

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Easter Sunday	Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Luke 22:39-46; Matthew 27:32-66; Acts 2:22-36	Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	April 5, 2026 (a.m.)	

GETHSEMANE, GOLGOTHA AND THE EMPTY TOMB

The New Testament does not discuss the sufferings of Christ in either an abstract or a sentimental fashion. Rather, the focus is on the meaning, significance, and purpose of His suffering. The writers of the New Testament clearly indicate, as the late G. C. Berkouwer has written, “that His suffering was not senseless, tragic or hopeless. This becomes especially manifest in the historical fact of his passage from humiliation to exaltation, Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead. It is impossible to separate the fact from the significance of the resurrection, as though the main thing were the idea rather than the historical reality of the resurrection. The Scriptures present the message of Christ’s resurrection as being of essential and decisive significance. Again and again the apostolic message calls our attention to both the crucifixion *and* the resurrection. The fact of the cross is followed by the *but* of the fact of the resurrection. This *but* expresses the joy and superior power of God’s activity in the glorification of the Son of Man (Acts 2:23; 3:11f; 4:10; 13:29).¹ The resurrection of Christ is *the* cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith, a point underscored by the Apostle Paul – “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless² and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19. There is a popular hymn, one that most of you have sung. It is the hymn “He Lives.” In many ways it is a fine Christian hymn – but it does contain a phrase in the chorus that, in my opinion, is absolutely deplorable. It is the very last line, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” Speaking apologetically, this is a weak defense of the resurrection of Christ! Perhaps the writer of the hymn, Alfred H. Ackley, intended otherwise, but as it stands, this sentiment has been (and still is) used to interpret the resurrection of Christ in *only* a spiritual sense. Note the words of B. B. Warfield as he describes this type of *unmiraculous Christianity*. “Accordingly, we have now for more than a whole generation been told over and over again, and with ever-increasing stridency of voice, that it makes no manner of difference whether Jesus rose from the dead or not. The main fact, we are told, is not whether the body that was laid in the tomb was resuscitated. Of what religious value, we are asked, can that purely physical fact be to any man? The main fact is that Jesus – that Jesus who lived in the world a life of such transcendent attractiveness, going about doing good, and by His unshaken and unshakable faith in providence revealed to men the love of a Father-God – this Jesus, though He underwent the inevitable experience of change which men call death, yet still lives. Lives! – lives in His Church; or at least lives in that heaven to which He pointed us as the home of our Father, and to which we may all follow Him from the evils of this life; or in any event lives in the influence which His beautiful and inspiring life still exerts upon His followers and through them in the world. This, this, we are told, is the fact of real religious value; the only fact upon which the religious emotions can take hold; by which the religious life can be quickened; and through which we may be impelled to religious effort and strengthened in religious endurance.”³

- I. **GETHSEMANE, from the Aramaic for “oil/press.”** John Brown (1784-1858) was a highly-accomplished Biblical scholar. He summarizes this well, “*Now was the power of darkness. Now the prince of this world came to him. Untouched by mortal hand, he began to be sorrowful, sore amazed, and very heavy, and said to his three friends, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; tarry ye here, and watch with me. Pray that ye enter not into temptation. And going forward a little, about a stone-cast, he kneeled down, and fell on his face on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, that hour, that is, the extreme inward suffering of that hour, might pass from him. Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee. O, my Father, if it be possible, take away this cup;*

let it pass from me; nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt. He returned and found his three disciples sleeping, worn out with fatigue and sorrow. *Could ye not, said he, watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation. The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.* Again he retired, and prostrated himself, and *with strong crying and tears,* presented the same supplication. Returning again, he again found them asleep; and again he retired, and prostrated himself, and with unabated intenseness of desire presented a third time the same prayer, and, *being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was as great drops of blood falling to the ground.* The struggle is over; the prayer is heard. The prince of this world retires, finding that he has nothing in him. The cup – *that cup* – of agony, which threatened to dissolve the bands of life, passes from him, and *an angel appears to him, strengthening him.* Coming to his disciples, he speaks to them as one bent, with unchanged resolution and undaunted courage, on prosecuting his journey, notwithstanding the fearful storm he had met in its commencement. *The hour, said he, is at hand when the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.”*⁴

- II. ***GOLGOTHA, from the Hebrew gulgoleth, a bald, round skull-like hill.*** The Latin name, *Calvarius* (“bald skull”), has been retained in the form *Calvary* (Luke 23:33). In NIV, following RSV, it is simply, “The Skull.” Two explanations of the name are found: (1) It was a place of execution and therefore abounded in skulls; (2) the place had the appearance of a skull when viewed from a short distance. The Gospels and tradition do not agree as to its location. Both Matthew (27:33) and Mark (15:22) locate it outside the city, but close to it (John 19:20) on the public highway, which was the type of location usually chosen by the Romans for executions. Tradition locates it within the present city.⁵ Long points out that “In Jerusalem, the so-named street of suffering (*via dolorosa, via crucis*) runs from the northern foot of the temple-mountain in a westerly direction, somewhat inclining to the south, to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Tradition undertakes, in this street, to indicate the way by which Christ must have been led from the judgment-hall to the place of execution (Golgotha); nay, it points out several places in which special events of the history of the passion (of which the four Evangelists make mention, or which tradition records) must have occurred. As for these stations, they belong, for the most part, to tradition. Even the road itself has been left to the decision of tradition; and, indeed, the genuineness of the point of departure indicated by tradition, and still more that of the point of destination, has been absolutely and decidedly questioned. In respect of the place of departure, the genuineness of this may not be unreasonably denied; for it is much more likely that Pilate resided in the palace on that temple-mountain than in the palace at the foot of the city of David. If thus the destination – namely, the determining of the situation of Golgotha – be rightly specified by tradition, then the general direction of the *via dolorosa* must be rightly indicated; if, after the desolations that Jerusalem has undergone, anything can be said of the correctness of the direction of this street in general. The authenticity of that locality, however, has been of late more established again than ever. For a long time it has been asserted that the place of Christ’s crucifixion, as well as His grave, was outside the city of Jerusalem, while the place of the holy sepulchre that tradition has consecrated is enclosed by the walls of the city. But now lately it has been shown that the district of the crucifixion of Jesus, the new city (Bezetha) before the building of the walls of Agrippa, or up to the time of the death of Jesus, had been situated entirely in the open ground. This observation is more and more confirmed by the latest inquiries. The testimony of the tradition, moreover, in this case, obtains an entirely special importance, because to the time of Constantine it searched after the place of the crucifixion of Christ exactly on a spot which must have had for the Christian mind much that would cause its rejection, since the Emperor Hadrian had built there a temple of Venus. The Christians would not have been likely to have decided thus easily, without objective reasons, on consecrating this profaned spot to their holiest recollections.”⁶

III. **THE EMPTY TOMB: whom God raised up.** Christianity is built upon an *historical* event. It was not something that was invented; it was something that *happened*. Note how this is recorded in the pages of the New Testament. The Gospel writers recorded the resurrection as historical fact. They do not attempt to *prove* it or *explain* it. They simply state what they saw and heard and what happened to them. The account in John 20:1-9 is typical. Here we read of three individuals at the empty tomb: Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John. Mary concluded that someone had stolen the body. She “saw” (the word is *blepo*, to glance at, see quickly) from the outside of the tomb.⁷ Peter “saw” (the word is *theoreo*, a close examination). He looked at all the details very carefully but remained puzzled. John “saw” (the word is *eidon*, to look), and *believed*. He understood the *meaning* of the empty tomb and immediately came to the conviction that Jesus was alive. All three saw (1) that the stone was rolled away (not to let Jesus out but to let witnesses in), and (2) they saw the tomb was empty and the grave clothes lying undisturbed.

A. **The Divine Approval: “Freeing Him from the Agony of Death.”** What does this mean?

1. **The Atoning Sacrifice of Christ was Valid.** The Father placed His “amen” on the Son’s “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). “Jesus laid His sacrifice before the Father’s Throne. The Father accepted it and raised Him from the dead.”⁸ Richard Gaffin, one of my professors at Westminster, makes this important point “It is, then, not only meaningful but necessary to speak of the resurrection as the redemption of Christ. The resurrection is nothing if not his deliverance from the power and curse of death which was in force until the moment of being raised. Here too the adamic factor is pivotal. The resurrection is the salvation of Jesus as the last Adam; it and no other event in his experience is the point of *his* transition from wrath to grace. This does not at all imply that Paul compromises the absolute necessity and intrinsic efficacy of Christ’s death (as an atonement). It does mean, however, that he does not confuse the ransom price, no matter how sublime and precious, with what is secured by its payment. To Paul’s way of thinking, as long as Christ remains dead, Satan and sin are triumphant, or, more broadly, the dominion of the old aeon remains unbroken. Strictly speaking, not Christ’s death, but his resurrection (that is, his exaltation) marks the completion of the once-for-all accomplishment of redemption.”⁹
2. **The Basis For Our Acceptance With God Secured.** This is Paul’s point in Rom. 4:24, 25. Christ’s resurrection is the basis for our future bodily resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15). It means that Christ’s righteousness is ours by faith.

NOTE: The resurrection of Christ is **not** the ground of the forgiveness of sin. Our sins were blotted out by Christ’s death by the shedding of His blood; Jesus rose from the dead to *guarantee* our justification.¹⁰ Furthermore, as M. M. B. Turner has rightly observed, there is a sense in which the astonishing development of an exalted view of Christ can be traced back to the impetus of the resurrection. Yet, as he goes on to remark, the resurrection without the ascension would be incomplete; demonstrating the conquest of death, but not exaltation. Is it then possible that this latter aspect of the resurrection-exaltation complex – the ascension of Jesus – can have provided the decisive impetus to the worship of Jesus that the resurrection appearances alone leave unexplained? When we turn to the account of the significance of the ascension in Peter’s speech in Acts 2, we appear to be offered an affirmative answer to this question. We shall first examine, then, the claim made by the Pentecost speech with respect to the ascension; and subsequently we shall have to enquire whether what Luke attributes to Peter can plausibly be defended as representative of the early church’s view of the import of the exaltation of Jesus.¹¹

B. **The Perfect Victory: “Because It Was Impossible for Death to Keep its Hold on Him.”** Christ conquered death. Why was it impossible for death to hold Him? To answer this, consider this question: Why did Jesus go to the cross to die in the first place? The New Testament declares that Christ **died** for sinners (Rom. 5:6, 8; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 2:24; Heb. 9:28). This was the reason for His coming (Mark 10:45). His death was to atone for sins. Now what is the penalty for sin? Death (1 Cor.

15:56). When the Lord Jesus died, He died for sinners. He blotted out our transgressions (Isa. 53:5, 11). Once the power of sin had been broken, *Death* had no grounds for holding Him. He was sinless – He died representatively, and therefore sin and death have been conquered by Him. James Orr, in his masterful book on the resurrection of Jesus, has a chapter entitled, “Doctrinal Bearings of The Resurrection,” where he writes: “In New Testament Scripture, it will not be disputed that these two things are always taken together – the Death and the Resurrection of Christ – the one as essentially connected with, and completed in, the other. “It is Christ Jesus that died,” says St Paul, “yea, rather, that was raised from the dead” (Romans 8:34). “Who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). “Who through Him,” says St. Peter, “are believers in God, which raised Him from the dead, and gave Him glory; so that your faith and hope might be in God” (1Peter 1:21). “The God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep, with the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Hebrews 13:20), we read in Hebrews. “I am the Living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:18), says the Lord in the Apocalypse. What is the nature of this connexion? The answer to this question turns on the manner in which the death of Christ itself is conceived, and on the point the teaching of the New Testament is again sufficiently explicit. The Cross is the decisive meeting-place between man’s sin and God’s grace.”¹²

CONCLUSION: Christianity stands or falls with the historical facts recorded in the New Testament. These historical facts (the birth, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth) constitute its substance, and as Warfield concludes, “to be indifferent to them is to be indifferent to the substance of Christianity.”¹³ Christ **is** risen from the dead. He **has** conquered sin and death. What does this mean to us? The resurrection of Christ gives *authority, power, confidence* and *urgency* to the preaching of the Gospel. We have a message to give to a lost and perishing world – and we have the Great Shepherd of the sheep, risen and alive to guide us (Heb. 13:20, 21).

ENDNOTES

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 181.

² The word translated “useless” in the NIV is *kenos*. It means empty, without consent, basis, truth or power, without result or profit, an illusion or delusion. Paul uses the word here and elsewhere (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:5; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16) to suggest that under certain circumstances, certain things would be pointless, fruitless, or in vain.

³ B. B. Warfield, *The Savior of the World* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1992), p. 200.

⁴ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord II* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 399.

⁵ *The New International Dictionary of The Bible*, eds. J. D. Douglas & M. C. Tenney (Zondervan, 1987), p. 395.

⁶ J. P. Lange, *The Life of The Lord Jesus Christ III* (rpt. Zondervan, 1958), p. 280.

⁷ Because the gospels report the resurrection narratives with variations at points, some New Testament scholars say that the accounts are in conflict with one another and are therefore suspect. These critics are effectively answered by John Wenham in his book, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict* (Zondervan, 1984).

⁸ Thomas C. Vander Heuvel, “Preaching the Resurrection,” in *The Outlook* vol. 43, No. 4, Apr. 1993. I am indebted to Vander Heuvel for the major outline of this sermon.

⁹ R. B. Gaffin, *The Centrality of The Resurrection: A Study of Paul’s Soteriology* (Baker, 1978), p. 116.

¹⁰ Cf. the excellent discussion on Rom. 4:25 by John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 155-157.

¹¹ M. M. B. Turner, “The Spirit of Christ and Christology” in *Christ The Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. H. H. Rowdon (IVP, 1986), p. 174.

¹² James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 275.

¹³ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 139.