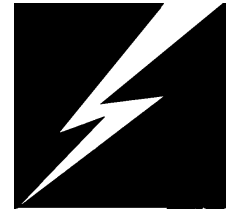


You expect me to believe in miracles?
 Week 7:



Easter: Same Old Story?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne April 12, 2009

Reading from Matthew 28:1-9

Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to see the tomb. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, because an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled aside the stone and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He has been raised from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples he has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember, I have told you." The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to find the disciples to give them the angel's message. And as they went, Jesus met them. "Greetings!" he said. And they ran to him, held his feet, and worshiped him. (NLT)

Intro to message: So today is the greatest of days in the Christian year, the celebration of God's greatest miracle. It's the one miracle that can't be duplicated, can't be explained away. Either it happened or it didn't. There are no plausible scientific or medical explanations for how Jesus could come back to life. Sure skeptics, and those Christians who are embarrassed by miracles, look for ways to explain it all away, but I'll readily give up offering rational explanations for the resurrection. I'll surrender easily enough and admit it can't be proven, it can not be explained. That doesn't worry me. After all, if the Easter miracle could be explained, rising from the dead would not have been much of a miracle. As it is, it is the biggest of all mysteries, and miracles.

Now I'm not gullible, I'm not so easily tricked that I'll believe anything. In fact I hate magic shows. I know what is happening has an explanation. I know the magician is fooling with me, and I don't like that. But I also know there's a trick involved, something that can be explained. Like this. I have an example for you, submitted by one of our members a few weeks back. I want to know what we as a church think is the best topping for pizza. To find our group consensus I'd like you to start by thinking of a number between 10 and 40. Any number. Got one? OK, now subtract from your number the two digits that make up the number, for instance if I had asked you to choose a number between 50 and 70, you might have chosen 50 and then you would subtract 5 and 0 and get 45. OK? Now I just want you to choose a number between 10 and 40 ... and subtract the digits. Counting on your fingers is OK, we

don't have calculators for everyone. Now let's see how you answered ... Look for your number on this chart. How many of

you came up with the number for pepperoni? No? Show of hands, how many chose bacon? Wow. Seems an overwhelming choice. OK, just to prove the point, though, let me ask you to pick another number between 10 and 40. Subtract again. OK, now we want to know which of the following recording artists would you like to see leading the band next week. How many of you have the number for the Rolling Stones? For ZZ Top? For Henry Fiske? Wow. Impressive. Henry, looks like you still got a job for next week. OK, one last time. Let's answer the question what's the best way each of you can serve God in the week ahead ... Pick a number, any number. Do the math, and let's see a show of hands ...

1	Anchovies	21	Onions
2	Sausage	22	Pineapple
3	Ham	23	Ham
4	Pepperoni	24	Mushrooms
5	Mushrooms	25	Black Olives
6	Green Olives	26	Sausage
7	Black Olives	27	Bacon
8	Onions	28	Anchovies
9	Bacon	29	Chocolate
10	Pineapple	30	Pepperoni
11	Extra Cheese	31	Sausage
12	Green Pepper	32	Green Olives
13	Onions	33	Red Pepper
14	Mushrooms	34	Green Pepper
15	Green Olives	35	Chicken
16	Anchovies	36	Bacon
17	Pepperoni	37	Pineapple
18	Bacon	38	Pesto
19	Black Olives	39	Mushrooms
20	Extra Cheese	40	Onions

1	Madonna	21	Paul McCarthy
2	Rolling Stones	22	Jay Z
3	ZZ Top	23	Bob Dylan
4	Randy Travis	24	Ray Charles
5	Ray Charles	25	Pink
6	Frank Sinatra	26	Kanye West
7	Beyonce	27	Henry Fiske
8	Lady Gaga	28	Abba
9	Henry Fiske	29	Justin Timberlake
10	Pink	30	David Cook
11	Jay Z	31	Ray Charles
12	Michelle Branch	32	Mariah Carey
13	Kayne West	33	Beyonce
14	Justin Timberlake	34	Rolling Stones
15	ZZ Top	35	Stevie Wonder
16	Madonna	36	Henry Fiske
17	Ray Charles	37	Frank Sinatra
18	Henry Fiske	38	Led Zeppelin
19	Rolling Stones	39	Michelle Branch
20	Garth Brooks	40	Madonna

1	Read the Bible daily	21	Take a mission trip
2	Pray more often	22	Lead a small group
3	Teach Sunday School	23	Volunteer more
4	Take a mission trip	24	Work for justice
5	Volunteer more	25	Be a big brother/sister
6	Be a guest preacher	26	Fold bulletins
7	Fold bulletins	27	Donate generously
8	Lead a small group	28	Pray more often
9	Donate generously	29	Teach Sunday School
10	Give a testimony	30	Be a guest preacher
11	Work for justice	31	Give a testimony
12	Be a big brother/sister	32	Take a mission trip
13	Fold bulletins	33	Lead a small group
14	Teach Sunday School	34	Give a testimony
15	Take a mission trip	35	Work for justice
16	Read the Bible daily	36	Donate generously
17	Pray more often	37	Pray more often
18	Donate generously	38	Be a guest preacher
19	Volunteer more	39	Vacuum church
20	Be a guest preacher	40	Teach Sunday School

how many of you have the number for praying more? How many for donating more generously? Thank you. If you keep your hands raised, the men with baskets will be around in a few moments. There.

Of course, I have no magical abilities. I was tricking you. Now I've lost a few of you as you sit there trying to work out exactly how I did that, right? Well forget it for now and see me later ... the point is that coming back to life was no trick. There are simply no medical explanations for how Jesus could both come back to life and appear to be so lively. After being tortured,

beaten and having nearly bled to death, after having a spear thrust into his heart by a professional executioner, there's no logical rationale for how he could have been revived and ready to sit down and share a meal with them on Easter night. It's either all make believe or all too miraculous. I choose to believe the resurrection was real. And since that's real, I believe everything else Jesus said and did and taught must be real, and, really important to understand.

I'm willing to accept the unbelievable and say a miracle took place. I understand people who find the resurrection hard to believe. Fine, the resurrection is that and more. But just because it's hard to believe and hard to explain, does not make it any less real or true. I know how that works in other things, how just because something is hard to explain doesn't make it any less true. Consider the problem of exercising. With my arthritis, my joints hurt. Since I am overweight I need to exercise so my joints won't hurt so much and yet exercising makes my joints hurt. And what's up with this ... Every exercise program I've looked at seems to start out by saying, "Wear loose-fitting clothes." But my whole problem is I don't have any loose-fitting clothes!

Easter defies explanation. I think that's so it's harder to try to explain it away. Something big happened. Something powerful. Something mysterious. I would expect no less from God. Not having an explanation for it all makes it hard to talk about the resurrection. This is the day of the greatest of all miracles. However Easter is also the day when most preachers have the greatest level of anxiety for the whole year. Now that anxiety is not because of the larger crowds at services. Most preachers like to stand up and talk in front of people. No, preachers are worried today because of the familiarity of the subject material.

Most people have heard this story before. So what more is there to say about Easter that has not been said already in the last 2000 years? Isn't it really just the same old story over and over again every year?

I saw a cartoon showing a man walking out of church and greeting the pastor. There was a sign on the church which said, "Happy Easter" and listed the sermon title: "He is risen." The man shaking the pastor's hand was not happy as he said, "You know pastor every year when I come to church it's the same message. Have you ever considered preaching about something else?" Only what else is there? Even Paul in one part of the Bible confessed, "Dear brothers and sisters, when I first came to you I didn't use lofty words and brilliant ideas to tell you God's message. For I decided to concentrate only on Jesus Christ and his death on the cross." [1 Corinthians 2:1-2 NLT] It was this story of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead that was the initial message preached to the crowds. Read the Book of Acts and you'll see every mes-

sage preached dealt with this one thing: Easter. The story of Christmas, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, the parables Jesus told, even the report of the miracles he performed all took a back seat to this one thing. Those became important later, after people knew what was most important about Jesus. In Jesus people could meet the one real God, who lived as one of us and died as one of us, and then was raised to a new life. As CS Lewis writes in one of his books, years before there were books called the Gospels, there was a single gospel message spread by his followers; it was simply this: Christ had died on the cross and rose again in power. That was the only message needed, because in it was a life-changing reality.

So is Easter just about this same old story? You know, it would be easy to think that a good story, even such good news as this, could get a little tired after a while. I suppose the temptation would be to add to the story in some way, or to explain it away. But there's something enduring to the story. Unlike other historical events like the Alamo or last year's Super Bowl, Easter is not over and done with. It is a continuing miracle. It's something that has ripples that have spread out over the centuries and the miles so that what happened in the tomb that day long ago has the power to change your life here and now. You see, when we talk about the miracle of the resurrection we're not talking about one five minute period of time when Jesus went from dead and beaten to alive and refreshed. Not

one of the disciples saw Jesus resurrected, in the act of being brought to life. That happened behind closed doors, in the tomb. No, the miracle of Easter is how the disciples and 503 other witnesses saw Jesus living again. They experienced the resurrection for themselves in the days after Easter. And so can you.

The Bible tells us: "It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, you ... will be as alive as

Christ!" [Romans 8:11 The Message] You can be alive like Christ. The story isn't over, it's not just the same old thing over and over. Easter is new each day and each day is alive with possibility for you to live with the Spirit of Jesus making you feel fully alive. That's the kind of thing that changes you, from the inside out. You can live with hope for the future, knowing Jesus has power over death. You can live with confidence in the present, knowing that the risen Lord is present with you every step of the way. Easter changes your perspective on everything ... And today God challenges you to do more than treat Easter as an old story, "So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ ... Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ, that's where the action is. See things from his perspective. Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life ... is with Christ in God." [Colossians 3:1-3 The Message]

Christian author Charles Henderson tells the story of a young boy. He was a small boy of seven who was stricken with a fatal, ferocious and fast growing cancer. He had been treated

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at Memorial Sloan Kettering with every sort of therapy known to science, but nothing further could be done. As the doctors and parents had come to the conclusion there was nothing left to be done, the boy spoke up in a clear, crisp voice, *"Well, what I really want to do is to go home and learn how to ride my two wheeler."* The bicycle had been a Christmas present. It had those little trainer wheels attached. But before the boy had gained enough confidence to remove the trainer wheels the cancer caught up with him and he was sent to the hospital. Learning how to ride a two wheeler was the last thought the doctors would have contemplated. It just didn't seem possible. The boy was weak, why encourage him to do something that clearly would not be possible for very long even if he could succeed? But the boy insisted and the resistance of the doctors and his parents melted away under the withering assurances of his clear brown eyes. And home they went. Not thirty minutes after they had settled in, they were out in the yard, the boy insisting that his father take off the training wheels and let him have a go at it. To their surprise, after only two false starts and one fall the boy was able to steer the bike, somewhat erratically to be sure. *"And now,"* he said with mounting assurance in his voice, *"Now I want to ride it by myself all the way around the block."* Before anyone could stop him, he was off, up the street and around the corner out of sight. There were those few minutes of suspense as the parents, brother and little sister, waited for him to appear at the other end of the block, and after what seemed an eternity, there he was, headed for home, a gigantic expression of triumph and satisfaction written on his face. When the excitement had settled down, the boy retired to his bedroom, and asked if he could be left alone with his little sister. He had his father bring the shiny blue bike into the bedroom. It sat there in the corner, a gleaming symbol of life. Then the boy turned to his little sister and said, *"I won't be needing the bicycle anymore. I want you to have it for your birthday. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did."* Henderson sums the story up by saying *"from under the shadow of death, there comes the hope of resurrection."*

That hope brings you a new way to experience life fully now, all because of the hope of experiencing eternal life later. It is because Christ has been raised to life again, you and I can lift up our heads and lift up our hearts and live with new freedom, no matter what may happen. Without Easter, we might as well hang our heads and let the shadows win. But not now. No sir. Not now, not now that we know God has power over life and

death. That power he showed so long ago, is the power he continues to show each day in my life. He has power to change me and make me whole. He has the power to do that for you too. The Easter story is not the same old thing, but a new thing with each new day ... for

***"Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!"***

Reading from Romans 12:1-2

So here's what I want you to do... Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you ... (The Message)

Song: It's a new day

*Beauty for ashes, joy for my pain,
You've given me wings to fly again
Strength for today, a dance for my sorrows
Because of you, because of you
Shades of gray turn to color, dark of night breaks today
It's a new day, it's a new day,
Shadows rise at the glory of your son
It's a new day, it's a new day,
The past has gone and life has just begun
Hope for my future, my life's made brand new
Because of you, because of you
Chains of fear turn to freedom,
Silence breaks into praise
It's a new day, it's a new day,
Shadows rise at the glory of your son
It's a new day, it's a new day,
The past has gone and life has just begun*

