

## **“Beats The Alternative!” (John 14:19)      Easter 1, April 12, 2009**

This morning I'd like to tell you about a friend of mine. His name was Ernie. Over the years, he had a lot of medical problems, which required a lot of surgeries, medications, and treatments. But through it all, he showed tremendous courage. If that's what it took to keep him alive, he'd say, "Then so be it! It beats the alternative!" Now, as a friend I admired his positive attitude, but as his pastor...well, I wasn't real comfortable with that answer. So one day, when just the two of us were talking, and he said, "Beats the alternative," I told him as kindly as I could, "You know, Ernie, actually it doesn't." For a moment, he just looked at me. Then he burst out laughing. "I guess you're right," he said, and laughed again. "The life to come will be much better than this one, won't it?"

And yes, it will! Obviously, it's good to enjoy this life. It's good to make the most of it. And it's natural to want to spend a long time here – especially if we have kids and grandkids. But as Christians, we know this life is not all there is. Nor is this life the best there is. In fact, we look forward to an infinitely better life when this one is through. Thanks to Jesus, we can look forward to a life where mortal limitations will be gone and all our tears will be wiped away. Thanks to Jesus, we can look forward to a life where we'll be reunited with loved ones and bask in God's love forever. That's the alternative – a glorious eternity in heaven – so, my friends, there's no way that this life beats the alternative! No way!

And I'm sure we'd all agree, wouldn't we? But it is easy to lose sight of this fact. We're so used to this life, so comfortable with this life, so wrapped up in this life that it's easy to focus *just* on this life – in fact, to operate as if this life were *it*. Spiritually, we know better. We know that this life is just a journey – a journey toward that life which is life indeed. Yet, even though we know this, we don't always integrate our beliefs into everyday life – which, frankly, makes this life a lot harder than it needs to be! I mean, how many things do we worry about that in the big picture won't count for diddly? How many things do we stress over that ultimately won't matter at all? And by the same token, think how much richer, how much brighter, how much wiser our lives would be if we did keep our destination in mind – if we did focus on what *will* matter in eternity! Most of all, think how that would transform our attitude towards death itself! St. Paul was able to say, **“For me, to live is Christ, death is but gain!”** And that is the truth, isn't it? That is our belief. Yet how many Christians today could honestly say the same thing? **“For me, to live is Christ, death is but gain!”** And more to the point, how do you get to where you can honestly say this *and* live accordingly? That takes some “connecting the dots,” doesn't it? Not keeping “spiritual beliefs” over here and “everyday life” over here, but connecting the dots; integrating the two; integrating our beliefs into everyday life. *“Because I believe this, therefore this...”* *“Because I believe this, therefore this...”* Yes, that's always the challenge for us Christians – integrating our beliefs into everyday life! And nowhere is this more important than when it comes to our beliefs about Easter and the meaning of Jesus' resurrection.

Our beliefs about Easter are pretty straightforward: Jesus rose from the dead. And we all know the story. After His suffering and death on Good Friday, Jesus' body was placed in a borrowed tomb, which the authorities sealed and placed under guard. This was done rather hastily, so the women assumed that burial arrangements were not complete. Saturday, of course, was the sabbath; work was not allowed. So first thing Sunday morning, the women went to the Jesus' tomb to finish the burial arrangements. Along the way, they discussed potential difficulties like, "**Who will roll away the stone?**" But this turned out to be a non-issue. When they arrived, the stone was already rolled away. Also, the Roman guards had disappeared. So the women went inside the tomb, looking for Jesus' body, and to their distress, it was gone. Instead, they found a young man dressed in white. And what he told them was equally distressing: "**You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised!**" Their response to this news was "**terror and amazement!**" In fact, they were so shaken they fled from the tomb!

So that's the story. That's what happened on Easter. But what it all meant – well, only gradually did that become clear. First, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene. That helped some. Then Jesus appeared to the disciples. That helped some more. Then Jesus appeared to other people, too, which was great, but to finally grasp what the resurrection meant – what it meant for them personally – the disciples had to connect some dots. Specifically, they had to connect the dots between the miracle of Easter and something Jesus had told them the night before He died: "**Because I live, you will live also.**"

Few verses in the Bible are more important than this one, for as you've heard me say many times before, this verse is a kind of equation. Saying this the night before He died, Jesus was telling His disciples: *Here's how you'll know whether my promise of eternal life is true. If I die and live again, that will be the proof that when you die, you too will live again.* "**Because I live, you will live also.**"

Now, when you think about it, this was a pretty outrageous statement! Making resurrection the basis on which His claims would stand or fall! Outrageous! Small wonder the disciples didn't pick up on it at first! Small wonder they didn't connect the dots right away even when they saw Jesus alive! But its very outrageousness is what makes this promise so great! Jesus didn't say something vague or wishy-washy, open to various interpretations. No, He based our hope on an actual historic event: His resurrection from the dead. He guaranteed our eternal life with something very specific: His resurrection from the dead. "**Because I live, you will live also.**" Everything we believe stands or falls on this simple equation: "**Because I live, you will live also.**"

And the verdict? Well, Jesus does live! That's what we're here celebrating today! Jesus does live! And that means His promise stands firm! Yes, for 2,000 years critics have tried to disprove Jesus' resurrection, but their efforts have been in vain. These days, even objective *secular* scholars admit you cannot disprove

Jesus' resurrection; the evidence for it is too strong. For starters, what else could have made the Roman guards abandon their post, knowing they could be executed for doing so? What else could have made them flee from the tomb in terror? What else but resurrection? Actually seeing the "impossible" happen! For that matter, what else could have changed the disciples themselves – from cowards hiding behind locked doors into fearless witnesses? What else could have made them defy every threat and keep on telling the world: "*Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!*"? What else but resurrection? Actually seeing the Risen Lord in person! So it is an outrageous statement: "**Because I live, you will live also.**" But the first part just happens to be true – Jesus lives! That means we have an outrageously ironclad guarantee of salvation: we will live also! And that guarantee comes from God Himself! With the miracle of Easter, God shows us that Jesus is who He says He is: the Son of God, our Savior. With the miracle of Easter, God assures that us Jesus can do what He's promised to do: forgive our sins and offer us eternal life as a gift. So this is what gives us confidence in life and in death, Jesus' promise backed by His resurrection: "**Because I live, you will live also.**"

Of course, for this to sink in where we live and breathe, we do still need to connect those dots, don't we? We do still need to integrate what we believe into everyday life. But...well, let's not stop celebrating Easter just yet. Why don't we consider this homework? For that's really what it is. As I said a moment ago, integrating what we believe into everyday life is always the challenge before us Christians. So let's just consider this homework. As my friend, Ernie, did.

After the conversation I mentioned, Ernie's health gradually grew worse. He took it in stride, always showing great courage. But as the end of this life came closer, knowing what was waiting for him beyond took on more meaning. He really connected the dots; really integrated what he believed into everyday life. I was not with Ernie when he died; I had already moved up here. But from his family, I know that he died peacefully, in full assurance of salvation through faith in his Lord Jesus Christ. And because he did, I have a sneaking suspicion what will be waiting for me someday when my time on earth is through.

Here is how I picture it. One day, I will close my eyes for the last time here on earth. Then, I will open them again – not here but in heaven; open them to – glory, radiance, splendor beyond anything mortal mind can imagine! In that moment, I will find myself more fully alive than I ever dreamed possible! In that moment, I will experience perfect peace and joy. Loved ones will gather around me. Jesus Himself will welcome me home. And by His side, I expect to see my friend, Ernie. And what will Ernie do? With a sweep of his hand, I suspect he'll say, "So...what do you think? Sure beats the alternative, doesn't it?" Then it will be my turn to laugh...and say, "Yes, Ernie, it definitely beats the alternative!"

And that is the assurance we all take home with us today, thanks to our risen Lord Jesus and His promise, "**Because I live, you will live also.**" Amen.

