

Over the past few years, my wife and I have had the opportunity to travel some. It's quite a privilege. It's a combination of her work commitments to travel all over the world and my enjoyment of half-off vacations where her company foots most of the bill. It's taken us to places all across the world, and regardless of where we venture, there are typically two ways that we explore new cities.

First, we go to different coffee shops for obvious reasons, but secondly, we visit cathedrals. Because cathedrals have a way of being planted in old cities, with the town being built around them. It allows us to see the people of the area. One of the things we've noticed through this is whether it's the thousand-year-old transcendent architectural gem of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland, or whether it's the recently finished Antoni Gaudí project of 144 years with the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, I have found a few things to be remarkably similar.

First, like all great religious sites, they have largely transformed into a tourist attraction. You buy your ticket, you line up and wait for your visitation window, and you walk in with a crowd of people there to take in the splendor. But the second thing I've noticed is there's a familiar cast of characters. There's the reluctant skeptic, inevitably dragged there by someone else, who is waiting out the whole experience as a blip on the family vacation while they sit scrolling on their phones. There's the architectural appreciator, the one who wants nothing to do with religion, but can understand and appreciate the beauty of the architectural genius. They want to appreciate it only for what it is, not what all of those "religious fanatics" seem to make it.

There's the devoted disciple, who enters with reverence, sits quietly, prays, and tries to receive the space as an encounter with the living God. And there's the genuine pilgrim somewhere in between seeking and wondering, not sure what they believe, but they're open. They are thinking that maybe this is where they can encounter the living God and what it means for them.

Easter is the global celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. The high point of our Christian hope, and like those cathedrals, often Easter stands as that cathedral, a magnificent, meaning-laden moment in the church calendar. People approach it just like that, a typical crowd with different distances and expectations.

There are some of you in here who are reluctant and skeptical. You're putting up with the Jesus stuff; someone dragged you here, but it's really just a blip on your way to avocado toast and mimosas, and that is okay. I want you to hear that you may be a

bit more suspicious, but I'm grateful you're here, and I want you to know that you are so welcome, not just today, but anytime to bring all of the doubts, questions, and uncertainties. Thank you for being here.

There are still others among us. Devoted disciples who are here, and there's a deep, resounding sense of anticipation for this celebration. There's hope and joy brimming in your soul as you come to hear the words—He is risen. He is risen indeed. Others among us may be the genuine pilgrims or the architectural appreciators. Something resonates. You're here because there's something to this. You are so welcome.

Wherever you are coming from, and whatever story that brought you here, you are welcome here. Whatever the distance between us, there's some reason that you are present. So here's my proposal. We're all here looking at the cathedral of Easter. We're standing outside with tickets in hand, and whether you want to be here or you were dragged here, or whether you are coming exuberant, what if we just gave this story a fresh look? What if we walked in, admired its beauty, and considered that maybe, along with millions across the world, there could be something to this beautiful cathedral that we're about to step into.

Charles Taylor, the preeminent philosopher and sociologist, wrote this in his book, *Sources Of Self*. He says, "We...inescapably understand our lives in narrative form." His point is that it's not that we just prefer stories, it is that we cannot escape stories. You bring with you a story today, one that may put you in the reluctant skeptic or the devoted disciple or whatever it is, we all carry a story.

We live leaning forward with some understanding of how we make sense of reality. And I believe it is a story that shapes how we encounter something like Easter. Some of you are thinking, "Really, are we still entertaining fables of first-century peasants who came back from the dead. I'm not picking up what you're laying down." To put my cards fully on the table, I actually do believe that the story of the resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate today is, in fact, the decisive moment in all of human history. It's the story that's forever changed the trajectory of history.

I don't believe it because I bought the myth of some religious zealot or fanatic, where I had to set aside rationality. But I believe this story because of the multiple moments in my life where it intersects, and all the data points of reality seem to suggest that this resurrection story is true. What is the story you bring with you today? How do you make sense of reality? How do you make

sense of your own life? I want to investigate this story through two questions. What happened and what does it mean, which is the same way we evaluate any story.

This morning, we're going to allow the Apostle Paul to be our guide through the cathedral, showing us the ins and outs. Paul's an interesting person. Originally, he was deeply skeptical of Jesus. He was so skeptical that he murdered and killed Christians, trying to squelch the movement. But it was his life, intersecting with the resurrected Jesus, that transformed the trajectory of history, and he became the one who wrote the majority of the New Testament. He's probably as good a guide as any, and so why don't we walk with him through this cathedral of Easter?

What Happened?

If you have your Bible, turn to 1 Corinthians 15. We will begin with the question of what happened. One of the unique things about the Christian faith, compared to most other faith traditions, is that it traces its origins back to a definitive event. That is important because an event is simply something that happened, and because of that event, the world is now transformed. That's where Paul begins.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 1 Cor. 15:1-2

The word gospel is the Greek word *euangelion*, and it's where we get the word good news, because that's what it is. The gospel is a pronouncement of news, an event, a thing that happened in which all of history is now different. Paul continues, and here's where he now details that *euangelion*:

For 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 Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters 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. vv. 3-7

See, this is Paul's summary of the gospel. It's minimalist, it's stripped down. It's taken the key elements to its core. It's likely, scholars believe, that this was some early creed that became the anchor rallying cry of the early church. See, everything pivots around those complex events in which he says the Messiah died, was buried, was raised, and was seen. If you take any one of those elements away, the whole story collapses in on itself, but put in its proper place, the whole world is transformed by that story.

Did you notice that Paul said twice that this happened according to the scriptures? That's an important piece because this gospel, this *euangelion*, is one part of a much larger story. It's a story that begins at the very beginning of your Bible in Genesis, and it's in that where it begins from a totally different place than secularism. A totally different story from what the modern world professes. It's the story of creation and genesis. It's not about scientific beginnings. It's a book about the very character of the God who started this world.

It emerged at a time when there were many different stories of how the world came to be, and every other ancient creation myth spoke of creation as rising, not through an act of self-love, but through violence. Every other creation story was about a pantheon of gods who were at war with one another, and the victorious god, the one who slaughtered the rest, was the one who then created the world. At the center of those stories, it presupposes that the deepest part of God's character is power.

This story begins with something totally different. Genesis begins not with a war among the gods, but with showing that the deepest part of God's character is love. It's God, within this triune being, a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so consumed with love for one another, that they essentially said, what if we created a world out of that place similar to a husband and a wife who say, "What if we took a little bit of me and you and created a child, an expression of love?" That is where this story begins, an expression of the love of God. At the deepest part of the character of God is love.

Part one of the Bible is about that perfect love expressing itself in creation. It's the perfect love between God and his people. Between his people and creation and between creation and God. It says they were naked and unashamed, walking in the cool of the day with the Lord. It's the biblical concept of shalom, which we translate as peace, but it's much more than just the absence of conflict. It's utter harmony. Everything working in the way it's supposed to.

But as beautiful as that first scene in the story is, the second scene is equally tragic and familiar. The proto-humans, Adam and Eve, archetypal type figures in the story, seized autonomy from God and gave in to the age-old temptation that you and I face every single day. They would rather be God than submit to God. So, they seize autonomy, and the perfect love in chapters 1 and 2 is then corrupted. The perfect view of the self in a loving relationship with God is now replaced by insecurity, anxiety, and self-consciousness. All of that enters the story. The perfect union between people is replaced by perfecting pretending, self-interest, and self-obsession. The perfect union with God is replaced by hiding from God.

This is where the story begins, and that's what we call sin. Calling something sin gets a bad rap in our day and age, but sin is just

that moment in which we have steered away from God and said, "God, we're good. We'll take the reins of life."

What happens from that second page of the scriptures is that death enters the scene. Death and all of its friends. It isn't long into the story until brother is warring against brother, Cain and Abel, where the story spirals down into more and more violence and brokenness. That picture of love is utterly destroyed because you know what? Death comes like that, as an intrusion that was not the original part of the story. Death is an intrusion.

I can still see the fold-out tables in that crowded cafeteria when I was just a junior in high school in what seemed like an ordinary morning at school. I showed up eating French toast sticks, with the rest of the basketball team around me. We were dressed for game day, shirts and ties for all. But our coach gathered us together that day and gave us the news. Stephen died last night. Shocking. What? How Coach? He says that his dad came home in a rage, and Stephan stepped in front to protect his mom and the dad shot them both and then himself.

Death is an intrusion. A shockwave went through the whole team, each one of us trying to comprehend what we had just heard. It is the unthinkable. The once strong, popular students in the school were reduced to tears and uncertainty at the intrusion of death. It's hard; it's impossible to make sense of such a moment, the confusion and grief where you don't quite cry instantly because your emotions haven't caught up with reality.

Now, I was the only Christian on the team. I was the one who was elected as the token kid to pray before each game, even though I really didn't want to. But that was apparently what we did, so I was given that task. The whole team was trying to comprehend what they had just heard about our friend and teammate, Stephen, and they looked at me and said, "We don't know what to do with this. Why would this happen? Kevin, can you pray?"

I didn't have the words to speak. I didn't know what to say. What could anyone say? There's no way to make sense of that story. So, whatever came out of my mouth wasn't eloquent. I fumbled for words, choking back my own tears, trying to make sense of the senseless, and I don't remember anything that happened in that prayer. But all I do know is that in some way, I expressed that this isn't the way it's supposed to be, because death is an intrusion and it breaks into our world unexpectedly.

In just the past two weeks, I've attended two funerals. One for a 74-year-old man and another for a child, both tragic in their own right because death is always tragic. In each of these moments, I sat with families and listened to beautiful memories, stories, and tears—grief mixed with unthinkable loss. Here I am, 25 years since I was in high school, trying to give words to the death of Stephen, sitting there with grieving parents and family, uncertain of what to say. Somehow, I stumbled through the same words that I did back in high school. "This isn't the way it's

supposed to be." I'm still at a loss for words because death is an intrusion. It's always an intrusion.

What I find so striking between that story so many years ago and the stories I walked into this week is that there is something in our core that understands that it is not the way it's supposed to be. Believer or not, we all recognize when death knocks down the door of our life, it is not supposed to be there. We know intuitively that it's not the way it's supposed to be. Something has gone horribly wrong, and the consequences of both are of the broadest and most personal variety. It's as broad as genocide, war, hunger, and systemic injustice, and it's as personal as shame, loneliness, and the loss of a loved one.

Most modern people give very little thought to the inevitability of death. We pass our days under the illusion of immortality, and that works for most of the time, doesn't it? We can get by with that. But then you show up in a crowded cafeteria, and the coach delivers the news, or you sit in that doctor's office and hear the diagnosis, or you're faced with the disorienting reality of the intrusion of death. Death kicks down the door, and you have been confronted with the illusion of your immortality. It leaves behind all these questions.

So, at the risk of ruining your Easter this early in the day, can I confront you with the uncomfortable truth of which we spend the majority of our lives suppressing and ignoring? If you're honest with yourself, you know it lingers there. You are going to die, you are going to face death, and no matter what you've accomplished, no matter what you've accumulated, you can take none of it with you. It won't matter how many commas you have in your 401 (k). How many letters there are after your name, or how good you look with your shirt off, or what follows your name on LinkedIn, all of the accomplishments and accumulations that you've used to find your own security, none of it comes with you.

Are you ready to jump into that void? It was that question that haunted Leo Tolstoy and his short work, *A Confession*, which he details an existential crisis that he suffered later in life after he had achieved his literary brilliance, fame, and family. He culminates it with this question:

My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible...is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me? Leo Tolstov

He's asking if there is anything that survives death's reach? Is there anything that death does not destroy? Is there any meaning that pushes beyond the void? That is the exact place that Paul goes to next:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 1 Corinthians 15:13-19

See, Paul is brutally honest. He says, if it were not for Easter, if it were not for the resurrection, then all of it would be futile. His response to Tolstoy is that there is nothing. If the resurrection does not exist, there is nothing beyond what will be annihilated by death. C.S. Lewis said it a bit differently. He said, "Christianity if false is of no importance, but if true of infinite importance, the only thing it cannot be is moderately important." The claims of the Christian hope are too grand. They are too large; they're too all-encompassing for them to be anything but total idiocy or absolute and total truth.

Please don't forget that the morning when Jesus came out of the tomb, he was met not by those who were expecting it. Here's where we want to think it's so naive to still believe in this myth. The women who showed up that morning, that first Easter morning, brought spices. That's the equivalent of flowers to a graveside. They were grieving. They were expecting a dead body because that's what happened in the first century, too. Dead people stayed dead.

Don't succumb to the recency bias of the modern world that assumes that we are just enlightened people and now we realize dead people stay dead. No, they believed the same thing in the first century as they do today. And Lewis is right, the only thing that this gospel cannot be is moderately important. Sure, it is crazy. Infinitely life-altering. Absolutely. But to look at the story that we professed this morning and the reason you are here and to respond with the take it or leave it blase option with no relevance for our time, my friends, that's not an option. It cannot be moderately important because the claims are far too big.

What story do you tell to make sense of a moment like Stephen's death? What do you do? because you know that impending death is coming. Here's what is wild: death has a pretty good track record. It works 100 percent of the time unless there's something that transcends the grave.

What story do you tell? You can suppress it, but is it any less crazy than the claim that we make as Christians, that Jesus walked out of that tomb? Then, for you to look wide-eyed at the inevitability of your death and say, "Just another promotion will squash that

ache." Do we really believe that? Does that make sense of reality? "Live and let live, and then we'll just let it go." What if you were in that cafeteria? What do you say to that group of basketball players trying to make sense of life? In your gut, you know, it's not the way it's supposed to be.

So what happened? The event, resurrection, is Jesus defeating what Paul says later in verse 26, "The last enemy, it is death itself." Jesus, walking into the resurrection. Jesus destroying death itself. That is the event that took place. But now let's shift to what it means.

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 death, 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. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. vv. 51-58

Notice that Paul does not say that death has been eradicated. That's a mistake we often make when we think of resurrection. Paul doesn't say that. Paul says death has been swallowed up in victory. What does he mean by that? Well, to swallow something is to take it into your being and reorder its energy for your own purposes. To swallow something is to consume it, not to avoid it.

Let's use an example. Let's go to that avocado toast and mimosa that's waiting for you at Easter brunch. There are two ways to remove that from the plate on which it's served. You can pick it up and dump it in the trash, but you haven't actually done anything with it; you just relocated it. You could take it, sprinkle a little olive oil and maybe a little paprika on it, and swallow it bite by bite. What are you doing when you swallow that? You're taking its energy into you, and it's reordering and giving you life.

At the very heart of all creation, at every single meal you enjoy, you are practicing resurrection. Something died and landed on your plate, and it is giving you life? You practice resurrection at least three times a day. The two ways in which you can move that, you could just eschew it, and sometimes we think that this is what Paul's talking about. But no, death has been swallowed in victory.

The church fathers used to talk about death as being extinguished. That what Jesus did in the resurrection was pure life,

unfiltered, untainted in the person of Jesus entering into death itself. Then, when it's on the inside, just like light dissipates darkness, that life dissipates death. When pure life entered into the grave and came out the other side, it extinguished what Paul called the sting of death.

What is the sting of death? The word sting is the Greek word *kentron*, which means a point or sting. That's a good definition, but it is used uniquely as a poisonous sting. And that's important because it isn't the bite, which we typically think of as leading to death, it is the poison that's hidden in the bite. So when Paul makes this taunt at death itself, he's not saying that the bite is gone. He's saying the sting is gone. The poison itself has been removed.

The resurrection of Jesus is the antidote to the poisonous effects of sin. Without the resurrection, there is nothing other than the persistent sting of death. Without the resurrection, you are left in your grief. Without resurrection, there's no, "He's in a better place." "He's finally at rest." There's nothing without the resurrection. I'm stuck sitting at that table trying to stumble for words, and I am not allowed to say it's not the way it's supposed to be. Because that would be the way it's supposed to be. Without the resurrection, it all falls apart. Without the resurrection, it's just meaningless happenstance, all for naught. We can dress it up all we want, but if the resurrection did not happen, then death's sting remains fierce.

But what if there was a victory that swallowed death? What if the sting was removed? Frederick Mechner said it best. "Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing." Every single one of us comes in here with a story where we've experienced the worst thing. You've experienced the sting of death; you've brought whatever it is into your life. No one escapes without feeling the sting of sin and death. You can put it off for a time, but eventually death kicks in the door. Eventually, you find yourself in that cafeteria. Eventually, you find yourself sitting with people who are trying to understand the thing that is incomprehensible. They're asking the question you ask, they're asking the question I ask, why? How could this happen? What would you tell them? What story do you have to make sense of that?

The story of Easter stares death right in the eyes and professes that there's coming a day in which all of it is overturned. It's done away with. It's swallowed up in victory. It proclaims that there's coming a new reality, a new dawn. We stand on that story in confidence because Jesus' resurrection is what Paul describes right here in chapter 15 as the first fruits of the new creation.

That's an agrarian metaphor that we're not used to, but I spent about eight years in Napa, and I'm used to some of those images. What the first fruits means is that it is the first grape that breaks on the vine. That's a signpost of what's to come for everything else. When Paul says that the resurrection is the first fruit, he means that what is true of Jesus will one day be true of every

one of us. There is coming a day in which God is recreating, renewing, and redeeming all of this world as it all began.

It was ripped from the future and put right into the here and now. Jesus' resurrection was the signpost that says that what is true of Jesus will be true of every single one of us, all of creation will be reordered, redeemed, and restored. That's what's coming. But why? Because when Jesus carried that cross on his back, he was carrying more than just that cross. He was carrying the weight of all creation on his shoulders.

He was carrying the consequences of all human sin. He was pure life entering into death to extinguish it from the inside out. The divine human, Jesus, the Christ, entered in, experiencing all the heinousness of brokenness and sin to take it upon himself and usher in the reality of resurrection. The first fruits of all that was to come. Is that your story?

I want to leave you with this image. [It's Rembrandt's Raising Of The Cross](#). It might be a familiar one. It's stunning in its own right. It's a master work of light and shadow. It's the crucifixion with a raw, unflinching weight. But I'm guessing what your eye is inevitably drawn to is the striking historical inaccuracy right at the center. Has anyone noticed the man in a blue beret? I'm no historian, but they didn't wear blue berets in the first century, but you know where they did wear blue berets? It was pretty common attire in the 16th century in the Netherlands, where Rembrandt lived.

It wasn't an accidental oversight. Of course not. It was intentional. It was a self-portrait. Rembrandt looks at this scene and intentionally paints himself into the story because he understands himself as somehow complicit in the crucifixion. See, Rembrandt understood that this story is his story. That he, too, had some role in this, that he contributed to that brokenness. And so Rembrandt does the unthinkable and paints himself into the scene, not as a bystander watching from a safe distance, not as an appreciator of something beautiful in that religious moment from across the centuries, but he placed himself there with his hands on the cross present day. A complicit one of us.

The weight of that cross is the full accumulated consequences of all human wrongs, all of the hiding and pretending, and the seizing and the breaking; this is what Jesus carried up that hill. And the claim of the resurrection is that on the other side of that weight, on the other side of the worst thing, there was a love that could not be held down by death. A love that swallowed it whole. So it begs the question, is this a story? What do you tell yourself to make sense of death?

The resurrection of Jesus is the decisive response to every cry that's ever risen from the ruins, every how and why that echoes through every crowded cafeteria and every family sitting with grief. They could not name every person who stared into the

void and wondered like Tolstoy, "Is there any meaning that can transcend the inevitability of death?"

The resurrection answers definitively that he has risen. He has risen indeed. That is the hope that we hold this Easter morning. What you get to witness in a moment is people walking into these waters of baptism, professing, like Rembrandt, this story is their story. Because the way you join this story, the way you make sense of it is you simply align with him. You say that his death is also my death. What we see in baptism is a rehearsing of this story in which they enter the water symbolically being buried like Jesus and then resurrected out of the water to new life. That's what we celebrate in resurrection.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2026 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1500 FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, April 5, 2026 at Central Peninsula Church.

www.cpc.org