



Don't you love Easter? There's something about it, isn't there? Here are a few fun facts about Easter you may not have known:

- The word, *Easter* is the name of a pagan goddess who was associated with one of the spring festivals celebrated in Central Europe. The earliest celebrated Passover before they started celebrating Easter, sometime in the second century.
- Easter has been called a moveable feast because it doesn't fall on a set date every year. It's observed every year on the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21. That can be anywhere between March 22 and April 25.
- Christians consider Easter eggs to symbolize new life and resurrection. In medieval times, a festival of egg-throwing was held in church. The priest would throw a hard-boiled egg to one of the choir boys, and then it was tossed from one choir boy to the next. When the clock struck 12, whoever held the egg was the winner and got to keep the egg.
- Half of the states in the U.S. have banned the practice of dyeing chicks for Easter. I think that's a good thing!
- After Halloween, Easter is the biggest candy consuming holiday. 120 million pounds of candy are bought each year. 90 million chocolate bunnies and 91.4 billion eggs are made each year. 76% of people eat the ears on the bunnies first. Americans consume over 16 million jellybeans on Easter, enough to circle the globe three times over.

It's fascinating that every religion on earth has some kind of a spring celebration. I think it's only natural that the celebration of Jesus' resurrection and the celebration of the return of spring have merged, because the theme is the same: the emergence of life from death; the return of hope, warmth and color to a weary, barren, and dreary world.

No writer in the New Testament captures so fully, in one short sentence, the hope of Easter than the Apostle Peter does in 1 Peter 1:3-4. He says, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you..."*

Our Hope is Living

Notice Peter starts with praise. He's praising God because he has what he calls "a living hope." Peter had experienced that in his own life. No one felt the death of Jesus more agonizingly than Peter. He'd boasted he wouldn't leave or forsake Jesus. He meant well, but he failed miserably. When the moment came, a little girl's question melted all his bravado, and he denied Jesus. So to the appalling collapse of hope all the apostles experienced in the death of Jesus, in Peter's case was added the shame and disgrace of his own denial. No wonder one of the last views of him in the Gospels is going into the darkness of night, weeping bitterly.

I'm sure there are some here who feel like Peter this morning. Your hopes have been crushed. Maybe just a few years ago you had glorious dreams of what you'd like to be, or what you'd like to do, and now they've all collapsed. Maybe you had a whole set of ideals you meant to live by, but you've failed miserably. It's hard to admit it but you have. You meant to do well, but you ended up wrong. Maybe it was a failed marriage, or a failure in your career, or a broken relationship with a child. Maybe you're in a job that's beating you up and there's no way out. Or maybe you've experienced the loss of a loved one and it's devastated you. This past week my daughter and I visited my father who is 89 years old and on hospice care. It's hard to watch your dad diminish. It's hard to watch your daughter weep as she says good-bye to him for perhaps the last time. I've been wrestling with that all week long.

But it's those kinds of moments in which the resurrection is designed to give us hope. I'm sure Peter had that in mind when he talked about this "living hope." After the resurrection, Jesus sought Peter out. There's a wonderful scene by the shores of Galilee where Jesus appears to his disciples and prepares a meal for them. Around the fire, Jesus asks Peter three times: *"Do you love me?"* Three times Peter affirms his love, and three times Jesus gives him back his ministry, *"Feed my lambs; feed my sheep"* (John 21:15–18). From that point on, Peter knew that no situation was hopeless. Do you know that? If Jesus is alive, if he really conquered death, there's nothing you face that he can't overcome. If he has power over death, he has power over anything that comes against you.

Our Hope is Based on the Historical Fact of the Resurrection

And he really is alive. The resurrection is based on historical fact. Peter says this living hope came *“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”* That’s a concrete event in history.

The Guinness Book of World Records says the most successful attorney in history is Sir Lionel Luckhoo, who got his 245th consecutive murder acquittal on January 1, 1985. This was an incredible feat nobody has ever come close to duplicating. He’s a real life Perry Mason! I’d guess he was a very bright man with acute analytical skills. He’d have to be a world class expert on what constitutes reliable, admissible and persuasive evidence. During his own spiritual journey Luckhoo took his expertise in law and combed through the evidence to see if the resurrection of Jesus stood the test of legal evidence. This was his conclusion: “I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof that leaves absolutely no room for doubt.” He wasn’t talking about a pretend resurrection that only takes place in our hearts, but a real physical one.

We hear a lot these days about near-death experiences. I’m sure many of you have read the book, *Heaven Is For Real*. It was a best-seller and now it’s been made into a movie. It’s a very touching story of Colton Burpo who, at age 4, visited heaven on the operating table after a burst appendix. Then there’s the story of Eben Alexander who wrote, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*. He was a highly trained neurosurgeon who always believed near-death experiences were fantasies produced by brains under extreme stress. Then his own brain was attacked by a rare illness. For seven days he lay in a coma, and then he miraculously recovered. During that time he claims he journeyed beyond this world and met with an angelic being who guided him into a meeting with the Divine source of the universe itself.

Stories like that impress us, and I’m not here to judge their validity, but the resurrection of Jesus is something far more impressive and certain. Here’s the difference between the resurrection of Jesus and these near-death experiences we read about today. First, Jesus was really dead. When the Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear, John tells us, *“blood and water came out”* (John 19:34). Any doctor will tell you that indicates the circulation of the blood had long since ceased. Then he was taken down; his body was wrapped in grave clothes so he couldn’t move, and a wrapping was bound around his head so tightly it was impossible for him to breathe. He was laid in a tomb and sealed in with a rock and left there for three days and three nights. There’s no question he was dead. And yet from that he returned.

Second, these people who supposedly visited heaven returned to the same life they left, and they’ll all die some day. When Jesus

came back, he came back the same, but different. Thomas was invited to put his hands in the wounds and see it was the same body that was crucified, and yet there was a difference. He had a glorified body, and instead of dying he ascended into heaven. He came back, not merely having resisted death and recovered from it; he came back having conquered death. This is the guarantee upon which our hope rests as we face our own death.

Our Hope is Fixed on an Inheritance That Can Never Perish

Here’s another thing: our hope is fixed on an inheritance that can never perish. I’ve heard people say, “Even if there is a heaven, I really don’t want to go there. It doesn’t sound very exciting to me. I’m not even sure I’d like the people there very much.” But Peter calls heaven *“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”* On earth, everything perishes, spoils or fades, but not this. 1 Co.r 2:9 says, *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”* That sounds good to me. I’ll take that!

The most complete portrait of heaven in the Bible is found in the book of Revelation, chapters 21–22. The apostle John pulls back the curtain and stretches the limits of language to describe what heaven is like. He tells us a number of things. He tells us heaven is a real place. It’s not some esoteric, undefined existence. John describes something material. He writes, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband”* (21:1–2). Someone has said the Christian faith is the most materialistic of all faiths because our vision of the future is earthly. God made us for earth and he’ll fulfill that original intent by placing us on a new earth. Our destiny is **not** to go to heaven. Our destiny is for the heavenly city to come down to us. Our vision of the future is **not** other worldly; it’s new worldly. And we’ll not be freed from our bodies; we’ll get new bodies, like the one Jesus had after he was raised up.

Heaven is also described as a holy place. The thing that dominates John’s description of heaven is the presence of God. He says, *“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple”* (21:22). For a Jewish man like John, the temple is the place where God dwells. For him to say there’s no temple is unthinkable. If there’s no temple, where is God? But what John is really saying is the whole city is the temple. God’s dwelling place is no longer a place in the city, but it’s the city itself! Even better, John says, *“They will see his face...”* Can that really be? The whole Bible stresses no one can see God’s face and live. But here, in that very real place we call heaven, we’ll see his face. Nothing can satisfy more than that.

Heaven is also a safe place. Each of us lives with a certain amount of fear. Anything can happen to us. The world is full of things that threaten. School buses that crash. Airplanes that disappear. Diseases that kill. But John says in heaven, *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”* (v.4). Why is that? Because there’ll be no more sin or crime, no litter or smog, no oil spills, no sickness or disease, no betrayal or bickering. Think of all the folks who will need to find new jobs: exterminators, counselors, insurance adjusters, doctors, mechanics, policemen, health inspectors, maybe even pastors!

Heaven is also described as a big place. Verse 16 says, *“This city will be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long.”* That’s 1,400 square miles, the distance from Mexico to Canada or from the Appalachians to California. Heaven is big enough for the full range of the world’s ethnic and cultural diversity. John says, *“The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it”* (vv. 24–26). All the different people groups of the world will be represented there. The gates of a city were typically closed at night to keep foreigners out, but the gates of heaven will never be shut. There’s no immigration problem there; no border patrol! It’s like all peoples will be welcome and they’ll bring with them all the beauty of their culture.

Heaven is also a serving place. John says in heaven, *“his servants will serve him...they will reign forever and ever”* (22:3, 5). He’s hinting at the fact heaven won’t be like an eternal day off. We’ll serve him. He’ll give us assignments. We know in the first Eden there was work to do. Work was a part of paradise. God told Adam to care for the earth and to cultivate it. In the new Eden there’ll be work as well. It won’t have the drudgery attached to it that our present work has. It will be joyful, creative and productive work. Won’t it be fun to find out what kind of assignment you’ll have? And we’ll love our assignment! There won’t be any whining, “Oh no, I have to do that?” No! It will be like, “That’s the perfect job for me.”

Our Hope is Kept in Heaven for Us

Do you know what’s great? This hope we have of heaven is secure. Go back to 1 Peter. Peter says this inheritance *“is kept in heaven for you.”* It sounds like God is just waiting to give us this amazing inheritance, which he’s been preparing since the beginning of time.

I heard a story about a guy who, ever since he was a little boy, his parents had promised to give him a beautiful car to drive when he turned 16. He looked forward to parking it in the family’s barn where it could stay warm and dry. Only first his dad would have to get rid of that old car sitting in the barn. He couldn’t

wait for his dad to haul it off to the dump to make way for his dream car. But when would that day come? When would that new car arrive? And when would his dad get rid of that old junky car under the tarp? Then one evening in early summer he heard strange sounds coming from the barn. It sounded like an engine. What was going on? Peering into the darkness he noticed a light was on in the barn. He walked into the warm night air, down the dirt path, and poked his head into the barn door. When he saw the tarp, rolled up and left against the door, he excitedly thought, “Dad is finally getting rid of that junky old car!” But then he looked and saw one of the most incredible sports cars in automotive history. It was a Corvette, but not just any Corvette. It was the coveted, beautiful, powerful 1963 Corvette 327 V8 with a split window, aluminum knock-off wheels, painted candy apple red. So that was the car underneath the tarp all those years. He stood there stunned. It was always there, just waiting for him to turn 16. His father looked up, and with a broad smile, he said, “Come on, son. Let’s take her for a ride.”

In the same way, this coveted, beautiful and powerful inheritance I just described is “kept in heaven for you.” It’s there now. Some day the Lord himself will roll up the tarp and let you see it in all its glory.

Our Hope is Given to Us Through His Great Mercy and the New Birth

The question is, How do we know that’s true for us? How do we obtain this living hope? If what I’ve said this morning is even close to true, that’s the most important question in the world. Here’s Peter’s answer: *“In his great mercy we has given us new birth into a living hope.”* A new birth. What does that mean? How does that happen to us? It simply means there comes a time when, in our emptiness, in our loneliness or despair or guilt and shame, we respond to the invitation of Jesus to come into our lives; we put our trust in him as our Savior. The Bible says, *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1:12–13).

When we receive Jesus we’re spiritually reborn and he begins to make changes. That doesn’t happen because we’re good or try really hard to change our ways. You see, none of are good enough. We all fall short of God’s glory. So this becomes true for us “in his great mercy.” God loves you; he cares about you. That’s why he sent his Son to die in your place. He wants to spend eternity with you in that place I described. But you can’t earn this new birth any more than you earned your physical birth. It’s a gift and you must receive it as such by simply saying “yes” to Jesus.

I’ve seen the power of this new birth in my own family. I was raised in a home where faith wasn’t taken seriously. We were

CEO Christians at best (Christmas and Easter only). But when I was 17 I came to a crossroad. I'd lived a self consumed life apart from God and I was a mess. But one evening I knelt by my bedside and cried out to Him for help. I confessed my sin and asked him to take over this mess I'd made of my life, and he did. The entire direction of my life changed. Next month will be my 40th spiritual birthday. I saw the same thing happen to my older brother a few years later. And then 20 years ago it happened to my father. He was a decorated WW2 veteran, a successful dentist, an avid hunter, fisherman and golfer, but after my mother died years of social drinking turned him into a helpless alcoholic. Two different in-patient treatment programs were unsuccessful. Each time he tried to do the Twelve Steps without the God part. The third time his doctor told me this time he'd die if he relapsed. Finally, he surrendered and prayed with my brother to receive

Christ into his life. He's far from perfect—none of us are—but I've witnessed a remarkable change in his life. He hasn't taken a drink in 20 years, and he lives a life of gratitude. Best of all, he doesn't have to fear death. When my daughter said goodbye to him last Monday with tears in both of their eyes, he said, "It's okay. I'm going to heaven."

That's what Peter was talking about! That's the living hope Jesus will give to anyone who asks. ***"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you..."*** (1 Peter 1:3–4).

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

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