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Sermon: He Has Been Raised From the Dead!

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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio

April 5, 2026

Col 3:1-4, Mt 28:1-10

Prayer: O Lord, may the words of my lips ...

Often, when people hear that I am a preacher and have been preaching for the past twenty years, they will say something like, "Oh, you must have a lot of sermons in your files. Surely, it's easy enough at this point just to pull out an old sermon and preach it again."

In fact, I am rarely able to re-use a sermon, and certainly not the entirety of a previous sermon. I can sometimes use pieces perhaps but not the whole thing. And the sermon always must be shaped especially for each occasion.

There are good reasons for not re-using the same sermons. First, the preacher is not the same person the second and third and fourth time around. The preacher will be older, ideally will have read more widely, will have gained more experience, and will be deepened in his faith. It is a different preacher from the one who preaches initially from the Scriptural text.

Second, while the scriptures haven't changed, there will have been a lot of scholarly study in the intervening years that alters and deepens our understanding of a scriptural text. Third, the listeners are different. Even if it is the same congregation, they are older and wiser and changed by their additional life experiences. And of course, preaching to a new congregation at a different church really makes it important to consider who the listeners are and what their context is.

Finally, the times will have changed. Imagine a preacher who reused a sermon from a Sunday in World War II twenty years later during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. What was important to say during the war would not have necessarily been helpful or even meaningful during the travails of marches and riots and important legislation related to black folks securing their human rights. The original sermon, as written, would not be bad, just more or less irrelevant.

Have you ever thought that the same thing might be true about the Gospels? Why do we have four different Gospels? Some religious skeptics say they are bothered by differences between the Gospels. That suggests, they say, that the Gospels are unreliable accounts of Jesus' life and death.

I heartily disagree. There is good reason for the Gospel accounts to differ. And those reasons mirror the same reasons that a preacher's sermons on the same Scriptural text differ over the years.

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The four Gospels differ because each Gospel was written by a different author, at different times and for different congregations. As traditionally dated, Mark wrote the first Gospel in the middle of the first century and John wrote several decades later. Some Gospels were directed at Jewish congregations, others made efforts to reach out to Gentiles, and some had mixed audiences.

The Gospels were also based on a variety of materials. Some, like Matthew, used the material available to Mark plus some of his own. Luke had access to material not used by Mark or Matthew. John seems to have used a different set of materials altogether to write his Gospel.

And each of those authors were trying to communicate with a different emphasis ... the same good news but with a different emphasis. Mark is very matter of fact and plain-spoken about the good news, presenting it cleanly and crisply, as one might expect of the first account of Jesus' life and resurrection. John had a longer period to consider who Jesus is. His Gospel reflects that deep theological thinking. John emphasizes the divinity as well as the humanity of Jesus and the very direct connection of the good news with God the Father.

Differences in the Gospels are not reasons to doubt their veracity. I see those four Gospels and their different aspects as reasons for belief. We have four different authors writing at different times and places. They all testify to the same important facts. They all testify to a living Savior who died for us and was raised by God on the third day to eternal life. They all testify, in my view, that Jesus took our sins with him to the cross in atonement for the accumulated sins of humanity, and that we are saved by his death, resurrection to eternal life, and ascension to God.

Skeptics will sometimes also argue that the Gospels were written well after Jesus lived and died, suggesting that the authors later, sometimes much later, embellished the story of Jesus the way that the ancients allegedly polished the stories of other heroes. However, the best scholarship shows that the Gospels were written within the first century, mere decades after Jesus died. One scholar recently argued that all the books of the New Testament were written prior to the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 A.D. [See *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament*, Jonathan Bernier, Baker Academic, 2022.] The latest of that date range is less than forty years after Jesus' earthly life ended.

By way of contrast, the only written evidence we have for Alexander the Great was authored several hundreds of years after this death. Same for the Buddha ... what we know of him comes from material written several hundreds of years after he died.

Skeptics who date the Gospels in the second century A. D. also question the reliability of the Gospels because, the skeptics assert, that the authors relied on second-hand accounts of Jesus. However, recent scholarship has come back around to the traditional notion that the Gospels were either written by eyewitnesses to Jesus' life or written by their author employing the testimony of eyewitnesses. [See *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed.: *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Richard Bauckham, William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2017.]

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So, if anyone tries to tell you that the Gospels or the Biblical accounts of Jesus are unreliable, they are wrong. We have multiple attestations by eyewitnesses of the truth of our Savior, something we have for very few people who lived before or during the time of Jesus. Those multiple attestations were written very closely in time to the events themselves. And they agree on the essentials about Jesus.

On this resurrection Sunday, what do those multiple attestations have to say about the resurrection of Jesus? Mark writes, “He has been raised.” Matthew: “He has been raised from the dead.” Luke writes, “[He] has risen.” John simply describes the fact of the empty tomb, adding to that fact an account of Jesus’ resurrection appearance and his words to Mary.

Now, you may hear unbelievers say that Jesus was not resurrected because the crucifixion was incomplete. Jesus, they say, recovered from his flogging and his time on the cross and never really died.

{Nowhere in history is there any record of anyone recovering from a Roman crucifixion. That is why there were guards at the cross. They were there to ensure that the sentence of death by crucifixion was carried out. That is why Jesus’ side was pierced by a spear. That is why Matthew tells us that the guards at the tomb were so scared to report the empty tomb to the governor. They might well have been punished by death if a living Jesus had suddenly appeared. That is why the Jewish priests, says Matthew, bribed them to report instead that the disciples stole Jesus’ body from the tomb.}

A thought on the truth of Jesus’ resurrection: Church tradition tells us that every one of the disciples spent their life ministering in the name of Jesus, proclaiming our salvation because of what Jesus did on the cross and God’s raising of Jesus. Church tradition also tells us that every one of those disciples except for John suffered a horrible and violent death because they would not renounce Jesus.

{Traditional Accounts of the Deaths of the Apostles: Peter: Crucified upside down in Rome around 66 AD. Andrew: Crucified in Greece. James (Son of Zebedee): Beheaded in Jerusalem (Acts 12:2). John: Lived to old age, dying a natural death in Ephesus. Philip: Crucified/stoned in Phrygia. Bartholomew (Nathanael): Flayed/skinned alive and beheaded. Thomas: Speared to death in India. Matthew: Killed by a sword in Ethiopia. James (Son of Alphaeus): Crucified or stoned in Egypt or Jerusalem. Jude (Thaddeus): Killed with arrows. Simon the Zealot: Crucified or cut in half. Judas Iscariot: Committed suicide after betraying Jesus. Matthias (Replacement): Stoned and beheaded.}

{If the Gospels are lying and Jesus is not alive, then why would those disciples have devoted their lives to a lie? Why would they have been willing to suffer awful deaths because of that lie? No, they were testifying to the truth. Jesus was raised by God from the dead. Jesus is alive.}

The Gospel according to Matthew tells us more than that of course. First, do not be afraid, Matthew writes. The two Marys at the tomb were afraid because of the earthquake and the angel

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descending from heaven to roll away the stone. Yup. I would be afraid! Those Roman guards were so afraid that they went comatose, like dead men, says Matthew. I get it!

But the angel told the two Marys not to be afraid and that Jesus was going ahead of them back to Galilee. In fact, Jesus himself came to the two Marys and told them to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. Remember, Galilee was where Jesus and the disciples came from. It was their home. Jesus was going to meet up with them where they lived.

So, there is no reason for fear. God has conquered death by raising Jesus. If the God who created us, redeemed us and sustains us is more powerful than death, then of whom or of what shall we be afraid? That is a good thing to remember when we get depressed or anxious, when we are facing serious medical or financial or personal difficulties, and when we are facing death. God is more powerful than all those things.

More than that, Jesus is with us. Jesus went to Galilee where the disciples lived. Jesus is with us wherever we are in our lives. We don't have to go to church to find Jesus, we don't have to undertake difficult pilgrimages to find Jesus, we don't have to go to the Holy Land. The first step to Jesus is getting down on our knees. All the travel we need to reach Jesus is accomplished by praying, by listening for the sound of those butterfly wings I told the children about. Jesus will meet us there in that prayer ... wherever we are praying. The last words Jesus spoke in the Gospel according to Matthew were, "I am with you always ..."

And who are we to Jesus? The two Marys were messengers, sent by God to tell the disciples the news that Jesus was risen and alive. Don't ever let anyone tell you that men somehow have a more important role to play in the life of the church than women. Women were the first evangelists ... the very first. And they were sent by Jesus to proclaim the resurrection to the men.

And then Jesus called the disciples his brothers. My translation says, "brothers and sisters." Our Savior is our brother ... to all the men, to all the women in the congregation, Jesus is our brother. Some people have a hard time believing in the resurrection. I do not. However, I am always overcome by the notion that the One who was present at the creation of all things, the One who saved us by his death and resurrection, the One who sits at God's right hand and the One who will judge us all at the end ... he is our brother! How amazing is that!!

{A final observation to share with you: Jesus was the Son of God and claimed to be the Son of God. It was Jesus' claim to be the Son of God in his trial before the Sanhedrin that caused them to turn him over to the Romans for execution.

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah but that was not a crime. Others had and others would later claim to be the Messiah. To the Jews of Jesus' time the Messiah was to have been a political figure who would, among other things, reestablish Israel as a kingdom with a Jewish king. But Jesus' claim was radical. Jesus claimed to be a different kind of Messiah, one who was the very Son of God, with the power and glory of God. That was blasphemy. And so, the Sanhedrin

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asserted to the Roman authorities that Jesus aimed to become the King of the Jews. That was treason and sedition and grounds for the Roman authorities to execute him.

God's raising Jesus from the dead to life eternal at God's right hand was confirmation that Jesus was God's Son. God's raising of Jesus confirmed Jesus' radical claims about who he was.}

More than that, the resurrection of Jesus was not just about Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus was the most important event in history since the Creation. Jesus' resurrection inaugurated a new age, a new era in human history when it became possible for human beings to enter a new relationship with God and with one another. That new era is marked by the coming of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus. The era will end when Jesus returns at which point Jesus will judge human beings and angels and establish the Kingdom of God in full. In the words of a song I love, "Jesus didn't stay dead, and he won't stay gone!"

The raising of Jesus from the dead means everything to humanity. Without it we would remain under the law and would inevitably fall short of obedience to all those 613 commandments in the Old Testament. How could we hope to make enough sacrifices to atone for so much disobedience and sin by so many people? But Jesus completed that atonement. He made the sacrifice. His was the last sacrifice. By his death and resurrection and ascension he became the bridge between humanity and God that we need for our salvation.

My friends, my brothers and my sisters, let us be firm in our faith. We have ample evidence for our belief that Jesus was raised by God on the third day following his death. We have testimony of eyewitnesses and of faithful believers over the past two thousand years. We have only to claim the salvation offered by Jesus to be a part of God's Kingdom and to enter with Jesus into true life now and into life eternal.

Jesus has been raised from the dead! He is alive! Hallelujah!

Amen.