

“All Or Nothing”

Dear friends, Happy Easter and welcome, once again, to our worship.

Not long before Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, put on trial and (eventually) sentenced to death, there was a gathering of the religious leaders (of that day) who were trying to decide what to do with this man called the Christ.

It was a group called the Sanhedrin, what was (thought of) in those days as the “Religious Supreme Court.” They were talking about all of the things Jesus had done and how, (as a result), so many people were beginning to follow. And (bottom line), if it continued happening, they were concerned what might happen to them.

“If we let Jesus go on like this,” (they said), “everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our position.” They didn’t want that to happen. They were afraid that if (this Jesus-thing) caught on, their whole religious-thing would be let go.

That’s when one of them, named Caiaphas, the High Priest that year, made an interesting statement. Concerned about Jesus and about what his continued ministry would mean for them, in arguing for finding a way to put Jesus to death, here’s what he said.

To the other religious leaders (he said), “You know nothing at all!” (He said), “You do not realize that it is better for you (and for us) that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish.” “It’s better that one man (be put to death) than the whole nation fall apart.”

Now, what did he mean by that? What he meant (by that) was that it was better for Jesus to die than for him to lead the people down the wrong path. It was better that (this one called the Christ) be put to death than for the whole nation to be deceived (by what he was doing) and ultimately to be destroyed by what he was all about.

If this doesn’t happen (he argued), then something else will. If this doesn’t take place (and be brought to an end), then something more serious will take place and it’ll all end. (In other words,) “It is better that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish.”

What’s interesting (about that statement) is that it’s the same thing God said when he made the decision to send his Son, Jesus, into the world. What interesting about that statement is that it’s the same thing God chose to do when he allowed his only Son to die on a cross.

If this doesn’t happen, then something else will. If this doesn’t take place (and bring it all to an end), then something more serious will take place and it will all end.

I want to talk (with you) today about how Easter is an “All or Nothing” event. It’s the culmination of everything God had planned (and prepared) from the beginning of time. It’s the climax to the story. It’s the final word in what God has said and done for us. And it’s that event which brings (all other events) in the history of the world together and that places (every other event) that has ever happened (throughout history) including your life, in its proper place.

And I want to do so by coming at that premise from four different directions. It’s “All or Nothing”, in Jesus’ life, his death, his resurrection, and your response; his life, his death, his resurrection, and your response.

If it’s true, then it means everything. If it’s not true, then it means nothing. But it can’t work both ways. You can’t pretend (and live) as if it doesn’t matter, if it does, (and you’re wasting your life) if you live as if it does matter, if it doesn’t. It’s all or nothing, for God and for us; his life, his death, his resurrection, and your response.

Let’s start with his life, with the life of Jesus. I don’t know how much you know about the life of Jesus. It’s an interesting life, a fascinating life, a life unlike any other.

It’s hard to know where to start. It wasn’t a long life. It was actually a rather short life. Thirty-three years is what he had. From the time he was born until the time he died, just thirty-three years from start to finish. It was a rather short life.

It was also a rather insignificant life, at least in terms of what he had accumulated (and had left) when he died. He never owned a home. He never had any amount of wealth. When he died, all he had left were the clothes on his back, and (before he died), they even took those (and rolled dice for them), while he was dying, and he had nothing. In terms of (worldly wealth), there wasn't much to show.

And he didn't do much traveling, either. In spite of all of the journeys he took (with his disciples) and all of the places they went, he never ended up more than thirty miles from where he was born. It was, geographically, a rather narrow life-spectrum. Nonetheless, the life of Jesus Christ has left a mark on human history that is unparalleled in all of history.

Did you know that almost every moral code that exists today is built upon and around the teachings of Jesus Christ? (It's true.) Two thousand years have come and gone and no one has come up with a better set of moral teachings than the ones given to us by Jesus. (Read through the stories, the things he taught.) There are none better. He was an incredible teacher. He taught as one (the Bible says) "who had authority" above and beyond anyone else. There's no question.

He was also the greatest miracle-worker who has ever lived. None of the other "so-called" miracle-workers (throughout history), and there have been many, even come close. In the four gospels (alone), those stories of Jesus' life, not counting (the many references) outside the Bible, there are more 40 different miracles attested to, touching on a wider range of miraculous impact than you'll ever find. He healed the sick, he cast out demons, he fed five thousand, walked on water. On three different occasions, he brought people back to life. There was no one else like Jesus. Jesus had incredible miraculous power; there's no doubt.

Did you know (also) there are more historical references (and facts) about the life of Jesus than there are about any other historical figure who ever lived? (It's not even close.) There are more books written, more references made, more historical connections with (and to) the life of Jesus Christ than with any other person in history. It keeps on going.

His teachings, his miracles, the historical impact he had; it was an incredible life, an unmatched and unparalleled life. In spite of its brevity, and its lack of worldly accumulation, and geographic breadth, there was never a life (before Jesus) that had ever come close, and there has never been a life since that is even in the same ballpark. Not even one.

Having said that, (and that's a lot), that's not what set his life apart? (It's not.) Those are not the things that made his life (what it was) and what it still is. What set his life apart were the claims he made about himself, about who he was, about the connection (in his life) he had with God, and about how in (your life) and in my life, without an ongoing connection with him, you and I will never understand (or know) what it means to live.

Go down the list of the things he claimed. He said, "I and the Father are one." (He said), "If you want to know God, then you need to know me." (He said), "I'm the one who can forgive your sins." (He said), "I'm the one who can set you free." (He said), "I can watch over you and (care for you) and give meaning to your life." (And), "If you want to end up in heaven (he said), then (apart from me), there is no other way."

And then (he said), "I'll prove it (to you) by dying on a cross and (three days later) coming back to life." That's when you'll know (he said) that "I am who I am," (the Son of God), and that's when you'll see (he said) that what I've claimed about myself (and your life) is actually true.

It's "All or Nothing" in the life of Jesus. It's either true or it's not. It's either worth everything or it's worth nothing. But it can't work both ways. You can't pick and choose as you like. You need to decide (for yourself) who this Jesus is and (whether or not) it really happened.

It's "All or Nothing" in the life of Jesus. It's also "All or Nothing" in the death of Jesus. Did you know that Jesus didn't have to die? (He didn't have to die.) Jesus didn't have to die. He chose to die? Jesus made the clear (and conscious) decision to go to the cross.

Just like with his life, the same is true in his death. It's hard to know where to start. Again, read through the stories. In each of the four gospels, Jesus makes an intentional and (an informed) decision to end up in Jerusalem where he knows, when he gets there, what's going to happen.

He knows when he gets there, he's going to die. He knows when he ends up there, how it's all going to end up. In fact, on several occasions, Jesus predicts it. He tells his followers (straight-up), "Here's what's going to happen." ("Here's how it's going to play out.") At the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the

law, I'm going to be beaten and whipped and killed, put to death on a tree. And I'm going to do it (he said) because "for this reason I was born."

Did you know that the name Jesus means "one who saves?" Jesus came to save us. Jesus came to save you. It's the reason he was born. It was his purpose for coming into this world.

In fact, (the truth is), Jesus is the only person who has ever lived who was born for the purpose of dying. That's why he was born. He was born to die; the only one.

Everyone else (you and I included) try to avoid it. We do everything we can to avoid death. We really do. (Am I wrong?) We act as if it's not real. We pretend (as we go through life) as if it's not going to happen. We try to convince ourselves, (every step of the way), even though we know it's coming, that (if nothing else) at least it's a long way off. We do all of that and (we all do it), and I understand and recognize (and realize) why, because no one wants to die. No one wants to die. Not even Jesus wanted to die.

But Jesus, from the time he was born, was destined to die. He was preparing to die. He was born to die. And he was born to die so that you and I could live.

Read through the story. That's what's behind the whole thing. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." (That's why it happened.) It was the love of God for this world that sent Jesus into this world. It was the love of God for your life that caused Jesus to give up his. (And it happened because Jesus was not just another man, but God.) It happened because what he claimed about himself (to be true) actually was! "No one takes my life from me;" (Jesus said), "I give it up of my own free will."

Did you know there were countless opportunities, in those final days (and hours), before his death, for Jesus to avoid his death? On Palm Sunday, he didn't have to keep riding. (He could have turned around and rode away.) In the Temple, he could have over-turned those tables and been done. (None of this would have ever happened.)

In Gethsemane, on trial before Pilate, before he was beaten and flogged and stripped of his clothes and left half-dead...before he was nailed to a tree, Jesus could have called it all off and walked away, on any (and all) of those occasions. He could have chosen another path, anything he wanted. But he didn't and he wouldn't because if he did (and he had) and he had wanted, then his very purpose for being born would have never been fulfilled...and you and I would have no hope.

It was "All or Nothing" in the death of Jesus. Either he would willingly walk the path to his death, or you and I would unwillingly (forever) end up in the grave. Either the deceiving and destructive power of sin would be conquered and destroyed (on the cross), or its power (and deception) would leave us forever trapped.

And so Jesus went to the cross (and to his own death) so that you and I would have an answer to ours. Jesus never called it off and walked away, (in order that) the power of sin and death would be called off and there would be another way for us.

It was "All or Nothing" in the life of Jesus. In the things he claimed and (the life he lived), it was either true or it wasn't. It was "All or Nothing" in the death of Jesus. If it didn't have to happen, it would not have happened. If there had been another way, Jesus would have chosen another way, but there wasn't. And it was "All or Nothing" in the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus never came back to life, then everything we're (saying and doing) in this place is all a joke.

I hope you realize that about the Christian faith and what we claim and profess to be true about Jesus. Everything we're about in the Church stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything we teach and preach (in the Church) either has meaning and significance, now and forever, (or not) based upon whether Easter really happened.

If it happened, then it happened and what Jesus claimed about himself (and his life) and who he was, and why he lived and he died, it's all true. If it happened, he was and he still is and he (will always be) God. And (if it happened), all he said about himself and about life and about where you and I can find life, it's all a fact. If it happened, it all happened (and became real) when (in fact) it really happened on that first Easter morning...if it happened.

But if it didn't happen, then it didn't happen, and everything he said and did and claimed for himself is nothing more than a farce. It's false news. It's all made up. And those who believe it (myself included), as hopeful and sincere as they (and I) might be, have only been set-up.

That's how important Jesus' resurrection from the dead actually is. If it didn't happen, then none of what we're saying, (here today), actually matters! None of it matters!

I mean, really? Who cares if Jesus was a great teacher, all of the moral codes based upon what he taught? Good stuff, but (finally), why does it matter?

And what difference does it make if Jesus was able to pull off miracles when he was alive? Good for him (and for them), but that was 2000 years ago and not today. (So what if it happened?)

And so what if he actually is the most written about and referenced and connected to historical fact person who has ever lived? I'm glad he was (and he is) and it's good to know, but why should I (or anyone else) for that matter, really care?

Let me tell you something. If he was all of that and (even more), but not who claimed to be; if he didn't die on a cross, didn't rise from the dead, didn't open the way (eternally) for you and me to be with God (and to live forever), then (not even) I don't care, and I honestly don't care if you do either. I really don't.

Because if it didn't actually happen (and it's not true), then it doesn't matter if you or I (or anyone else) thinks it actually did. It doesn't really matter, if (it didn't happen) and it's not true.

But if it is true, and it did actually happen, and if the witness of those first disciples, and (from there), the early church, and (since then), the 2000 years of history and the millions of people who have claimed to have met and experienced (and lived with) the risen Christ (each day) have any connection with actual fact, then the fact is that there is no middle ground when it comes to the response you and I make.

You cannot have it both ways when it comes to Jesus. Either he is the Savior of the world or he is not. Either was the Son of God who willingly gave his life for us, or he wasn't. But if he was the Savior of the world (and that's what this day is all about), then he must also be, if you want (anything to do with him), whatsoever, the Lord of your life.

Do you know what the Oxford Dictionaries "2016 International Word of the Year" was? Every year, at the end of the year, a word is selected as the most-used "new word" for that year. Every year there's a choice. Do you know what the Oxford International "Word of the Year" was for 2016? The 2016 "Word of the Year" was "post-truth"... "post-truth." You and I now live in what many believe is a post-truth world.

It's interesting how that word's used. The dictionary defines "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

In other words, the word "post-truth" doesn't mean "after truth", as much as it implies an atmosphere of belief (in our society today) in which anyone can believe what they want to believe, because (for them) what they believe is their own truth. You and I are living in (what has become) for many a self-proclaimed, self-structured, self-serving "post-truth" world. That's what's happened to truth.

Now, let me let you in on a little bit of truth, on what's really true. No one can change the truth. (No one can change what's true.) If something is true, then it's true, no matter what you (or I) or anyone else might think. My (or your) opinion (or public opinion) does not change the truth. Truth is truth, and that's the truth.

Now, let me let you in on another truth. The truth is Jesus was who he claimed he was. He was the Son of God. He was the Author of Life. And he is the only one (in this life) who can give ultimate (and lasting) meaning to your life. He is the only one.

And (not only that), but the truth is that Jesus did die on a cross. He was nailed to a tree. He gave up his life willingly so that you and I could have ours. He didn't have to die. He chose to die. And he did it because it was the reason he was born, the purpose for which he came into this world (because God so loved the world), and because your life matters eternally to him.

And the truth is that Jesus did come back to life. He was raised (on the third day) by his Heavenly Father. And the disciples saw him. They talked with him, they ate with him, they were able to touch and to experience him, and, ever since, for more than 2000 years, hundreds of millions of people have come to know him as well, including many (who are) here today.

Now, what I just shared with you is the truth. (You don't have to believe it, but it's true.) And not only is it true, but those are "All of Nothing" truths about Jesus Christ. That means that if they are true, they mean everything. If they are not true, they mean nothing. (It works both ways.) It's all or nothing with Jesus. It's all or nothing with the response we give.

And that's why (in your life) you cannot have it both ways. You can't pretend that it's true and that it matters, and then live as if it does not, because not only will you be missing out, you'll be losing out.

And so let me close with this. And don't mishear what I'm (about to say), because what I'm (about to say), I'm saying out of love and with the deepest and most heartfelt respect.

In this so-called "post-truth" world in which we live, you need to decide (for yourself) what's true. You need to (figure out for yourself), if you haven't already, what you actually believe about Jesus Christ. And when you do, (you figure it out), you need to let what you believe (and know) as the truth, shape how you live. (That's what needs to happen.)

And here's how it needs to happen. If what we are celebrating today is true, then this is not just a once-a-year celebration. This is not just a come-when-you-want and take-in-what-you-want, (and then go home), and we're all good event. It's not. (Don't mishear.) This is an every week, every day, (every moment) of every day relationship with the One who is your Savior. (It's that important.)

Because if it's true, then it's true, and (what that means is) the Son of God, the person of Jesus Christ, the one who created you and gave you life, and who now calls you to be his follower, gave his life (on the cross) and was raised from the dead so that you could have yours.

That's what it means and that's why we're here. That's what the Church is all about. We are here week-in and week-out because of (what happened) on that first Easter. That's why we're here. You need to decide what you believe to be the truth.

But don't base your belief on public opinion or personal desire or the latest social media post. Base your belief on what really happened, on what God has told us about himself (in his Word), what he's done and accomplished in Jesus Christ (on the cross), and upon what's really true.

It's "All or Nothing" in his life, his death, his resurrection, and your response. If this day means anything, it means everything. There is no middle ground. Amen.