddle of death for all those who place their trust in him. And that trust starts in our belief in the resurrection. What do you believe about the resurrection?

In the Scripture text, there are four different approaches to the resurrection: the first one is the approach that Mary took. In the first verse, in John chapter twenty, we find Mary up early in the morning—before dawn—making her way into the graveyard. She comes to the tomb, and the Bible tells us that she SAW that the stone had been rolled away. The word that is used for the word ‘saw’ in the Greek language is very specific—it literally meant that she perused the scene. She was just looking at what was going on and saw the big items in the picture there, but she did not do anything to try to interpret what it meant. She did, however, jump to a conclusion as it tells us in verse two, “She ran back to tell the others that they had stolen the body.”

She missed the miracle—she missed the most important part—Mary was ‘short-sighted.’ It reminds of a person who is following a treasure map with clues—or on ‘The Amazing Race’—and they stop a little bit short of where ‘X’ marks the spot and miss the entirety of what is going on. Sometimes we are like that, are we not? Do you have a ‘short-sighted faith?’ Have you taken a look at the big picture and jumped to a quick conclusion and missed out on the fullness of the goodness that God has for you in your life?

There is a second approach to the resurrection in this passage—it is the disciple that Jesus loved (we know that this is John). In verse three, it tells us that he and Peter heard the news from Mary and started out for the tomb. Verse four tells us that they were in a foot race. Now I surmise that John was younger and in better shape than Simon Peter because he leaves him in the dust and arrives at the empty tomb first. Verse five tells us that he bent down and looked in, and he saw the linen wrappings lying there—but he did not go in. The word ‘saw’ in this passage is different than that of the first passage—this word literally meant that he observed from a distance. He was assessing the data, he was pondering what it meant—over and over again. John was ‘far-sighted.’ He could not see the forest for the trees.

Reminds me of a boy who was watching a circus through a hole in the big-top tent. Could he see inside? Yes. Could he see the whole circus with all of its majesty? No. His eyesight was limited by his distance from the event. Do you have a ‘far-sighted faith?’ Have you come close—but not quite close enough—to focus on Jesus and figure it out and get the big picture of what is going on?

There is a third view of the resurrection in this passage as well—it is the view of Peter. In verses six and seven, Peter arrives. We know enough about Peter that I want to tell you what I think is going on. Peter is a little older and in worse shape than John, but he is too proud to stop and catch his breath along the way. So he keeps running up the hill to the graveside. He sees John outside, but he cannot quite stop himself at the entrance so he slides all the way in—I envision him sitting there sucking wind, looking around, seeing what is going on. The verse tells us that he ‘saw’—again a different word in the Greek—the linen wrappings lying on one side and the cloth that had been around Jesus’ head folded up and set across the tomb in a place by itself. This word ‘saw’ meant that he was carefully analyzing the facts, he was assessing the situation, he was trying to figure out the puzzle of information that he was observing—but he could not see it. Peter was ‘near-sighted.’ He was so close that he could not figure out the details. He could observe all the facts, but he missed seeing the miracle.

Reminds of the young boy that received a telescope for Christmas—just what he wanted. He opened it up, read all of the instructions, learned all the principles of optics, how it was supposed work, how to take it apart and put it back together again—but he never got around to using it to look at the stars. He had all of the information about how it worked, but he never used it. Do you have a ‘near-sighted faith?’ Have you been on an information quest trying to figure out all you can about what God has done? Are you gathering information? Are you learning all about God, but you are learning so much that you missed putting Him in the place of greatest importance in your life?

There is a fourth view of the resurrection—John gets a second chance—just like the rest of us. In verse eight, it tells us that he went inside; and he saw and believed. This is the fourth time in these eight verses that a different word for ‘saw’ is used. This literally means that what he had seen with his eyes began to click in his heart. Reminds me of a high school geometry teacher I had—the first month of that class was awful. I could not remember a thing. He would stand at the blackboard all day, drawing these figures and formulas, and he would try to explain them one by one. For about a month, I was lost. All of sudden—after he had explained something for the twentieth time—something clicked and I understood it. What had been rattling around in my head all of sudden began to make sense to me, and I was able to articulate it in a way that I understood it and knew it to be my own.

That is what happened in John’s life—something clicked. Something that he had seen with his eyes and thought about in his mind suddenly penetrated his heart and his soul. John received ‘faith-sight’—he was not short-sighted like Mary, he was not far-sighted anymore, he was not near-sighted like Peter—all of a sudden, everything came into focus. You see, the good news of Jesus came into 20-20 focus in his life. Here is my question: do you have ‘faith-sight?’ I am not asking you to check your brain at the door—I am just asking you to find yourself in the story: which one of these four best describes you? Are you short-sighted? Are you far-sighted? Are you near-sighted? As soon as John received faith-sight, he went and told Peter—and he got it, too. And then he went and told Mary—and she got it, too. By the end of the day, everyone who had been following Jesus had the same faith. Just ask God to simply allow you to see and believe—allow the Spirit of God to open your mind and penetrate your heart and to change your life. Will you let Him do that? Will you give yourself the best Christmas gift ever?

A lot of us get stuck right here because we are afraid. I find that we are afraid of two things: we are afraid of losing control, and we are still afraid of death. I recently read

a book called *Mixed Blessings* by a preacher and author named Barbara Brown Taylor; and in the book, she tells a story about a friend of hers who had gone through a terrible summer in which he lost four of his closest friends—all believers, all in their forties—who died of strange means. One had a cerebral hemorrhage, one had a heart attack, one was hit with lightning while fishing with his family, and the last one was killed in an automobile accident. As you can imagine, this guy's world was rocked. And he began to doubt everything that he knew to be true.

And as she was talking with him about what he was experiencing, he remembered a story from his childhood that helped him. He remembered that on a hot summer afternoon in a southern town, he would sneak off with some of the other boys down by the riverside. They had a rope strung over a branch on a tree, and the older boys would swing out on that rope over the stream and let go. They would drop under the surface of the water; and ten yards later pop up with the quick current, they would laugh and run back and do it all over again. The man telling the story would always want to do it, but he was afraid—he could not stand to let go and lose control. Finally, one day he decided he was going to try it—after all, his friends had all been telling him to come in, the water is fine. “It’s going to be great—you’re going to love it!” He kept listening to their witness. Finally, he took his place on the rope and went running toward the shore and leapt off and swung over the stream, and he willed his hands to let go—but they would not let go of that rope. And there he was hanging out over the water like a dope on a rope.

They finally pulled him back in, and he kept watching his friends over and over again. He finally got to the place where he wanted to try it again. He finally did it—he ran, leapt, let go and dropped in the water. Ten yards later, he popped to the surface and swam to the side, and he enjoyed the fun that his friends were having all along. When he finally did it, it was because of his friends. This is what he said about it, “I watched each of them let go; and finally, I just made up my mind that if they could do it, I could do it, too. Without knowing what would happen, without knowing whether I would make it or not, or how it would turn out, I just opened my hands and let go—because I wanted to join those who had gone ahead of me.” He said that, as he remembered that episode, he remembered the faith with which they had lived and the faith with which they had died—and his was restored.

I know what you are thinking—it was easy for him to swing out on a rope because they kept swimming back to the shore and telling them what it was like...none of them came back to tell him what death was like. Here is where faith comes in—it all depends on whom you believe and if you believe it, but we have a Friend who has gone through death and come back to tell us what it was like—and His name is Jesus. And the Bible tells that, later in His life, after Jesus had laid down His life, and with much pain and anguish, He did not want to do this—just like you or me, because He was fully human—but the Bible tells us that later He came to His followers, and they said He had peace. They said that He said there was nothing to be afraid of. In essence, Jesus said, “Come on in...the water’s fine and you’re going to be okay.” It all depends on whom you believe and what you believe.

The resurrection changes everything—do you believe? Will you trust Jesus? The resurrection changes the way we look at death. The hopes and fears of all the years that were born in Jesus in Bethlehem that night became reality when He walked out of a tomb on Easter morning. It changed everything. It’s not the end—it’s a beginning. It’s not a tombstone—it’s a milestone. It’s not the end of the road—it’s a bend in the road. This is not all there is—there is more for us in Christ.

I read a story about a little girl in a little church in Iowa. Her church would gather

between Sunday School and Worship in the Sanctuary and would talk with one another about what they covered in Sunday School that day. The Sunday School Superintendent would always call on one person to give a summary of the lesson, and that person would share what they had learned, they would pray together and then they would go to Worship. One day, he called on a twelve year-old little girl who stood and spoke to her congregation. She said, "Our Sunday School lesson was about Enoch, and how Enoch walked with God." The verse was, "Enoch walked with God, and then he was no more because God took him." She said, "Enoch and God were best friends, and every morning Enoch walked through the community and God walked with him. Wherever Enoch went, God went because Enoch and God were really close."

Then she said, "Now about Enoch's death, here is how it happened: God and Enoch were out walking one day, and on their way to Enoch's house, it got dark. And God said to Enoch, 'I don't think we're going to get to your house before it gets dark.' And Enoch said to God, 'That's okay, we're closer to your house anyway. Let's just go and spend the night at your house.' So Enoch went to spend the night at God's house." Then she ended the story by saying this: "Enoch and God were so close that it didn't make any difference to either of them where they spent the night—at Enoch's house or God's house."

Let me tell you what I want for my life—at the end of my days, I want to be such good friends with God, that it won't matter whether I go to my house or His house. What about you? The resurrection changes the way we look at death—that is not all; the resurrection also changes the way we look at life. Jesus did not just come to get us into heaven. The primary importance of Jesus' resurrection is not our whereabouts after death—but rather what it says about where God is present now. The resurrection tells us that God is present now and dwells forever right here on the earth. He is not just standing at heaven's gate, waiting to welcome us home (which will surely happen to us)—He joins us in the here and now in the nitty-gritty real-life stuff in which we find ourselves. And He walks with us, and He sustains us.

Jesus said, "I came that you should have life and have it in super abundance." Jesus said, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you." The resurrection is good news not just because we get to go to be with Jesus when we die, but rather because the Risen Jesus has come to be with us while we live. And that changes everything. When He comes, He brings us love, joy and peace, meaning and purpose. He brings our lives into focus so that we can have faith-sight. He gives clarity to who we are and who we are becoming. And that changes our lives. And when He comes, He does not come alone—He brings the whole family with Him. He brings our brothers and sisters—those who look like us and those who do not. He brings the hungry and the thirsty, the naked and the lonely, the sick and the hurting, the broken and the mourning, and we begin to see them the way Jesus does—with faith-sight.

Where will you see Jesus this week? The goal of the resurrection is to reshape our lives as Christ-followers so that we can begin to live as Jesus lived, so that we can love like Jesus loved, that we can think like Jesus thought, so that we can speak like Jesus spoke, and that we can change the world like Jesus did—because Jesus is in the place of greatest importance and we live our lives in His presence and power and with His love.

I think you would have liked Bill Lapp. I met Bill in the last two years of his life, and he already had the perfect Santa Claus body. It had been carefully cultivated over years of overeating. Long before he knew God, he built his body; but when he met God and put Him in the place of greatest importance in his life, what happened

to Bill Lapp is nothing short of miraculous. He and his wife were not able to have children of their own. They had adopted a couple of girls; and not only did he care about the girls he adopted, he cared about any child. When he came to Jesus, he became the personification of Santa Claus to a whole generation of people in Erie, Pennsylvania, and he looked and spoke the part. He volunteered with a Boy Scout troop and helped thirty young men get their Eagle Scout awards. He would give things away to the poor, was always volunteering in their Emmaus-like community. He was a great guy.

On December 15 of that year, he was in an automobile accident—a minor accident—spent a couple of days in the hospital and they sent him home. Three days later, he felt well enough to drive to Virginia to see their youngest daughter and grandchildren. As they were driving, an artery that had been weakened by the accident ruptured in his heart and he died. We buried him on Christmas Eve in that church—and it was packed. There was not a seat to be found as people came to bear witness to the transformation that Jesus could make in one person's life. We listened to children tell how he made God's love real to them. We listened to Eagle Scouts tell how Bill would always tell them the truth. We sang the Christmas songs and we sang the Easter songs. What better time to bury a man that played Santa Claus than on Christmas Eve as we remembered the coming of the ultimate gift of Jesus. His life was an embodiment of the power of the resurrection, and we remembered.

I don't know what it is going to take for you to remember that this year—maybe it is a song that we will sing, maybe it is a prayer that we will pray, maybe it will be a sermon spoken or a card that you receive—but in the next two days, will you find yourself a place where you can just be still and come before God and allow Him to be in the place of greatest importance in your life.

That day at Bill's funeral, the church was packed, people were standing, they bore witness to his life, they bore testimony to the power of his faith; and at the end we sang Christmas carols that captured the power of the story of the resurrection in their last verse (almost every Christmas carol talks about that). And in the midst of great despair, I looked at his wife of fifty years, and she had hope—because Bill knew it was okay to go into the water and that it would be fine...and so did she. Will you allow the Spirit of God to give you faith-sight? Will you see and believe? Will you celebrate Emmanuel—God's gift to us? Will you put Jesus in the place of greatest importance?