

The Yes and No of Easter
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
Easter Weekend, April 23-24, 2011

Scripture: Philippians 3:10-11

Today I want us to listen carefully to what God is saying. It won't be hard because at Easter God speaks louder than at any other time in history.

So let's put our ear to the empty tomb to find out what our Heavenly Father is communicating to us through the resurrection of his Son.
Please grab your message outline as we hear **The Yes and No of Easter.**

First, at Easter God is saying **YES TO JESUS.**

By raising Jesus from the dead God is affirming the completeness and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. God is declaring that Jesus is the way, truth and the life.

Now God had endorsed his Son before.

You remember the angels told the shepherd, **"Today in the town of David a Savior has born to you; he is Christ the Lord."** (Luke 2:11)



I took down the last of our Christmas decorations this week. I never like to hurry these things.
My excuse is that by waiting until Holy Week I link the incarnation with the resurrection.

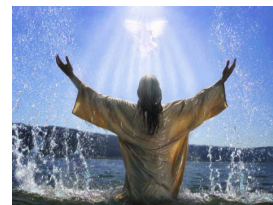
This is important Jesus' coming was just the beginning of the story.

The angels said a Savior had been born.

But at Christmas Jesus hadn't saved anybody.

He didn't do that until Good Friday when he died to save us. It is the resurrection that is the proof that our debt had been paid.

Then at the baptism of Jesus God announced, **"This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased."** (Matthew 3:17)



But it is the resurrection that proves beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus is the divine Son of God.



Later at the transfiguration on the top of the mountain when Jesus appears in dazzling white in the company of Elijah and Moses God declared, **"This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him."** (Mark 9:7).

But it is the resurrection that proves that Jesus has fulfilled the law and the prophets and is worthy of our love and adoration.

When Jesus was alive there was a lot of discussion about his identity. That debate continues today.

People ask is Jesus a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord?

We need to talk about these things.

But when we are making up our mind about who Jesus is, it is a good idea to consider God's verdict.

At Easter the Father says "Yes" to his Son.

God's vindication of Jesus reversed the world's judgment.

The world crucified Christ but God raised him.

God exalted him and gave him a name above every name.

But have we grasped this?

Years ago I was in the Royal Air Force.

I had an instructor who taught us young pilots the principles of navigation.

Like many military instructors he did a lot of shouting particularly at me. But he wanted to make sure we understood what he was saying so we didn't get lost on a cross country flight.

He would ask a question and we had to shout back the response. It was a good way of learning.

So let me try that with you this morning with a bit of help from the screen.

What is God saying to us about his son at Easter? **YES**

Second, at Easter God is saying **NO TO SATAN.**

On Good Friday we hear Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"

But on Easter morning the universe heard a far more forlorn cry.

It came from Satan who knew that he had been defeated. His doom was assured.

He no longer controlled the destiny of people.

Jesus was now in charge. He is the rightful king.

There is a spectacular passage in the book of Hebrews that describes the devil's defeat.

It tells us, **"By his death Jesus destroyed him who holds the power of death – that is the devil and frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Hebrews 2:14-15)**

Jesus destroyed the trifecta of evil.

That is death itself, the devil and our fear of death.

Now it takes faith to believe this because there is plenty of evidence of the devil's activity in the world today.

But Easter informs us that Satan is a defeated foe.
 He is mortally wounded.
 That is why Christians don't need to fear him.
 We don't even need to run from him.
 Rather scripture tells us to resist him and he will flee from us. This is possible because of Easter.

Last Monday I watched *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. I have read all the Harry Potter books and watched all the movies. Hogwarts is a lot like the school I attended in England so I feel very much at home.



If you have followed the story you know it is about a struggle between Harry Potter and the evil Lord called Voldemort. At times it seems that Voldemort has the upper hand and once again Harry and his friends are on the run.

But the reality is we all know, even though the last movie has not been made yet, that Voldemort is going to lose. He can send his dementors and he can try his tricks but he is no match for Harry Potter.

The devil shares the same fate.
 He can throw his weight around.
 But we have read the end of the book. He loses.

So are you with me?
 What does God say to Satan at Easter? **NO**

Then at Easter God is saying **YES TO FORGIVENESS**
 Because of Easter we can be forgiven.
 We can have a new start.

That is what happened to the penitent thief on the cross. That man had probably lived a long life of crime. He had no time for God. He was about to die and yet he finds forgiveness and Jesus promises him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."



It was the same story of forgiveness for Peter and Thomas. Peter had denied Jesus, Thomas doubted him but they are both forgiven.

The message is brought out profoundly when Jesus shouts from the cross, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** (Luke 23:34)

Perhaps we look at our life and we are desperately ashamed of some event in our past.

We may find it hard to forgive ourselves or believe that God could forgive us.

That was Judas' problem.

He did not think that Jesus would forgive him.

But the Lord would have forgiven Judas gladly, had he just asked.

There was no need for Judas to take his life because at Easter God says, yes to forgiveness.

We may have grown up in an environment where there was little forgiveness and that is why it is all the more important we listen to what God is saying at Easter. He says "Yes, I do forgive you. The proof is in the resurrection."

Jesus offers us a brand new start and so Paul can say, **"If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)**

Our society believes in forgiveness with limits but God has removed all those limits. He forgives the abuser, the sex offender, the child pornographer, the concentration camp guard.

Whatever we have done if we are truly sorry, and we repent and seek God's mercy we hear the Father say, **"I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins." (Jeremiah 33:8)**

This message is worth celebrating and that is why we have Easter baskets and Easter bonnets and Easter bunnies. It is why we gather together for Easter dinner with family and friends.

A gentleman in Germany called Volker Kraft decorates a tree in his front garden with 9,800 colored eggs. Like Volker we need to find creative ways to proclaim the Yes and No of Easter and live out its message.

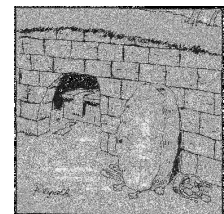


So what does God say about forgiveness? **YES**

God is still not done with his Easter message and now he says **NO TO TYRANNY.** The might of the Roman Empire tried to destroy Jesus but it was unsuccessful. Pilate sealed the tomb but God blew it open.

The empty tomb was not good news for everyone as this cartoon shows.

The stone didn't need to be rolled away to let Jesus out. God removed that stone to send a message to the Roman Empire. The message is that unjust regimes may have their day but their days are numbered.



This is a fulfillment of the prophecy in the Magnificat. There Mary sings of the Messiah, **"He has brought down rulers from their thrones." (Luke 1:52)**

Because the resurrection says no to tyranny this gives hope to those who live in situations of injustice.

The resurrection is good news for the people of Libya and the other countries in the Middle East where dictators dominate by means of cruelty and torture.

The resurrection gives hope to the people in North Korea who are starving and suffering because of the mismanagement of their government.

Recently there have been stories of South Korean Christians who have entered North Korea.

The North Korean government immediately arrests them. The authorities are rightfully terrified of the gospel these believers bring because they know it can overthrow their evil regime.

You see the Easter faith is not simply about believing that God has a nice comfortable afterlife for some of us.

It is not just about me finding a new dimension to my own spiritual life.

Easter faith is far more outward looking than that.

It is good news for the whole world.

Easter tells us that the living God has dealt with evil once and for all. He is now at work by his Spirit to do for us and the whole world what he did for Jesus on that first Easter day.

It is true we celebrate Easter in a world where injustice, violence and wickedness are epidemic but Easter says we are not prepared to tolerate such things.

God is not prepared to tolerate such things.

And so we work and plan and pray and vote with all the energy of God to implement the victory of Jesus.

When God yells No to tyranny at Easter, he is informing us that the resurrection is to impact our public life.

It impacts our education policy and how we treat immigrants and our view of the environment.

Because Jesus is raised from the dead God's new world has begun.

We are not only the beneficiaries of a new creation we are the agents of it.

If we believe in the resurrection, we believe that the living God will put this world right. And if God wants to do that in the future then it is appropriate to try and anticipate that by whatever means we can in the present.

It is our job as Christians in the power of the Spirit to anticipate that glorious final state as much as we possible can. It is up to us to produce signs of the resurrection in our world right now.

And so I ask you on behalf of all the oppressed people of the world, what does God say to tyranny? **NO**

And then at Easter God is saying **YES TO ETERNAL LIFE**. Now what exactly is this eternal life? Well it is the life of God. As God is eternal those who possess this life will live forever.

It is the life that comes to us by the Holy Spirit who indwells those who embrace the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is an indelible characteristic of those who have this eternal life. Whenever you meet a person with eternal life you will notice they have this virtue. It is hope. We know the future will be better because Jesus controls that future. We may not see it now but we have hope.

We stand at the grave of a loved one and we weep and we mourn but in the midst of our sorrow we still have hope. For we know that death is not the end.

So John can say, **"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."**
(John 3:46)

This eternal life begins now and it changes the way we live now but it continues on after we die.

Next week we begin a new series on **Heaven and Hell.**

I encourage you to join us as we examine our eternal destiny. The whole subject of hell is in the news right now so it is an appropriate time to consider it, and to rejoice that Jesus rose to deliver us from Satan.



All this is possible because Jesus was raised on the third day and in scripture the third day is God's Day.

The third day is the day when prisoners of Pharaoh get set free.

The third day is the day mountains shake and rivers are parted and people go into the Promised Land.

The third day is the day a Harem girl like Esther faces down a powerful king.

The third day is the day prophets like Jonah are dropped off at seaports by giant fish.

The third day is the day a crucified carpenter came back to life.

The third day is God's day.

The third day is hope day.

So congregation are you still with me?

What is God is saying to us in Easter about eternal life? **YES**

Finally at Easter God is saying **NO TO DESPAIR.**

Before Easter morning the women were despairing, the disciples were despairing. The two on the road to Emmaus were despairing.

But the resurrection changes despair to delight, hopelessness to hope, tears to cheers.

This week I received a card.
 It is taken from the St. John's Illustrated Bible made in Minnesota
 and it shows a broken cross.
 It is the cross of Jesus that breaks our despair.
 You might be despondent today.
 Looking at your circumstances you have every reason to be. Life is
 not treating you well.



But can I encourage you not to look at your circumstances but look at Christ.
 Look into that empty tomb.
 Listen to the words of Jesus to his despairing disciples when he said, **"Peace be
 with you."** (John 20:26)

So what does God say to despair at Easter? **NO**

All this is well and good and yet there is a very real danger that we can be Christian
 atheists at Easter.
 Let me tell you about this dreadful spiritual disease. Christian atheists say we
 believe in God.
 We believe in the resurrection of Jesus.
 We are happy to come to church and celebrate at Easter.

But it makes no difference to our lives.
 We live the same as everybody else.
 We make decisions on natural principles rather than spiritual ones.

That is a great tragedy.
 For the whole point of the resurrection is that it must make a difference to our life.
 Yet it is so easy to go home and forget that Christ is risen.

Paul knew this temptation. So he tells the Philippians,
**"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the
 fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and
 so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."** (Philippians
 3:10-11)

Paul is saying, "I want the resurrection to be real to me.
 I want to reap its benefits. I want to be able to say "yes" to Jesus and "no" to
 Satan. "Yes" to forgiveness and "no" to tyranny. "Yes" to eternal life and "no" to
 despair.

But Paul acknowledges there is going to be a cost.
 There was for Jesus and there will be for us.
 The cost will be suffering.
 If I am going to say yes to forgiveness it means not only believing that God has
 forgiven me but it means forgiving others who have wronged me and that is very
 hard.

Its painful, its costly.

If I am going to say no to tyranny I cannot stand by and see innocent people suffer.

I have to engage in a struggle against poverty and ignorance and hunger and exploitation, sex trafficking and modern day slavery.

That means leaving my comfortable life and getting my hands dirty. It is costly in terms of time and finances and maybe reputation.

But when we do that we become alive.

We attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Perhaps you say, "I want to live like that."

Then make Paul's prayers your own.

Tell God right now, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Notice there is an element of uncertainty in Paul's statement. He doesn't know exactly what all this is going to involve. He uses that word "somehow".

But he wants God's best for his life.

He is willing to go where faith will take him, and meet each challenge using the Yes and No of Easter.