



## Because He Lives, You Can Face Tomorrow

Easter / SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

Sometimes in celebrating Easter we look back and focus on the past event of the resurrection. We want to prove that in fact it really did happen as a real event in history. That's important because we know that if it didn't happen the foundation of our faith collapses.

Or sometimes we focus on what the resurrection means for the future. We know that the resurrection gives us hope that there is life beyond the grave; that through our faith in Christ death won't have the last word in our lives.

Now both of those perspectives on Easter are important. But sometimes by focusing on the past or on the future we forget about the present. We forget to realize the difference the resurrection makes in our lives today.

Following an Easter service in 2003, a woman approached her pastor and asked, "So what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?"

The pastor said, "Well, he ascended into heaven and he's still alive."

"I know he was resurrected, but he's alive?" she said.

"Yes, he's alive."

"Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

For the next two weeks, she telephoned everyone she knew and said, "Jesus is alive! Did you know he's alive?!"

I want you to know that he didn't just rise from the dead, but he really is alive today. He's as alive as you and I are. He's as alive as your dog that runs up and licks you in the face when you walk in the door. He's as alive as the sun that shines on your face as you go outside.

But the question I want to ask this morning is what difference does that make in the midst of the real life challenges that you face every day? Just because it's Easter doesn't mean our life stops. The problems you had yesterday are still there today and they'll be there tomorrow.

I think of those of you who have lost loved ones this past year. There is nothing you would want more than to have them sitting with you this morning. Well, Easter doesn't bring your loved ones back.

I think of those of you who are struggling financially. Perhaps you're one of those folks whose mortgage is upside down and you're looking at the very real possibility of losing your home. Easter doesn't fix that.

And I think of you who are very aware this morning of your own shortcomings, failures and sins. You still have to live with many of the consequences of those things and you still want to beat yourself up. Easter doesn't change that.

So what difference does it make TODAY that he really is alive?

To answer that question I want us to look at a story from the life of the Apostle Paul taken out of the book of Acts, which is the story of the early church. I want to look at one very long, hard day in the life of Paul and see how the reality that Jesus really is alive made all the difference in the world. Paul is in Jerusalem and had just been taken into custody by a Roman commander:

**"But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them. Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.' The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, 'God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?' But the bystanders said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' And Paul said, 'I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, "YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'" But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!' As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, 'We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?' And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks. But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, 'Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also'" (Acts 22:30 - 23:11).**

### I. Jesus is alive.

The one unmistakable fact of this story from the life of Paul is that Jesus really is alive. When it says that

the Lord stood at Paul's side and spoke to him the clear assumption is that this is the Lord Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead. This is not the first nor will be the last time the living Lord revealed himself to Paul.

Prior to being a great Apostle, Paul was a zealous persecutor of Christians. But one day he was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest the believers there when a bright light flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"** He cried out, **"Who are you, Lord."** And then he heard those words he never forgot, **"I'm Jesus whom you're persecuting..."** That encounter with the living Lord Jesus changed the entire direction of his life. Saul, the persecutor became Paul, the Apostle.

Years later, when Paul was near the end of his life and a prisoner in Rome, he would have the first of several hearings before the Roman Emperor. No doubt Paul hoped that someone would show up and speak in his defense, but he wrote to Timothy, **"At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me..."** It sounds like such a dark time. He was so alone, but in the very next breath he says, **"But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me...and I was delivered out of the lion's mouth"** (2 Tim. 4:16-17). He wasn't alone. Jesus was there—alive!

Many of us believe that. But, again, we have to ask the question, what difference does that make for me today?

## 2. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us out of trouble.

As we look at this story one of the things we can say for sure is that the fact that Jesus is alive doesn't mean he keeps us out of trouble. This had been one of those "no good, very bad days" for Paul. He was in Jerusalem, paying his respects at the temple when some of his own countrymen began to stir up the crowd, accusing him of violating Jewish laws. They took hold of Paul, dragged him out of the temple and began to beat him. They would have killed him, but a local Roman commander whose job it was to keep the peace intervened and took Paul into custody.

The next day the commander decided to have him appear before the Sanhedrin to find out more about the charges against him. This was the most important religious body in all of Israel. I'm sure that Paul had anticipated an opportunity like this for years. He starts out respectfully and calls them **"Brethren."** He says he'd lived with a clear conscience before God right up to the present day. This doesn't mean he was perfect; just that he had practiced his Jewish faith with sincerity and integrity. And then, out of nowhere, someone slugged him in the mouth. Have you ever been slugged in the mouth? I have a few times. I used to have a big mouth. I guess you could say that I've been hit in the mouth because of my mouth! But it's remarkable what an unpleasant experience it is. I don't recommend it.

Now all of this happened to Paul and Jesus was still very much alive. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us out of trouble. Sometimes we might think that it should. If Jesus is alive, why does he allow bad stuff to happen to us and others? If Jesus really rose victorious over sin, death and the devil, why do we still have to deal with that stuff?

Think of what has happened on school campuses

across the nation since last Easter: Last April in Blacksburg, Virginia, a 23-year-old Virginia Tech student killed two in a dorm, then killed 30 more two hours later in a classroom. In September a Delaware State freshman shot and wounded two other students on campus. In October a 14-year-old in Cleveland shot and injured two students and two teachers before he killed himself. Last month alone there were four more incidents, including a former graduate student who killed seven students and then himself as he opened fire on a classroom at No. Illinois University.

That's just in one year. Someone could say, "If Jesus was alive, where was he when those students and teachers were being shot?" Let's face it: the fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us out of trouble.

## 3. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us from messing up.

But that's not all. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us from messing up either. You see, part of Paul's problem here is himself. After Paul gets slugged in the mouth, he reacts. He says, **"God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!"** That image suggests that the High Priest was like a tottering wall whose rotten condition was being covered up by a coat of paint. And then he says to the High Priest, **"Do you sit and try me according to the law, and in violation of the law order me to be struck?"** Paul was right about that. Jewish law said you were innocent until proven guilty. Paul hadn't even been properly charged with a crime.

It's hard to blame Paul for shooting off his mouth like this. It's a natural reaction; most of us would do the same. But what about turning the other cheek? Jesus faced the same treatment and Peter says **"when he was reviled, he did not revile in return"** (1Pt. 1:23). Even Paul wrote, **"when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate"** (1 Cor.4:12).

I don't think this is how Paul planned on this meeting going. And then when someone accused him of reviling the high priest, he had to apologize because the law forbade it. But then he explains that he didn't know it was the high priest. What does that mean? There are all kinds of creative explanations for this. Some say he was being sarcastic: "Oh, sorry! I didn't think someone like the high priest would act like that!" Others say there were so many voices going off that Paul didn't know it was the high priest who gave the order for him to be struck. Still others say Paul didn't recognize him because he had poor eyesight.

Irregardless of why he didn't recognize him Paul realized he was out of bounds. One of the things we sometimes forget is that Paul was made of the same stuff we are. This is the guy who said, **"The good that I want to do, I do not do. And the very thing I hate to do, that I do."** He didn't say that just for our sakes. That was out of his own experience.

The fact Jesus is alive doesn't keep us from messing up. It didn't take me long to learn this as a new believer. In the 2-3 weeks following putting my trust in Christ, I was on "cloud nine." I was a new creation. Spiritually speaking, I

was raised from the dead! I was so filled with a sense of God's love that I couldn't imagine ever doing anything against him. But then the feelings kind of wore off and I found myself in a battle against sin. And I discovered that I was still weak and I often fell into the very sins I had sworn off. Even today, 34 years later, I have a more acute sense of my sin than I did then. Jesus is alive, but I mess up all the time.

#### **4. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't mean everyone will believe it.**

So the fact that Jesus is alive doesn't keep us out of trouble nor does it keep us from messing up. But there is something else here. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't mean everyone will believe he's alive.

In v.6 Paul cries out, **"I'm a Pharisee. I'm on trial for the hope and the resurrection of the dead."** Saying that to the Sanhedrin was like going into a session of congress and saying, "I think we ought to cut taxes." The Sanhedrin consisted of two groups: the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection of the dead and the Sadducees who didn't. The Pharisees believed there was more to this world than what we can see and explain. They may not have believed in Jesus, but they weren't opposed to the idea of a resurrection. The Sadducees didn't buy any of it. So the two groups began to fight. The Pharisees were defending Paul while the Sadducees were ready to tear him apart.

You might wonder why Paul instigated this. I think Paul brought this up because this is a core issue that people have to deal with. He wanted to get these guys thinking about truth instead of about him. He knew it would cause a stir, but it would also raise a key issue.

When you think about it, these two groups mirror a dividing line we see in our society today. There are those who believe there really is more than we can see; that there is a God or gods; that when we die we don't just cease to exist; that from time to time things happen like miracles which can't be explained by science. They may not all accept the idea that Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead, but they would at least allow for the possibility. For example, Norman Mailer, a not exactly Christian novelist once said, "If you don't believe in God and the Devil, I wouldn't say you're crazy, but you're intellectually malnourished."

On the other hand, there are those who just don't believe that kind of stuff. For example, astronomer Carolyn Porco believes that science itself should attempt to replace God by providing the benefits and comforts people find in religion: community, ceremony, and a sense of awe. She writes: "Imagine congregations raising their voices in tribute to gravity—the force that binds us all to the Earth, and the Earth to the sun, and the sun to the Milky Way." But even Porco admits that there are limits to finding spiritual fulfillment by exploring the universe. She writes: "The people who want to know that they're going to live forever and meet Mom and Dad in heaven? We can't offer that."

There are people like that today. They're a minority, but they're there. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't mean everyone will believe it.

#### **5. The fact that Jesus is alive means he stands by us so we can face the future.**

That same evening Paul is back in the Roman barracks. If we use our imagination we can understand what he would have been feeling. I see him tossing and turning through the night, replaying the past day in his head. I've done it a million times myself. He says to himself, "Yeah, how clear is your conscience now, Paul? I just love how you displayed the meekness and gentleness of Christ. I can't believe how you spoke to the high priest. Why did I say that? Now he'll never believe in Christ. You call yourself an apostle? And then you take the easy way out by bringing up a subject of controversy? A lot of good that did. You're an abysmal failure."

I have little doubt that Paul was utterly discouraged at this point. We might think this is a terrible state of mind for the great apostle to be in but this is exactly where the Lord wanted him. The Lord often brings us to this place. He lets us go on until broken, defeated and discouraged, we sit utterly bankrupt of any resources in ourselves. Remember how Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Blessed are you when you are bankrupt of your own resources and ready to quit." I've been there. I've said to God, "Lord, I quit! I'm done with trying to live for you. I just can't do it."

Believe it or not, it's in these times that the Lord makes himself the most real to us. It's in these times we come to see that he really is alive and that makes a difference for us in a very personal way. That's what happens here. The Lord stands at Paul's side and says "Take courage." That shows us the state of Paul's heart. He's anything but of good courage. He's defeated. He's wallowing in a sense of shame and failure. But Jesus stands by him and says, "Take courage." He can say that because he's familiar with all Paul's gone through. He'd also been in Jerusalem. He'd stood before that Council. He'd been beaten, bruised, broken and alone. He understood Paul. He knew the pain. But he also had overcome it all. Seeing Jesus, having gone through all he had gone through, but now standing by him victorious would be the thing that would give him courage.

We can give every proof for the fact that Jesus rose; we can talk about how we'll someday be raised with him until we're blue in the face, but if we never actually experience him standing by us NOW, in our discouragements and defeats, we're missing something. Whatever you're going through, he knows; he's been there; he's there for you now.

Notice how the Lord spoke to Paul. Again, he seems to know what Paul needs. He deals with Paul's regrets. He says **"you have solemnly witnessed for my cause at Jerusalem."** Imagine that. All Paul could think about was what a flop he'd been in Jerusalem. But Jesus says, "Paul, I know your heart. I'm pleased with your efforts." Isn't that good to know? The Lord is more gracious to you than you are to yourself. He sees your heart. A little boy tries to scribble his name on a piece of paper and hands it to his dad. It's barely readable, but does the dad care? No! He's thrilled with it. Don't you think God is thrilled with imperfect offerings?

Paul also needed a word for the future. So Jesus says, **“so you must witness at Rome also.”** It was Paul’s desire to get to Rome for a long time. He often wondered if he would ever make it. But the Lord says, “You’ll make it and you’ll be my witness.” He didn’t say how or when he would get there. The fact is it would be over two years before he got to Rome and he would get there as a prisoner. We don’t know all that the future holds for us, but the Lord has given us enough promises about it that we don’t have to worry. He’ll get you where you’re supposed to be.

I asked the question, what difference does it make for us today that he’s alive, in the midst of the real life struggles and failures that we have to deal with? The answer is very simple: He stands at our side as one who has already been there. In the midst of our discouragement he says, “Take courage.” In the midst of our regrets he says, “I see your heart. I’m pleased with your efforts.” In the midst of our fears about the future he says, “I’ll get you where you’re supposed to be.”

Sometimes we think, “This is Paul. He had experiences like this because he was an apostle. But the Lord would never show up like this for me.” Maybe you’ve even felt in your hardest times he wasn’t there for you. If that’s what you’re thinking, ask yourself three questions:

First, have you entered into a relationship with him? If you haven’t done that, that’s where you start. You start by putting your faith in him as your Lord and Savior, surrendering your life to him. Until you do that, it will be hard to really experience his presence.

Second, are you in the battle? Maybe like Paul you need to get in the fray. Paul was deeply invested in doing what God had called him to do. He wasn’t holding back anything. It’s the battle weary guys on the field who need a drink of water during a time-out, not the guys on the sideline. Are you in the battle? If you are, the Lord will bring you the refreshment you need. But, if you’re not, what else can you expect?

Third, are you paying attention? I’ve found that if I keep my eyes open he shows up and stands at my side, too. Have you ever felt the Lord standing by as you pray? Have you ever sensed he was speaking to you in a very personal way through his word? Have you ever experienced some turn of events that you just know is directly from the Lord? Has he ever put someone in your path that had just the right thing to say to you, and they didn’t even know it? If not, are you paying attention?

As I thought about this passage, an old song kept coming to my mind. It’s not a song we sing much anymore, but the chorus expresses a very simple truth, and that truth reminds me why it matters that Jesus is alive for me today:

*Because he lives, I can face tomorrow.*

*Because he lives, all fear is gone.*

*Because I know he holds the future.*

*And life is worth the living just because he lives.*