

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 27, 2016
Easter Sunday**

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Matthew 27:57-66; 28:1-10

Let me tell you a story about a boy named Philip. Philip was born with Down's Syndrome. He was a happy child, but as he grew he became increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. He was in a Sunday school class at church with nine other eight-year-old boys and girls.

On the Sunday after Easter, Philip's Sunday school teacher brought in a bunch of those containers that pantyhose used to come in – they looked like humongous eggs – and gave each of the children one of the eggs. It was a beautiful spring Sunday morning, so the teacher took the children outside. They were each to find a symbol of new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back inside, where they would open their eggs and share with the rest of the class the symbols they had found.

They ran around the church grounds, gathered their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all the eggs on the table, and the teacher began to open them. One of the eggs contained a flower. In another there was a little butterfly. Another had a rock in it. The kids laughed when they saw it. Someone said: "That's crazy! How is a rock supposed to be like new life?" The boy who had found it said: "It's mine! I knew all of you would get flowers and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different."

In the light of Jesus' resurrection, of course, we can see a connection between a rock and the new, resurrection life that came bursting forth from the tomb on Easter morning. But the boy who chose the rock did not yet grasp the theological profundity of his choice.

The teacher opened the next egg. There was nothing in it. The children said: "Somebody didn't do it right!" The teacher felt a tug on his shirt. It was Philip, who said: "It's mine."

The children said: "You didn't do it right, Philip! There's nothing there!"

"I did so do it right," said Philip. "It's empty. The tomb is empty!"

There was a silence as the class pondered what Philip said. From that moment on, the rest of the kids treated Philip differently – not as someone who was different from them, but as part of the group. He was set free, you might say, from the tomb of his differentness.

Philip died the next year, as a result of an infection most children could have quickly shrugged off. His family had known since he was born that he probably wouldn't live out a full life span. Lots of things had been wrong with his little body.

At Philip's funeral, those nine children from his Sunday school class and their teacher walked up to the front of the church, not with flowers but with an empty pantyhose egg, a symbol of Philip's hope – and ours – in the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. (Source: Harry Pritchett, Jr., www.preachingtoday.com)

For Philip, and for you, I trust, the resurrection changes everything.

For the followers and friends and family of Jesus, it is clear that the resurrection changed everything. Think about what they had gone through in the week since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to a hero's welcome on Palm Sunday. After the Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room on Thursday evening, Jesus, betrayed by Judas, was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane where He had gone to pray. It must have seemed to His family and friends that things just spiraled out of control from there.

FRIDAY

Friday was not a good day. In fact, it was the worst day. Ever. In the early morning hours, Jesus was condemned to death by the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, on the charge of blasphemy. But the Jewish leaders had to convince the Roman government to sentence Jesus to death since they didn't have the authority to do it themselves. So they took Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, to seek the death penalty.

Pilate was not a good man. But he could see that Jesus had been railroaded. So he tried to release Jesus. Ultimately, though, he gave in to the political pressure applied by the Jewish leaders and to the demands of the crowd that had been whipped into a frenzy, calling for Jesus to be put to death. After washing his hands of responsibility, Pilate handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified.

They took Him to a place called Golgotha, on a hill also known as Calvary, where He was nailed to a cross along with two criminals, one on either side of Him.

One of the criminals hanging there with Jesus cursed Him and said: "Some Messiah you are! Save yourself and us!"

But the other one rebuked him. He said; "Have you no fear of God? You're getting the same as Him. We're getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

To which Jesus replied: "Don't worry, I will. Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 22:39-43, NIV and MSG).

What we can learn from this, as J. C. Ryle has pointed out, is that one thief was saved, so that no one should despair; and only one, that no one should presume on the grace of God. God's saving grace in Christ is so rich, so amazing, so sufficient, that no one should despair of it. It is available to any and all who will receive it. No one is beyond the reach of it. But no one

should ever take His saving grace for granted, as if it were something we are entitled to. There is both a great comfort and a serious warning in this.

While Jesus hung on the cross, for three hours, from about noon to 3 PM, the sun went into hiding and darkness covered the land. It was around 3 PM on Friday that Jesus, having completed His mission to save us from our sins, cried out: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He then took His last breath and died.

One of the soldiers overseeing the crucifixion, seeing that Jesus was dead, pierced His side with a spear, producing a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:34), confirming that He really was dead. There was no doubt about it.

A man named Joseph from a town called Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for permission to take the body of Jesus. Though he was a member of the Jewish Council, Joseph had become a secret follower of Jesus.

Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was already dead. But, receiving confirmation from the centurion in charge, he granted Joseph’s request. So Joseph, along with Nicodemus (John 19:38), who was also a secret follower of Jesus, took the body of Jesus, prepared it for burial and wrapped it in burial cloths, in accordance with the Jewish custom. They placed the body in a tomb cut out of rock, and rolled a stone in front of the entrance.

Matthew tells us that two women were there – Mary Magdalene and another Mary – watching as Joseph and Nicodemus laid the body of Jesus in the tomb (Matthew 27:61). So they knew where the body of Jesus was buried.

They weren’t the only ones watching. There were others on hand taking note, others who had a vested interest in knowing where Jesus was buried and in making sure He stayed there.

That was Friday. We call it “Good Friday,” and it *is* good because of what God accomplished for us through the death of Jesus on the cross. But what happened that day seemed to be anything but good. To the family and friends and followers of Jesus, it was a very bad day. A horrible day. The worst day imaginable.

SATURDAY

Then Saturday came. The Gospels tell us almost nothing of Saturday. *Almost* nothing. From sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, faithful Jews, including the followers of Jesus, observed the Sabbath.

The one development that took place on Saturday was that some of the Jewish leaders went to see Pilate to request that a guard be placed at the tomb of Jesus. Why? While the disciples of Jesus had all gone into hiding in their grief and despair, the opponents of Jesus remembered what Jesus had said about rising again on the third day. So they took what they considered to be appropriate measures to make sure nothing happened.

They went to Pilate and said: “We remember that while He was still alive that deceiver said: ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, His disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that He has been raised from the dead” (Matthew 27:62-64).

Pilate was probably somewhat amused at their request to guard a dead man. But he gave them permission to “make the tomb as secure as you know how” (27:65). So they put a seal on the stone over the entrance to the tomb, and posted guards from the temple police there. They made it as secure as they could. What they did not understand was that no stone, no seal, no guard, and no army could prevent the Son of God from rising from the dead.

Saturday must have been a long, long day for the family and friends and followers of Jesus. A day of fear, disillusionment, and despair. They were deflated. Devastated. In shock. Scared. And full of unanswered questions:

- How did this happen?
- What went wrong?
- What does it all mean?
- Now what?

A day of waiting. But waiting for what? They weren’t expecting a resurrection to take place. It wasn’t even on their radar screen. Their hopes and dreams had died with Jesus on the cross and were buried with Him in Joseph’s tomb. What were they to do now?

Waiting is hard, isn’t it? No one likes to wait. I know I don’t. But waiting is a huge part of life, whether it is the little things or the big things that shape and affect our lives on a daily basis.

In a world in which the evils of terrorism, senseless violence, hatred, fear, division, poverty, suffering, and selfishness threaten to overwhelm us, it is Saturday here on planet earth. And we wonder sometimes if Sunday will ever come. But because Sunday came for Jesus, because He rose again from the dead, we can have confidence that Sunday will come for us, too.

Yes, waiting can be hard. It is something we just have to get used to. Let waiting do its work in you. Trust God to do *His* work in you as you wait. And remember that God *is* at work, even when it seems like nothing is happening. Just as He was still at work between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, when the followers of Jesus had pretty much given up all the hope they ever had.

A few weeks ago we talked about the paradox of joy in suffering. Someone has said that, second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness and spiritual maturity any of us will ever encounter in this life.

Saturday was a day of waiting. And wondering.

SUNDAY

But then Sunday came. It was a day like no other. Ever. Even though Jesus had told them on several occasions that it would happen, His followers were completely surprised by His resurrection. They never saw it coming.

At the crack of dawn, Mary Magdalene, another Mary (not the mother of Jesus), and some other women went to the tomb, bringing spices with which to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1). When they got there, they found that the seal had been broken and the stone rolled away from the entrance, with an angel – a messenger from heaven – sitting on it.

The guards, who were there to prevent any hanky-panky from taking place, were shaking in their shoes, frightened out of their wits.

The reason the stone had been rolled away was so the women and, later, the other disciples could see for themselves that the tomb was empty. The stone had been rolled away so they could see that Jesus was not there. It was *not* rolled away to let Jesus out of the tomb. He was already up and out. He didn't need anyone to move the stone for Him.

The women were surprised – dumbfounded – to discover that the body of Jesus was gone. The tomb was empty. Well, almost empty. There was no body, but the burial cloths in which the body of Jesus had been wrapped were lying there undisturbed.

Some of you have been to Israel. You have seen the Garden Tomb, which many people believe to be the place where Joseph and Nicodemus laid the body of Jesus after His death that awful Friday. Mary Sue and I have seen it, too. We were there last June. We set foot in it ourselves. Like all first-century tombs, this one has two chambers or rooms – one where the body of the deceased was placed and one called the “weeping room” where loved ones could mourn the dead.

Here are a few pictures we took.

The first is a picture taken from the outside, showing the entrance to the tomb (minus the stone to cover the entrance).

The second, taken from inside, shows the inner chamber where the body of Jesus would have been laid. You can see that there was room for another body as well.

The last picture shows a hand-carved sign on the door at the entrance to the tomb, which says: HE IS NOT HERE FOR HE IS RISEN. I'm pretty sure the sign wasn't there the first Easter morning (haha!), but it encapsulates the message of the angel to the women who came to the tomb looking for Jesus: “He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said” (Matthew 28:6).

RISEN

Have you seen *Risen*, the new movie about a fictional Roman tribune's search for the body of Jesus after His resurrection? The tribune, named Clavius, is assigned by Pontius Pilate to investigate rumors of a risen Jewish Messiah and to produce the body of Jesus, missing from the tomb in which it was placed following His death on a Roman cross and burial. (Spoiler alert:) Failing to find the body, Clavius does find Mary Magdalene and the frightened disciples of Jesus, before encountering the risen Jesus Himself.

At one point in the film, Clavius says: "I have seen two things which {I} cannot reconcile: A man dead without question, and that same man alive again." Though he cannot explain it, Clavius comes to believe in the resurrection of Jesus and helps the disciples of Jesus evade the Romans on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee where they see Jesus again and watch Him ascend into heaven.

For Clavius, seeing the risen Messiah changed everything. It meant that he couldn't keep living the way he had been living.

Yes, Clavius is a fictional character. But what of Mary Magdalene and the other women who came to the tomb? What of Peter and John and doubting Thomas and the rest of the disciples? What of Cleopas and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)? They were all real people who saw the risen Lord Jesus with their own eyes, who heard His voice with their own ears, who touched Him and ate with Him after His resurrection. Whatever doubts they had melted away, and they became absolutely convinced that the same Jesus who died and was buried on Friday rose from the dead on Sunday.

THE RESURRECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING

The resurrection of Jesus changed everything for the followers of Jesus. Their grief was changed to joy. Their defeated, deflated spirits were transformed. A spirit of celebration and a new power for living took root in their hearts. Their fear turned to courage born of a living faith. They became new and different people from the inside out.

A famous theologian (Wolfhart Pannenberg) observed that "the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First it is a very unusual event." (How is that for a profound theological insight?) "And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

In other words, if it really happened, *because* it really happened, it changes everything. You can't stay the same. It is like when a guy meets the girl of his dreams, or when a woman meets the man of her dreams, after dating a bunch of "losers." It changes everything. Only *this* – the resurrection of Jesus – is exponentially bigger than finding the love of your life, becoming a parent (or grandparent), or any other life event you can imagine.

The resurrection changes everything because it means that Jesus really is who He says He is. He really is the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. It changes everything because it

means His death on the cross really did accomplish the salvation of everyone who believes in Him. It changes everything because it means He did not live and die in vain. It changes everything because it means He is alive and He is Lord. It means death does not have the final say. Not for Jesus and not for you or me. Not for Philip. Not for any of your family or friends who have died trusting the Lord Jesus. Not for that friend or family member of yours who is facing death today, trusting in Jesus and His saving love. It means we can face death with confidence, with a sure, certain, unwavering hope of life after death rooted in Jesus' resurrection power. It changes everything because it gives us power and purpose and peace and hope and joy in our lives here and now.

Do you have that hope and joy, that peace and power and purpose in your life? If you do, let it show in the way you live. Let it flow out of you every day. Spread it around, so that the life of the risen Lord Jesus will be seen in you. You may not see how, but it can't help but make a difference in someone's life.

If that hope and joy, that peace, power, and purpose are missing from your life, there is only one place to find it. It can be yours by embracing Jesus, by trusting Him in the fullness of who He is – Son of God, promised Messiah, suffering Savior, risen and living Lord. You have to go beyond just believing the resurrection really took place. (Which it did.) You have to believe *in* Jesus. You have to open your heart to Him and let Him have your life.

The changes in you may be incremental. Or they may be dramatic. But, I promise you, real, personal, living faith in Jesus – the Christ of the cross and the empty tomb – changes everything.

Lord, let it be so in each of us. Amen.