

“Unavoidable Truth”

Not long before Jesus was sentenced to be crucified, there was an interesting conversation that took place between Jesus and the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Trying to make a decision about what to do with (this man) who had been (brought to him) by the religious leaders, Pilate asked a simple question. He said, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (He said), “Is there anything in this charge brought against you grounded in what is true?”

Do you know what Jesus said to that charge...king of the Jews? Do you know what he said? (He said), “My kingdom is not of this world.” (He said), “My kingdom is from another place. In fact, for this reason I was born (he said), and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Then Pilate (followed up) with another question. He asked, “What is truth?” And then it says he went out and tried everything (he could) to avoid condemning this man Jesus to death...but he eventually did.

What is the truth about this day we call Easter? What are the truths about what happened two thousand years ago to this man they called the Christ? And why is it, in this so-called “post-truth world”, in which we live, where everyone comes up with their own version of what they (believe to be true) that the truth about Easter is still recognized as the single most important (and unavoidable) truth this world has ever known?

I'll tell you why? Because what happened on that first Easter proved that Jesus was who he claimed to be...he was God. And he came into this world to save us.

What I want to do (this morning) is to walk through the events of that first Easter, some of the things that (led up to) our Lord's resurrection, and touch on some of truths (from those events) that you and I (simply) cannot avoid.

Now, we can ignore them (if we want) and pretend they're not important. We can deny them and say they never happened. We can even believe in our hearts that they (actually did) happen, and then (go off) and do our own thing (as if) they had not. A lot of people do those things...every day they do them, and so can we.

But we can't avoid them. (We can't.) They're too great, they're too important, and (if they are true), which the Bible and 2000 years of Christian history says they are, then the implications (of those events) for our lives (here and now) and their significance for our lives (for eternity) are too far-reaching for (any of us) to avoid. (It's not possible.)

There were three significant events that happened on that first Easter weekend that took place over the course of about three days, from Thursday night until early Sunday morning. First, there was the trial of Jesus. Then there was the death of Jesus. And then there was the resurrection of Jesus. Let's take a look at (those three), in that order, starting with the trial.

If you remember the story, there were (actually) a series of trials Jesus went through. They arrested him on Thursday night and before that night was through, six different trials had taken place.

There were the religious trials: one before Annas (one of the religious leaders), another before Caiaphas (the High Priest), and finally before the Sanhedrin (the religious supreme court). And after that were the civil trials: one before Pilate (the governor of Jerusalem), a second before Herod (the governor of Galilee), and a third before Pilate, once again.

Six different trials, all night long, and by the time they were finished, do you know what they found? They found nothing. There was nothing Jesus had done that was wrong. They had no crime against him, no accusation that would stick. They even brought in people to make up charges, but they didn't stick.

Finally, Jesus was convicted on one count. They convinced Pilate to agree to one count. Do you know what it was? He claimed to be the Son of God. He claimed to be the Son of God.

It's an interesting study, the claims Jesus made about himself. People have (all kinds of ideas) about Jesus. But Jesus didn't have all kinds of ideas about himself. What he claimed for himself never changed. It was consistent from beginning to end.

He said things like, "I am the Son of God." He said things like, "I came into this world to save it." He said things like, "I and the Father are one." (He said), "There's only one way into heaven." And he said, "That (one way) into heaven is through me."

One count is all they could find; one charge (against Jesus) that finally stuck. He claimed to be the Son of God. (He claimed to be the Son of God.) And it was true. It's exactly what he claimed. And it ended up costing him his life.

One of the unavoidable truths (surrounding Easter) is the claims Jesus made for himself. (They're unavoidable.) And they're unavoidable because they're either true or they're not. They're either based in the reality of what was (actually the case) or they're built on some false notion of what never really was. But it has to be one or the other. It cannot be both. And because (it cannot be both), every one of us (here today) has to decide (for our self) which one it actually is.

Just for fun, I went online and did a little search. I typed in the phrase, "Things people believe about Jesus." Did you know that more than eight million sites popped up surrounding that one little phrase? There's a (long list) of things people believe about Jesus.

"What Muslims believe about Jesus...What Jews believe about Jews...What Mormons believe about Jesus." One of the sites listed was "What Americans believe about Jesus." More than 8 million sites (came up) dedicated to what people believe about Jesus. Go online (later today) and take a look. It's incredible what people believe.

Now, let me tell you something. It doesn't matter what people believe about Jesus. What matters is what's true about Jesus. It doesn't matter what ideas people might have about who Jesus was. What matters is whether the ideas (they have) are actually grounded in what's true.

What do you believe about Jesus? What's your judgment about this one who was called the Christ? Don't miss the point. Jesus is being judged (every day) in this world, in all kinds of ways.

He's being judged by the nations of the world. How many religions are there? (How many different belief systems exist?) Every one of them claims to have a way into heaven. But only one of them (in its leader) claimed to be the Son of God. (They can't all be true.) Jesus is being judged (every day) by the nations.

It's the same thing in the United States. Jesus is being judged (right here) in this country. (Every day, just think about it.) Almost anything goes these days when it comes to what we're allowing on television, (the internet), the kind of moral standards we're holding up. It's incredible (how much has changed), what we're holding up (today) as examples of things to emulate in life...almost anything.

But don't cross that line and confess to be a Christian. And don't hold up any standard that talks about sin, about what's really wrong in this world. But that's why Jesus died. That's what Jesus came to do. Every day, he's being judged in this country...every day.

And how about on a personal level? Did you know you make a judgment about Jesus every time you set priorities for your life, establish values, make decisions about what part he'll play or not?

My friends, Jesus has never done anything to force anyone in this world to believe. (He hasn't.) But he has done something that forces every one of us to decide. He claimed to be the Son of God. He claimed to be the only one in this world who could save. And he made that claim all the way to his death.

First, there was the trial of Jesus, and then there was the death of Jesus. Now, the crucifixion is probably the most brutal and tortuous form of the death penalty ever devised. About a hundred years later, even the Romans stopped using it because it was so inhumane. But even before he went to the cross, Jesus went through a tremendous amount of physical pain and abuse.

You remember the story. They put a robe on him and began to mock him. They placed on his head a crown of thorns. And they put a blindfold on him and began to beat him and slap him and hit him in the face. And when they did this, they'd say, "Who hit you, Jesus?" And then they'd slap him and they'd say, "Who slapped you Jesus? If you are the Son of God, tell us who you are. Tell us who we are."

Let me tell you something. Jesus knew exactly who they were. He knew everything about their lives. (He knows everything about your life.) But he didn't say a word. He didn't tell them a thing, because he was taking the punishment of the world upon himself.

The Bible says he was "mocked and scorned." And then it says he was "scourged." Thirty-nine lashes were given to Jesus. Forty would kill a man. Jesus was given thirty-nine, before he even went to the cross.

Now, Pilate thought that would be enough, that the crowd would be appeased and he could let him go. What it did was make them even (more hostile) and so they called out for his death. And that's what happened. Jesus went to his death. They nailed him to a tree. And he did it for you. He paid the price for you.

I came across a medical description of what happens when a person is crucified. I'm not going to go into the detail. It's gruesome how it happens. (I think you know how it works.) They drive a nail through the wrists on both sides (not the hands, but the wrists). And then they put the feet, one of the top of the other (pointing straight down), and drive another nail through the arches and into the wood.

Death on a cross was death by suffocation. That's what happens, because (if you hang that way) for any period of time, the muscles in your chest begin to paralyze. And when all the weight of your body is held this way, eventually you can breathe in, but you can't breathe out.

And so, death on the cross would be a simple death of suffocation. (And it would happen fast.) But the Romans didn't want to make it that easy. And so what they did was they would take a person's knees and bend them a little before nailing them to the cross.

The man being crucified would hang there in absolute agony until the pain in his chest was unbearable, and then he would lift himself up on his feet to be able to catch a breath. And then he'd hold that position until he could no longer stand the pain in his feet, and then he'd let himself back down. It was an incredibly torturous death.

That's why the Bible tells us (and history tells us too), that the Romans eventually, if they had to (speed up the process) for any reason, would break the man's legs so they couldn't stand up...and then they'd suffocate.

That's the kind of punishment Jesus went through on the cross. Why? Why did Jesus have to die? It says they took a spear and stuck it in his side, to make sure that he was dead. It says, (when that happened), water and blood came out of the chest cavity.

Now, there have been many books written on this. Doctors say the only way this would have happened (water and blood mixing in the chest cavity) is if the heart rips. Call it what you want. Jesus died of a broken heart. It exploded in his chest...and it happened for you.

Why did Jesus die? What was his death on the cross all about? The Bible says it was the will of God that Jesus would suffer. It says it was something Jesus did willingly, of his own accord. He didn't have to, but he did.

You see, it's a law of the universe that you reap what you sow. If you break this world's laws, you pay this world's price. If you break God's law, you pay God's price. If you break one commandment, you've broken them all. And there's a price that needs to be paid; there's a sacrifice that has to be given.

And so that's what happened. That's what Jesus did. He paid the price. He became the sacrifice. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death..." (That's the bad news.) If you sin, you're going to die. The good news is it's already been paid for...by Jesus. You don't have to pay it. "The wages of sin is death...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ."

I don't know how many of you would remember the name of Timothy McCarthy. (This goes back a ways.) He was the secret service man (in the early 1980's) who jumped in front of John Hinckley and took a bullet for President Reagan and saved his life.

I remember thinking (when it happened), "What a hero." (And he was.) He took a bullet for the President of the United States from a would-be assassin. (He was.) And yet, at Calvary, the President of the Universe took a bullet for you. He paid the price for you. He said, "I love you this much."

Now, everybody look up here for a moment, (and if you get nothing else this morning, get this). If you don't think God loves you, take a long look at the cross. If you don't think God loves you...there's nobody in this world who loves you more than God does...nobody.

What are you going to do with Jesus? What are you going to do with Easter? It's an (unavoidable truth), what happened. It was a horrible death. And to think that it happened to a man who had never sinned, who'd never done anything wrong. But he did it for you and for me.

There was a trial (six times), all the way through the night. There was a crucifixion. Jesus took the punishment you and I deserved when he went to his death. And there was a burial, and (three days later) a resurrection. And that's where we find our hope.

The Bible says after Jesus died, they took his body down and put him in a tomb. Now, the burial practices in those days were different than the ones today. They didn't put people in caskets and bury them in the ground. They dug caves in the side of a mountain, and then they'd dig a trench in front of the cave and roll a big stone in front of it. And then, when someone in the family died, they'd roll the stone away and bury the next person, and then roll it back.

But when Jesus died, they not only put a stone in front of it, but they placed guards to make sure that's where he stayed. (Can you believe it?) It's an interesting note, (almost comical), because never before in history had guards ever been placed to keep a dead man from coming out. But it's an important note, (and it's crucial), because that's exactly what took place. The guards were there. The stone was in front of the tomb. And Jesus came out! He rose from the dead!

My friends, this is at the heart of what this day is all about. This is at the heart of that the Christian faith is all about. If there was no resurrection from the dead, then what we're doing here this morning is a complete waste of time. (It really is.) The Christian faith means absolutely nothing if Easter didn't happen.

I mean, really? If Easter didn't happen, then what's the point? I'll tell you the point. There is no point, if it didn't happen. This all means nothing (and it's worth nothing) if it's not true. But it is true.

Did you know there is more historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ than almost any other event in history? In the Bible, in historical records, in the writings of some of the most well-respected historians of the day, it's there and it's true, because it really happened. Jesus came back to life.

A few years back, some of the world's top historians made a list of what they considered to be the 100 most significant events in history. (It was quite the list.) The list included (things like) the discovery of the Americas, the invention of the airplane, the printing press, the start of the internet. Number four on the list of the most significant events in world history was the life of Jesus Christ.

Now, when I first saw that, I was offended. (I thought), "How could they say that. (I know I'm a pastor), but how could they place the life of Jesus Christ as #4?" (It made no sense.) After all he had done, it was offensive. My first thought was, they had it wrong.

The more I thought about it, (I began to realize) they probably had it right. The life of Jesus Christ...the life of Jesus Christ...if that's all there was, then #4 would probably be the best you could say.

Because, honestly, there have been many good teachers (in history) who have left their mark, many moral philosophers who (have lived) and offered a new way to approach life. There have been healers, many miracle workers, many inspiring leaders, even (a long list) of unselfish martyrs who have lived (and died) for a cause. Jesus was not first, nor will he be the last. The life of Jesus Christ, by itself, probably deserves nothing more than number four.

What makes Jesus different (and sets him apart) and what makes the truth of what happened (on that first Easter) unavoidable, is not what he did with his life. That's not what makes the difference. What makes the difference is what was actually different.

Jesus not only made the claims he did (about who he was), not only died on a cross for those he loved, not only offered and accomplished a longer list of (well-documented and historically-substantiated) teachings and miracles and healings and life-changing impacts than anyone else who has ever lived, but he predicted that (when he died), three days later, he would come back to life. And it happened! Jesus Christ rose from the dead! Jesus Christ came back to life! And because he came back to life, he changed life. And he changed it, not only for when we die, but also for while we're here.

I'll give you my "short version" of what this is all about. (We could spend all day.) I'll give my short version. After more than 62 years of life, the past (almost) 32 years as a Lutheran pastor, here's my bottom line for (the Christian faith) and whether or not it's true and it actually works. The Christian faith is not true because it works. The Christian faith works because it's true.

It's an undeniable truth, what happened on the first Easter. It's a life-changing truth for anyone willing to take Jesus at his word and place their trust in him. And in this so-called "post-truth world", in which we live, where everyone comes up with their own version of what they (believe to be true), Easter is (without question) the single most important (and unavoidable) truth this world has ever known.

So, let me close with this. That little "Children's Sermon" we started with, that whole thing about this "piece of rope" and how it represents your life? It was a good illustration, don't you think? (I think it worked.) It makes the point. It was easy for the kids to follow.

But, do you know what? It wasn't just an illustration. It's the truth about the way things are. And it's not just for the young kids (who came up front), but for all of us kids, no matter where we are.

This is what you get. This is all there is apart from Jesus. Do what you want. Go where you will. Use your "piece of rope" length-of-life however you choose. (You're the only one who can live it.) But when it's over, it's over. It's an unavoidable truth; it's only a matter of time and it will soon be gone...for all of us.

The claim Jesus made is that this "piece-of-rope life" we've been given only makes sense (and lasts) and continues on, if it's lived in him. (It's the only way.) Jesus is your only hope. Amen.