

Easter Sunday
“The Best Comeback Ever”

Matthew 27:55-61, 28:1-10

[58] Happy Easter! I look forward to this Sunday more than any other. In the Easter story we find our ultimate purpose and meaning, and I know that God is going to meet us in a very real way this morning. Would you join me in prayer?

O Lord Jesus Christ, the risen and mighty one, today is your day. We are your people. Let your Spirit move powerfully among us this morning, so that every single person here would feel and experience your love, your grace, and your forgiveness. Tune our ears to hear your word. Open our minds, soften our hearts, and help us to know what your resurrection means for us today. In your precious holy name we pray. Amen.

Today is all about comebacks. And by comebacks, I don't mean those insults and one-liners you find on the internet. My definition of a comeback is an unexpected return to victory when all odds are stacked against you. It could be for a famous public figure, or even a group of people, or some other entity.

[59] Take, for example, superstar Michael Jordan. While playing basketball for the Chicago Bulls, he won three straight NBA championships from 1991 to 1993. Then he retired, citing his “loss of desire to play basketball” and the death of his father. He actually played baseball for a year.¹

In 1995, Jordan came out of retirement. He rejoined the Bulls and won three more championships from 1996-1998. That was an amazing comeback, maybe the greatest in basketball history.

[60] Speaking of sports, does anyone know who holds the record for the greatest comeback in a college football game? Michigan State University. I personally witnessed this feat when the Spartans beat my beloved Northwestern Wildcats in 2006. After falling behind 38-3, the Spartans rallied to score 38 unanswered points to beat the Wildcats 41-38. An amazing comeback, but not one of my favorite memories.

[61] Maybe you are not a sports fan, but you might know about the comeback at Yellowstone National Park. I visited in 1987, one year before a series

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Jordan

of wildfires ravaged the park. Before this time, forest management policies encouraged total suppression of any fire. [62] But ecologists began to understand how occasional fires actually helped the ecosystem. While those 1988 fires burned over 36% of the park, the forest and plants regenerated, and now the park is even more beautiful than ever.²

[63] My favorite political comeback actually involves two whole countries. From 1949 to 1990, Germany was split into East and West. A whole generation lived behind the Iron Curtain. And then, on October 3rd, 1990, the country was reunited. Interestingly enough, my wife, Katja, was eleven years old and living in the East when reunification happened. The news in 1989 that the Berlin Wall and all the borders were open was so astounding; her family didn't even believe it at first.

[64] Here's the deal: Combine all four of those comebacks, and they are still not as impressive as Jesus Christ's resurrection. The first Easter takes the prize for the best comeback ever. No single event has had a greater impact on the world.

I'm not going to try to prove the truth of resurrection to you. I just want to ask, what difference does the resurrection make? Is it simply a good story? To me, it is so much more. Today I simply want to tell you about the greatest comeback ever, and why it can change your life.

[65] We read one account of this impossible comeback in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 27:55-56 (NIV), we read, “Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.”

The women witnessed all these events. They saw Jesus die. They followed Joseph to the tomb where he laid the body. They saw how Joseph had to hurry. The Jewish Sabbath began at sunset on Friday, and after that, no work was allowed. Since Jesus had died around 3 pm, Joseph had only three hours to wrap the body and do a minimal embalment. The burial prep was likely incomplete.

[66] Jesus was placed in a tomb, and not in a grave like in our modern cemeteries. In Israel, generally the desert ground is too hard to dig, and any good

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellowstone_fires_of_1988

ground would have been saved for agriculture. Tombs were carved from pure rock, or caves or holes were used. To prevent animals or robbers from entering, a huge rock, possibly a ton or more, was rolled down an incline to cover the entrance, using gravity to keep it in place. While one person may have been strong enough to put the stone in place, once set, that stone wasn't going anywhere. It's not like you could call a contractor and a truck to move it.

[67] These women saw all of that. Think how desperate they were to still go to the tomb to finish the embalming. They were desperate to do something, anything for Jesus, and in their despair, they realized none of them could move the stone. Can you just how distraught they were?

[68] Early on Sunday morning, they arrived at the tomb, and what they saw astounded them. An angel, like lighting, came down from heaven, rolled the stone away, sat on it. He told them not to be afraid, that Jesus was risen, to look in the tomb, and to go tell the disciples. Imagine all their emotions. Matthew 28:8 says they were filled with joy and fear. No kidding!

We know the story. We know how this comeback ends. But in that moment, these women did not. Despite Jesus' teaching, they just didn't expect to find him alive.

[69] I've presided over dozens of funerals, and I've never seen a dead person sit up in the casket. I don't mean to be morbid, but it's true. We just don't expect the dead to rise. Sure, countries can reunite, sports teams can come back from certain defeat, even forests can regrow after a devastating fire. We believe those stories. But how do expect the dead to return to life after you have seen the crucifixion firsthand?

[70] The women reported back to the disciples as they were told. What a scene that would have been! The women babbling about angels, a stone, an empty tomb, and Jesus being risen. It was too much! Jesus' disciples were beyond skeptical. They weren't there to see the angel; they didn't see Jesus in the garden. Even though they also had heard Jesus openly preach about his death and resurrection, they just didn't believe the women's crazy report. They didn't believe until they met the resurrected Jesus face-to-face.

[71] Actually, it is good for us that they didn't believe at first. The Apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 15, if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, if there is no resurrection, if all we believe is just a lie, then we are to be pitied above all other people. But the resurrection is not a lie. It's the truth. Jesus really rose from the dead. How else could a rag-tag group of uneducated fishermen transform into an on-fire, world-changing group of apostles? How could these men and women die for their belief? Most of them eventually were murdered, martyred and exiled for their faith in Jesus Christ. These disciples were in the position to know the real truth of the resurrection. It is a great thing that Jesus had to appear to them for them to finally believe. That's how the church began.

As I said, most of us already know this comeback story. So the real question is, what does this resurrection mean for us?

[72] For starters, it's our choice whether or not to believe. CS Lewis once said, you've only got three options when it comes to Jesus Christ: liar, lunatic, or Lord.³ If Jesus said he was God, and said he would rise from the dead, and yet he knew he was not and could not, that makes him a liar. Or, maybe Jesus really thought he was the Son of God, in which case, that makes him a lunatic. Straight-up crazy. If I ever claim that I'm going to die and come back to life, please, get me some professional help!

If Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, there is only one other option. Jesus is Lord. Jesus really was who he said he was and really did what he said he would do. Jesus is Lord. You can't simply call him a good teacher or a nice man. It's not logical. Liar, lunatic, or Lord. What do you call him?

[73] Like I said, I can't prove to you that Jesus rose from the dead. But I can tell you the difference the resurrection makes in my life. First, I have no fear of death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ proves he is the Lord of life and death. I have nothing to fear if I trust Jesus. Because Jesus conquered the grave, I have the hope of eternal life. Like the song says, “Because He Lives, I can face tomorrow.”

³ C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 1952. (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6979-i-am-trying-here-to-prevent-anyone-saying-the-really>)

Second, the resurrection gives me purpose in this life, right here and now. Because Jesus died and rose again, everything Jesus said must be true. And if what Jesus said is true, then I must respond to his love. I am burdened to tell his story. I must love others as Christ loved me, so that everyone will know how they can receive Jesus as Lord as well. This is how we make disciples: by loving God and others. There is no greater purpose to this life, than to live for Jesus and to show unconditional love to others.

What do you believe about this comeback story? Are you skeptical? Do you want to believe it, but need proof? Are you overjoyed, filled with fear and wonder, and want to tell everyone, even if they think you're crazy?

Imagine what people might say: “What? You go to church?! You give your time and money away?! You pray, read the Bible, and love your enemies?!” Yes, we are crazy, but in a good way. Jesus' love compels us to do some extraordinary stuff. I for one am glad Jesus went to the cross for me. And the truth is, he went to the cross for you as well.

I wish there was more time to tell you all about Jesus' love. The good news is, we'll be celebrating his resurrection next Sunday, too. And the Sunday after that. And the one after that. I pray that you will be celebrating with us, too.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse:

1 Corinthians 15:20: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Reflection questions:

1. What is your earliest Easter memory? What is your favorite Easter tradition?
2. When have you experienced a “comeback” moment in your life? How did it happen, and where did you find the strength to rebound?
3. What would it have meant to the disciples if Jesus’ dead body had been found instead of the empty tomb? What would it have meant for us today?
4. How does Jesus’ resurrection impact your view of death and eternal life?
5. How can we respond to God’s radical grace with equivalent love and grace for all people?