

Isaiah 65: 17-25
Psalm 118: 19-24
Acts 10: 34-43
John 20: 1-18

Sermon for April 17, Easter Sunday, 2022

EASTER ASSURANCES

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Summary: Heaven exists. Love is victorious. Eternal Salvation.

Using the most commonly accepted timeline of his life, it was exactly one thousand nine hundred and ninety-two years ago today that Jesus rose from the grave. Assuming an average lifespan of seventy years, that means that it was only about twenty-seven lifetimes ago that Jesus was still walking among us. Thinking about it that way makes it seem not so long ago, doesn't it?

My own grandparents were born in the 1880's, well before World War One or even the Spanish-American War; their grandparents would have been born well before the Civil War, and their grandparents well below the revolutionary war. So only three grandparents back, and the United States of American didn't even exist. Isn't it funny how history seems to collapse down when you think of it in terms of lifetimes? Only twenty-four more of those lifetimes, and we're back before Jesus rose from the dead.

Christianity spread rapidly throughout Europe in the decades after Jesus rose from the dead. Literally within a single lifetime, almost everyone in Europe would at least have heard about Jesus, and how he had risen from the dead, and within three or four lifetimes after that, most people in Europe would have been a Christian. Since most of us sitting here probably trace at least some of our ancestry back to Europe, that means that if any of us were to climb down our family tree only twenty-three or four lifetimes, we would arrive back at an ancestor – or most probably a husband and wife – who left their pagan beliefs behind, and stepped into the family of Christ.

And why would they have done that? In all likelihood, they did it because they had heard, and come to believe, that Jesus rose from the dead. And why should that have mattered to them? Why should the fact that someone had risen from the dead ten years earlier, of fifty years earlier, or a couple of hundred years earlier...why should that have persuaded and motivated them to reorient their lives in such a profound way?

I'm going to suggest today that the reason the news that Jesus rose from the dead changed their lives, and the reason it continues to shape our own lives today, is because the fact that Jesus rose from the dead provided them and still provides us with certain assurances, and that it is those assurances that made their lives, with all their difficulties and hardships, worth living, and does the same for our lives today, with all our own difficulties and hardships.

The first assurance that Jesus rising from the dead provides is that Heaven exists.

During his lifetime, Jesus spoke on many occasions and in many different ways about Heaven, about this place where God lives, and where everything functions according to the will of God. That last phrase is important, so important that Jesus even inserted it into his special prayer: thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Other religions then and now have different theories about whether there is a life after death, and if so, what the nature of that life is. Some have denied the existence of an afterlife altogether, as atheism in all its varieties and disguises does today. Some have imagined it to be a sort of vague, shadowy place, devoid of life and energy and personality. Some think of it as a sort of pleasure garden, where every wish, no matter how debased, is instantly gratified. And there have been other theories as well.

And while he was conducting his ministry, what Jesus had to tell us about heaven, about life after death, might legitimately have been regarded as only a theory as well. That heaven exists, and exists as a place filled with the character of God, vibrant with joyful reverence for God and therefore joyfully and voluntarily obedient to God's will in all things...all that might have been considered only a theory, a flight of fancy on the part of an imaginative and charismatic young man from Nazareth.

That young man was executed by the Romans in the prime of his life, and if that had been the end of the story, then his teaching about heaven would have forever remained just another theory.

But that was not the end of the story. One thousand nine hundred and ninety-two years ago today, Jesus rose from the dead, and so we now know that the heaven he described exists. Because he lives, we know heaven exists. That is our first great Easter assurance.

The second is that over all defeat, over all disappointment, over all tragedy, over all seeming pain and sorrow and loss and regret, even over death itself, Love is victorious.

When Jesus rose in triumph from the tomb, he demonstrated not only that heaven exists, but that nothing can prevail against it. He demonstrated that the hardships of this life, no matter how overwhelming and unmanageable and devastating that can seem from our worldly perspective, are in heaven's reality as nothing when matched against the weight and authority of Heaven's ruling principle, which is Love.

St. Paul put the point this way in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

***31**What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32**He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? **33**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. **34**Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. **35**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?.....*

***37**Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. **38**For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, **39**nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Just think what that must have meant to those distant ancestors of yours who first heard about Christianity, perhaps from some travelling preacher, perhaps from a relative, perhaps from a neighbor at a wedding. What they heard was that what was really in control of their lives and their destinies, and their children's' lives and destinies, was not the Roman Empire with its great armies and heavy taxes; what was in control was not the catastrophes of nature or the brutalities of their political enemies; what was in control was not the cruel ravishment of disease or

the deprivations of poverty or the crushing and inevitable deterioration of their own bodies; what was in control was not even the necessity of death. What they heard from their teachers and neighbors and family was that something else, something deeper and richer and altogether glorious was in control. That love was in control.

Ah, that sounds so wonderful, your ancestor might have said, too wonderful to be true. How can I know it's true? Because Jesus lives, would have been the answer back then.

And it is the same question we ask today. And our answer today will only vary a little from then. Because one thousand nine hundred and ninety-two years ago, Jesus rose from the dead, will be our answer today. Because he lives, we know that love is victorious.

That is Easter's second great assurance for us.

And the third is in some ways the greatest assurance of all. When Jesus rose from the dead, he proved that God's heaven exists, he proved that the fundamental principle of God's heaven, Love, is victorious over all, and he proved the truth of what he had been teaching from the beginning, that the victory of heaven's love is everlasting for each and every one of us, that Love's salvation is eternal.

In many places and on many occasions during his ministry, Jesus offered the same assurance, but perhaps nowhere more beautifully than in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Let me remind you of part of it:

7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

9 Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

11 The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? 12 Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?"

13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.

But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

We can imagine another chapter in the life of this Samaritan woman. We can imagine she became pregnant that year by her current husband and they had a baby daughter. And we can imagine that when the daughter had reached a certain age, maybe six, on one early spring day her mother tells her about that wondrous day years before, and how it had completely changed her life, and led her to become a disciple of that young man, and to spread his teaching all around the neighboring villages.

“Mama,” the daughter might say, “I’ve heard other kids talking about this Jesus. But wasn’t he killed by the Romans not long after the time you’re telling me about now?.”

“Yes, he was,” her mother might say. “He was killed most cruelly. Just three days short of seven years ago today, in fact.”

“But Mama, if he was killed, if he’s dead, how can you believe what he said, about that water, about that everlasting life?”

“Because, my darling, exactly seven years ago today, he rose from the tomb. Because he lives, that’s how I know that I’ll live in heaven’s loving embrace forever, and so will you and all your friends. Because he lives. Because he still lives.”

The three great assurances we have from Easter are that heaven exists, that love is victorious, and that we have eternal salvation. And as a way of helping us to remember those assurances of that morning one thousand nine hundred and ninety-two years ago, I’ve drawn this little chart:

Heaven
Exists.

Love
Is
Victorious.
Eternal
Salvation.

And so our prayer for this Easter morning, Father, is that we remain always in awareness of the three great assurances given to all of us early one morning years ago when Your Son, Jesus, stepped forth from the tomb and became our Savior, Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray.