

The Meaning of Easter

Matthew 28:1-8

By Dr. James M. Baird

Let us continue our glorious worship as we take the word of God, the Bible, and turn to the book of Matthew, the last chapter, the 28th chapter of Matthew. And as you turn in your Bibles, the message of Easter comes, first of all, from God. As we will see, the angel of God will come and at the empty tomb will speak to some women. And the angel will say, "He is risen." The women will leave the empty tomb and will go out and find the disciples who are hiding in fear, and the women's message will be, "He is risen." At the end of that first Easter, all of the disciples will gather in the Upper Room. In the Upper Room they will say to one another, "He is risen." The message that's started by the angel comes through the women and then together they say, in the Upper Room, "He is risen." For the first three centuries in the early church, under great persecution, when they met each other publicly, privately they did not say, "Hello." Do you know what they said to each other? "He is risen." And the answer came back, "He is risen indeed." They encouraged each other with the words, "He is risen." Now the purpose of this sermon is to deal with the implication of those words: Why do we celebrate? What is the meaning of those words, "He is risen"?

Let's begin with the account and find out exactly what happened. The last Sunday we were here in this sanctuary we started in the Upper Room and we had the Lord's Supper. It was instituted in the Upper Room on a Thursday. They left the Upper Room and went to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas comes and Judas betrays Christ with a kiss, and Christ is arrested. He is taken immediately to a trial, an illegal trial that starts at least by midnight. Can you imagine? The trial is two-fold: it is a religious trial, and it is a civil trial. The religious trial is because of envy. He is being tried by the greatest religious people of that day—not the worst, the *best*. The civil trial comes under the greatest government that the world had ever known 'til that day, the Roman government, under Pilate. Pilate is moved not by envy but expediency. He knows that Jesus of Nazareth is innocent of the charges, so he brings Him before the people and says, "Behold the man! *Ecce homo*! Behold the man!" The crowd cries out, "Crucify Him! Give us Barabbas that he may go free!" and so Pilate says, 'Whatever you want.' And He is crucified on the Friday at 9:00 in the morning. He is crucified after He is beaten half to death, scourged, carries His cross outside the city gates, and He is crucified between two criminals. At 9:00 in the morning, He is nailed to the cross; at 3:00 in the afternoon, He cries out, "It is finished!" And He says, "I commit My spirit unto Thee," and He claims His own

death, and He dies.

Now the disciples, except for one, are all in fear and are hiding. There are two men who have never openly committed themselves—they are both very prominent men—have never openly committed themselves to Christ. They go to Pilate and they beg the body of Jesus Christ, else His body would've been thrown into the garbage heap of the city and burned. So they take the body and there is a nearby garden, and in a wealthy man's tomb they bury the body of the Lord Jesus. There are women who watched.

By the way, do you understand why we worship on Sunday? Saturday was the Sabbath day, and they had always worshipped on Saturday. We worship on Sunday because God put it in the hearts of the apostles to begin to worship on Sunday because it was the Day of Resurrection. Now, when you read through the book of the Acts and the epistles, by practice, as God put it in the hearts of the apostles, the Church begins to worship on Resurrection Day. On that first Resurrection Day as the sun comes up, two women, Mary Magdalene and another Mary, approach the sepulcher. The angel of God has come down. The angel of God has struck the Roman guard that has been placed to make sure that nothing happened to that tomb. The angel strikes those men. The angel removes the huge stone from the face of this cave-like tomb. The ladies didn't know how they were going to get in to further anoint the body, but when they arrive the angel is there, and it is the angel that has said, "You've come seeking the crucified Christ. He is not here. He is risen." The message of the angel is, "He is risen." And the women, both in awe and fear and *in joy*, turn and rush back with that message, "He is risen." That's the account. Let us read it as it is found in one of the gospels, the Gospel of Matthew. We begin to read in chapter 28, verse 1. Hear the word of God.

Matthew 28

In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulcher. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.

God bless us and give us insight into His holy word.

Why this great celebration down to this day that He is risen? There are many people who believe, theologians who believe, that Easter is the most excellent day (that first Easter) of all creation since the first day of creation—the most excellent day. Why? What is the meaning? Well, out of all the meanings I give you four “E’s.” The four “E’s” of excellency of Easter. It is the most excellent day because it deals with *Evidence*, because (#2) it deals with *Evil*, because (#3) it deals with the *Enhancement* of suffering, and (#4) it deals with *Eternal* life. Examine ‘em.

I. Easter deals with evidence.

There are times, I’m always riding in an automobile and I’m by myself when the thought comes across me, “What in the world are you doing, Baird? Why don’t you go back to what you first started out to do so many years ago and get it, and make it, and give it to your family, and make a mark upon this world? What are you doing in this thing called preaching?” Well, I know where that voice comes from: it comes from the pit. And I have learned how to deal with it. Doubt. That’s where the Bible begins when man sins. It begins in the Garden when the evil one comes and places doubt. The evil one is always placing doubt about the implications of Christianity. “Is it true?”

It goes like this in our day, “Jesus was a good man. There are many good men. We even have better examples in our day. You be a good man, too, and go do good things.” Nothing unique. Now, it gets even worse with some people. In 1955 there was a book published and made into a movie in 1988 by Martin Scorsese, who is brilliant as a movie director. The book is *The Last Temptation*; it deals with the life of Christ, and Christ is depicted not as one who is in control, but one who is in confusion. He doesn’t know who He is and what He’s doing, but He’s in utter confusion. And besides that He has lustful dreams of Mary Magdalene. And so Christ is presented as someone who has great problems. There is in Washington, D.C., a hall, and it is called “the Hall of Statues” at the capital. States have statues of people who represent that state. The state of Indiana has one. The man was born in the 1800s. He was a lawyer. He was successful. He was a great leader in military matters. He was a politician. In the 1800s he was the governor of the territory of New Mexico. When he was through with that assignment, he represented as our ambassador the United States to the nation of Turkey. He was influenced by a man who was an atheist, and this man—politician, military man—was encouraged to help do away with the myths of Christianity. And he put his finger on the issue, and the issue was the resurrection, and he sought to study to destroy the resurrection. The more he studied, the more he became convinced that there was no other explanation. He became a believer. He was a believer when he went into politics. He took that material and he wrote a book in the 1880s; the book is called *Ben Hur*, subtitle:

The Story of Christ. His name was Lew Wallace. Lew Wallace is one among many, many, many lawyers who are trained to examine evidence.

I have a book here in my hand that was written by a young man, brilliant, who started out as an atheist in his collegiate days. The name of the book is *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. You've got page after page after page of brilliant men and women—don't get the idea that you're dumb and that you have to throw your mind out in the bushes somewhere because you believe in the resurrection. He marshals *all* and he says, "Evidence that demands a verdict." You must choose whether to believe in Christ.

I wonder if there's somebody here who is saying, "You know, I think I would like to become a Christian but I just cannot believe all of this." How about making a search? There are some people who believe that the issue is intellectual. Usually the intellectual issue has many other implications in other areas of your life, but you should give it a true shot and examine the evidence. And those who do—many, many, many—with an open mind come to one conclusion: He really was raised from the dead. The Lord Jesus Christ based His whole life on these things: #1) He claimed He was the living God, fully God/fully man. #2) He claimed that He was sinless, and He invited anyone to show one sin in His life—anybody. Can you imagine a person running for public office, and saying, "Here, show me one fault"? #3) He based His whole life on the fact that on the third day He would be raised from the dead just like He promised. That's His life: evidence that demands a verdict.

I want to approach again those of you who may be very intellectual, and would trouble your soul. At the intellectual center of the day, beneath a tremendous edifice built to the gods, stood a man. I stood in that same place and thought about this: Paul at the Acropolis, speaking to the Athenians, and he says, dealing with this temple that is made by man's hands, "God...does not dwell in temples made with (man's) hands....God has overlooked those times; but now He commands all men everywhere to repent [change your mind]: Because He has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man He hath ordained; He hath given assurance unto all men, that He raised Him from the dead." When he said that, the place erupted. The text goes on to say that many said, 'That's crazy!' Others inquired...*some inquired* to believe.

What is the great proof? You see, that's why Lew Wallace was challenged by Ingersoll. Ingersoll, the great enemy of God, had it right: the issue is the resurrection because it deals with evidence. That's why, under tremendous persecution for centuries, when the Christians met each other they said, "He is risen." It is true! Everything is true! And they got the answer back, "He is risen indeed." We are not here because we are blind and because "My mama made me go to Sunday School when I was a boy."

II. Easter deals with the problem of evil.

The evil of this world

Now there is a second cause of celebration. Not only does Easter deal with the greatest evidence that all is true about Christianity; it also deals with the problem of evil. It deals with evil in two different ways: first of all, the evil of this world; and second, the evil of my own soul. A known great hero of God, George Bernard Shaw, was in Wales and was asked, "Do you believe that man is a sinner?" And George Bernard Shaw took the man outdoors and looming above the whole area is the largest mountain in the nation of Wales, Mount Snowden; he says, "You might as well ask me, 'Is man a sinner?' as ask me, 'Is there a Mount Snowden?' It's so obvious...your own heart, the history of mankind and everything. Chesterton said, "Whatever else you think about yourself and you think about man, there's one thing that's true: he's not what he oughtta be"—whatever else you think about him. Leo Durocher, that great philosopher who played baseball, said, "Nice guys finish last." You see he was a cynic. He really was. And that's the position of this world in our day: that's the kids out in the street and the wise men on Wall Street, and they all say, "So what? Why righteousness? This world is an evil place, and it's dog eat dog. And your own man, the Lord Jesus you call him, was #1? He was betrayed by one of His own; He had false trials; and He was crucified before criminals." That's the world. "Now let's just get it and step on everybody we can." That's the philosophy...and the kids in the inner city and the guys in the white collars who are making millions. But Jesus Christ says, 'On Easter Sunday, by the power of the Spirit and through God, evil will not win because God is going to deal with evil.' And that is done on Easter.

There was a white man who was asked to preach at a black church a number of years ago in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on Good Friday. And he preached a sermon; he thought it was a good sermon; and then the black pastor got up and the black pastor—and I've heard it on tape and the sermon goes like this: "Friday is here, but Sunday's comin'! Friday is here with evil and darkness and sin, and God Himself was put on the cross, but Sunday's comin', brother. Sunday's comin' and on Sunday God is gonna deal with the devil, and He's gonna defeat him once and forever." Beloved, you know what Easter says? Evil is not going to win. Wrong is not going to win. It only wins for *a little while*. The hymn writer put it like this, in fabulous poetry, "Though the cause of evil prosper, yet His truth alone is strong. / Truth forever on the scaffold, truth forever on the cross, / Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. / Yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown, / standeth God within the shadows keeping watch over His own." This world is a moral world, and evil will not win. That's why the Bible says at the end of the great chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, "Your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Those in vain are those who are getting by evil. Young people, are you listening?

The evil of my own soul

There's not only the evil of this world, but the evil of my own soul. If evil is going to be separated forever from God, how about me? And I know that I'm evil. The Bible says that I'm evil, and I know it. No man...there's not a Tom, Dick, or Harry here who is perfect in the eyes of the Lord—not a one!

Well, what happens on Calvary's cross? God Himself bore our sins. That's why it's good news. 'It is finished.' You don't come before God and say, "God, I'm trying." But if you're trying, how about all those things that you've left undone in your life this week that could've helped change the lives of hundreds of people, maybe thousands, maybe millions—? And you didn't raise a finger, and you've done it all your life. Did you forget about it? Not God. He nailed it to the cross, and as proof, He rose from the dead. Our justification is found not only in the cross but by the empty tomb. God's saying, "It's true." I don't know what your sin is that would kill you before God today, that awful thing that you have not mentioned to anybody, He nailed it to the cross if you believe on Christ.

He not only nailed that evil to the cross, because He's alive He sends His Spirit into our hearts and we're not alone, and He brings fabulous change. On that first Easter, the disciples walked out that morning before the women got to them, in utter confusion and utter defeat, and they were the cynics and they were saying, "We *thought* that He was the answer; instead He was crucified." And they are utterly defeated. But the Lord meets them on that road to Emmaus, and when He reveals Himself they rush back and their hearts are on fire.

That's the trouble with men today: men believe not only in the world but in their own hearts, What's the use? What's the use? Well, I'll tell you: if God be with you, who can stand against you? I'm not saying that it's gonna be easy and I'm not saying there's gonna be no crucifixion. But I want to tell you, evil will not win and you, who are believers, your sin is nailed to the cross and the Lord is with you to clean your life up in ever-increasing increments. They said when they saw each other, "He is risen, risen over evil." They said to each other, "Hallelujah. Hallelujah."

I want to tell you about another baseball manager. I didn't ever meet him; I never knew him. Had a little kid in our church who was in little league and he came back about this time of the year with his uniform on Wednesday night and he said, "I asked what *hallelujah* means and my manager said, 'It means "hurray for Jesus," little boy.'" And that's about it: hurray for Jesus who has defeated evil. That's Easter. That's why they said, "He is risen."

III. Easter deals with the enhancement of suffering.

In an evil world, they said, "He is risen," because of suffering. Easter enhances suffering. The cross has its completion and understanding in the resurrection.

Suffering had meaning for you and for me and for the whole world; it enhances by the example of Christ—He not only *did* something for us; He *showed* us something. Every week of my life, and certainly every week that I have been your pastor, I deal with suffering. There are some on our staff who deal with suffering far more than I do. Not once a week, but every week there are four, five, six new cases of suffering every week for *me*. A brilliant man, great athlete, intellectual—two weeks ago acknowledges across the United States, “I have AIDS.” When he says, “I have AIDS,” he asks one question that he has been asking everybody, “Is this a friendly universe?” That’s how Arthur Ashe’s mind works. He’s a very philosophical man, Arthur Ashe. Is this a friendly universe? You see suffering.

What has Easter to do with that? Well, I’ll tell you what it has to do with it, beloved brethren. When suffering comes your way, and it will surely come, and there will be some big ones—but then there are the little ones that nag your soul, and some of those things will never go away until the day you die. But you’re going to deal with suffering in this world. The Bible says, “Man is born into suffering like the sparks fly upward.” When you engage suffering, one of two things is going to happen to you—you’ll never be the same again. You’ll either be by suffering enhanced and made better and drawn to God, or you’re going to be, instead of enhanced, embittered. It may be with a smile on your face, but in the heart hard as leather or slashing at anything and everybody. Once you hit suffering, you don’t continue down the road: you either go up or you go down. I do not know of a single person in this Book who is a man or a woman or young person of God who did not suffer greatly. Do you? Not a one, including the living God. But the point is, it made them.

At the end of the first service, I don’t know how many people came by and mentioned one thing about the sermon, the suffering. And the testimony of some of the elders who sat right over here afterwards, “I wouldn’t be here if it were not for suffering.” Suffering either kills you or it makes you. And the Lord Jesus Christ knows about your suffering. He not only knows about your suffering, He...and He has that ability because He is the reigning, risen Jesus Christ. At the end of this service the choir’s gonna sing the “Hallelujah Chorus.” He not only rose; He reigns victorious over all of this world, and He is able to take suffering (and He understands it) and turn it into good. How many times, and I’ve used it this week. I use it every week: “All things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).” Every week. Only the risen Savior can do that. When they met each other in the early church, when they said, “He is risen,” they were suffering; but, my, how it made them tremendous. They overcame everything not because they lacked, but because they went victorious through heartache.

IV. Easter deals with eternal life.

Finally, Resurrection Day! When they said, “He is risen,” it meant eternal life.

Every time you drive through Mobile on your way to Pensacola on Interstate 10, you're gonna go over a river. There will be a little sign there. The first time I went over that river was not on an interstate; it was on a two-lane highway. Years and years ago on my way to Mobile, I came to this bridge, a rather new bridge; it had a little sign on the bridge telling us what the name of the river was and there was handwritten under it—obviously, everything was kind of new there—a little handwritten...somebody had pasted it up...the first one was permanent; this one was pasted up there. And I had to laugh out loud as I passed over it, because, you see, the river is the River Styx. The River Styx in Greek mythology is the River of Death. Underneath that sign in handwritten was this: Charon. Charon was the boatman who took you over in Greek mythology, took you over the river dead. It said, "Charon retired by Jesus Christ." I laughed! Next time I went somebody had taken down the temporary, but they've still got the River Styx sign there.

Beloved, the Bible says, "It is appointed unto man once to die." It is not *if* I'm going to die; the only question is, When? You young people, young people die. Did you know that? Old people die. But when I die, I don't go into extinction. I go into everlasting life. When I go into everlasting life, one of two things happens to me: I either enter into heaven or I am exiled from God into the place of torment, because I have *refused* Him. When He was in that Upper Room He said to His disciples before He was crucified, "In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would've told you. I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there you may be also." When they said, "He is risen," it means, "I'm going to be with Him." And when He comes, He will raise our bodies one day and the kingdom will come.

Beloved, do you believe? Do you believe in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you believe it? "Well, I think I do, preacher." Let me go through *believe*. *Believe* means "assent." I really believe He came out of that tomb...bodily. *Believe* also means, "I trust my life to Him. I trust my life to a person." It also means that "I commit myself to Him." It's full evidence. I commit myself to follow Him.

Of all the religions of the world, there are only four that are based upon the life of a founder of that religion. Buddha died and was put in the grave. Mohammed died on June the 8th, 632. And they go to Mecca and they worship his tomb. The third religion looks to Moses and Abraham, and they are dead. They never say they are going to live forever. The only one not dead is Jesus. Christianity. There is no tomb. He's alive! I commit myself to the living God to follow Him.

Puccini wrote *Madam Butterfly* and *La bohème*, and some other great operas. He had cancer. And when he died in the 1920s he was writing another opera, his last. In 1924 at the La Scala in Milan, they played that opera; and Toscanini, his student had the baton. When they came to a certain place, Toscanini stopped and he turned to the audience and he said, "Puccini died here," tears streaming

down his face. And then he said, "But his disciples have finished the opera," and he turned and he led them on. Beloved, if you're gonna follow Jesus and commit yourself to Him, then there's a job to be done. Don't kid yourselves by saying, "I believe, but I don't want to get involved."

You see, the analogy with Puccini and Toscanini breaks down here. He played it for him—Toscanini for the audience. You don't play for the audience; you get in the orchestra and you start playing. The Lord Jesus Christ comes into your heart and *you get involved*. If you're not a member of a church, why are you not a member of this church or some other church? If you're not involved in evangelism, if you're not giving your money faithfully, if you're not praying, if you're not—why not? There's a job to be done. The world needs to hear three words: It is finished. It's called the gospel; they're *dying* to hear it. Do you believe? Do you believe? Assent: "I trust my life to Him."

Some are saying, "I don't know where I stand." Do it now. And "I commit myself to His kingdom. My life is gonna count." That's what it means to believe. Now I'm gonna ask the choir to sing that great "Hallelujah Chorus," and when they're singing, you listen to the victory and you be praying...you be praying and you say in your heart, "I believe in Him." Amen.

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