

**ROMANS 4:25.** (EHV)

**He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification.**

In Easter of 2016, Gerhard Ulrich, the chief bishop of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, a fellowship of a number of German state churches, published an Easter message in a church newspaper. In the article he said that Jesus decomposed like any other person. "Jesus is dead," he said. But that which was "divine" in him, namely his ideas and his zeal and his commitment to life, continues to live because his disciples wanted it to. And they then experienced a "resurrection," because they no longer hid themselves away from the Jews in fear and despair, but saw to it that the cause of Christ continued.

Gerhard Ulrich is not the first pastor to preach only a spiritual resurrection of Christ, and not a literal, physical resurrection of Christ. This is also the gist of many Easter sermons in the United States, even in churches called Lutheran. Pastor Windsperger was just telling me the other day that one of his members in Minnesota made the mistake of sending her child to the local ELCA church's Vacation Bible School, where the pastor told them that Jesus did not rise physically, but only spiritually.

I wonder what would happen if that was my Easter message to you. "Jesus himself is dead. But his ideas and his zeal and his commitment to life continue to live through you who follow him." Would any of you say anything to me? Would you still show up to hear me preach the next Easter?

I not only pray that many of you would confront me about that message, and I not only pray that if I refused to change my message that you would carry out church discipline against me according to Christ's word and that you would not listen to me preach any more Easter messages like that, but I also pray that you would know why and how to confront me. I pray that you would know that, if I told you that Jesus did not literally and physically rise from the dead, then I would be making him out to be a liar, because he promised to rise from the dead. I pray that you would know that, if I told you that Jesus did not literally and physically rise from the dead, then I would be denying that Jesus is the very Son of God, because death cannot hold sway over God's Son. I pray that you would know that, if I told you that Jesus did not literally and physically rise from the dead, then I would in fact be denying the possibility that one day you will literally and physically rise from the dead and live forever in heaven with Jesus.

But perhaps most importantly, Christ's literal and physical resurrection, as well as his ascension and sitting at the right hand of God, proves that he has saved us from our sins. So if I were to deny Jesus's literal and physical resurrection, I would also be telling you that you were still in your sins without any hope of salvation. This is what I want to stress today along with the apostle Paul in the verse that I just read: The exaltation of Jesus after his burial is the proof of our salvation.

After Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for Jesus's body, and it was given to him. Together with Nicodemus, Joseph wrapped the body in spices and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.

On Saturday, the chief priests and the Pharisees, with Pilate's permission, saw to it that the tomb was sealed and that a detachment of soldiers was posted to guard it.

We are not actually told about the exact moment Jesus rose, other than that it was very early in the morning on Sunday, the first day of the week, which probably means between 3 and 6 a.m. We are told that at dawn there was a violent earthquake because an angel of the Lord came down from heaven. That angel went to the tomb and rolled back the stone and sat on it, scaring the guards so that they shook and passed out. But the angel did not go to roll the stone away so that Jesus could get out. He rolled the stone away so that the people could get in and see that Jesus was already gone.

At this point we should take a detour, because the apostle Peter tells us about something Jesus did that we confess in the Apostles' Creed, but which no other evangelist or apostle describes. Peter tells us that after Jesus was made alive, he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed in the days of Noah while the ark was being built (1 Peter 3:18–20). Since Peter describes this as a prison for spirits, and since it is a prison for those who disobeyed God's word, this prison can be nothing other than hell. Peter is talking about Christ's descent into hell.

We do not know exactly when Jesus descended into hell, other than that it was after he was made alive on Easter Sunday. And we don't know a whole lot about the visit itself. We do know that Jesus did not go to hell to suffer, since he had already completed his suffering on Good Friday. We also know that Jesus did not go to hell to take the Old Testament believers out of a special room attached to hell, called the Limbo of the Fathers, as many people teach in the Roman Catholic Church. We also know that Jesus did not go to hell to convert any souls suffering there, because the Bible says that it is destined for man to die once and after that to face the judgment. Now, while we live on earth, is our time of grace; there are no second chances after we die (Hebrews 9:27; 2 Corinthians 6:1–2).

Peter simply says that Jesus preached to the spirits who were locked up there who had disobeyed in the days of Noah. We can imagine those people, while they were still alive, mocking Noah as he built a huge boat on land, because they didn't believe him that the Lord was going to destroy them by sending a flood on the earth. "Prove it!" we might imagine them saying. And Noah might have replied, "God's word is proof enough." And they probably went away laughing.

Those disobedient people were representative of all unbelievers who refuse to believe God's word without sensory proof. But God's word is always true, with or without sensory proof, and Christ's physical resurrection is the ultimate proof of that. So, far from being a gospel sermon, Christ's sermon to the spirits in prison was a vindication of Noah and all faithful preachers who had no further proof than the words, "This is what the Lord says." Jesus's appearance in hell and his accompanying sermon was the visible proof those disobedient souls had demanded, only that proof now condemned their unbelief. Jesus proclaimed to these disobedient souls that they were exactly where they belonged.

For us, this descent into hell is a comfort. If the resurrected Jesus can descend to the very flames of hell itself, the very realm of Satan, his demons, and all the condemned souls, without any fear of harm, then certainly hell also cannot harm those of us who put our faith in him.

To resume with what was taking place on earth on Easter Sunday, we know that several women got up early in the morning and headed to the tomb to anoint Jesus's body with spices that they had purchased the night before. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it sounds like the women did this all together. In John, it sounds like Mary Magdalene did it alone. But these stories can easily be harmonized. Either the women did not actually go there all together and Matthew, Mark, and Luke are summarizing, or Mary Magdalene left her companions as soon as she saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance, and then came back later.

Either way, it was when Mary Magdalene came back the second time that the risen Jesus made his first appearance to another human, that is, to Mary Magdalene. Then he appeared to the other women. At some point after Peter and John had run to the tomb to check it out for themselves and then returned again, Jesus also appeared to Peter. He also appeared to two of his disciples as they were walking to Emmaus, one of whom was named Cleopas. Then he appeared to the rest of his twelve apostles, except for Judas. Then he appeared to a group of more than 500 men at the same time, not including the women and children that may have been with them. He also made a special appearance to his half-brother James. Luke tells us that he appeared to the apostles over a period of forty days, showed himself to them and giving them many convincing proofs that he was alive.

I remember talking a number of years ago to a young Muslim man who was about my age. He was no radical extremist; he was a nice young man. He told me he was dating a Christian woman and he was trying to make sense of the two religions and figure out what the differences were, and if those differences made any difference, or if the two religions were basically the same. It sounded like his girlfriend was doing her best to convert him to Christianity, so I didn't say too much at the time. But in retrospect, as with many other instances, I wish I had said more. Since he was actually curious about what the differences were, I wish I would have told him that Christianity is the only religion with a leader who rose from the dead. And he didn't do it in a corner; he appeared to many different witnesses on more than one occasion and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. When Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus appeared to more than 500 men and that most of them were still living, do you really think that none of the Corinthians sought to verify that claim? Do you really think that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians would have lasted to the present if he were lying? If you do, then I challenge you to write a letter to a group of people saying that your grandfather rose from his coffin in the cemetery and appeared to more than 500 men and that most of the men he appeared to are still alive, when none of those facts are true, and see if your letter is still around 2,000 years from now! The truth endures; lies do not.

I wish I would have also told him that precisely because Christianity is the only religion with a leader who rose from the dead, that means that Christianity is also the only religion that offers true peace. That's what Paul says here: "He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification." When you say that something *A* happened *because of* something *B*, that means that something *B* happened first. "He was arrested because of his shooting." That means the shooting happened first, then the shooter was arrested as a result. "He was refreshed because of his vacation." That means the vacation happened first, then the refreshment happened as a result.

So when Paul says Jesus was handed over to death because of our sins, that means that our sins happened first, then Jesus's death as a result. Now we might say, "We weren't even alive yet!" But that is the power of God's eternity and all-knowing-ness; to him everything is in the present. He knew every single sin you and I would commit before we were born. And it was because of all those sins, not just those that had happened before Jesus was born, but also those that would happen years later, that Jesus went to the cross and died. Our sins came first, then Jesus's death.

But then Paul goes on to say, "Jesus was raised to life because of our justification." That means that our justification happened first, then Jesus's resurrection as a result. But when did our justification happen? When did God declare us not guilty? That's what we talked about last week. God did that on Good Friday. Want proof? Paul says that Jesus's resurrection happened as a result. In other words, if we had not been justified, if we had not been declared innocent on Good Friday, if Jesus had failed in his mission, he would not be the Son of God and he would not have risen from the dead. A dead Jesus means no forgiveness, no peace. A risen Jesus means forgiveness and peace in abundance for all eternity. Easter Sunday is the exclamation point on Good Friday, the proof that Jesus did what he came to do.

After Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days, he commissioned his disciples to go and make more disciples of the people of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded them (Matthew 28:19–20). He then was lifted up before their very eyes and ascended into the sky until a cloud hid him from their sight. Even though heaven is not in any physical location, the disciples understood that by ascending into the sky, Jesus was telling them that his mission was accomplished and he was returning to heaven, his native home from which he had come (Luke 24:50–53).

There Jesus sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 8:1). Once again, since God is a spirit being, he does not actually have a right arm or a right hand. But just as we use the phrase "right-hand man" to denote someone who is an indispensable helper or assistant, in a similar way the Bible uses the picture of the right hand of God to describe a position of perfect and complete power and authority (Ephesians 1:20–23).

Jesus uses that power and authority to do chiefly four things for us. First, he rules over all of the affairs of the world, including the most confusing, disturbing, and saddening events, for the good of the gospel and the good of those who believe in the gospel. Nothing escapes his oversight or goes beyond the bounds of his control.

Secondly, he is interceding for us (Romans 8:34). Even as we pray to him here on earth, so also he is praying to his Father in heaven on our behalf—just further assurance that he and his Father are doing what is best for us.

Thirdly, he is preparing a place for us (John 14:1–3). Imagine your dream home at your dream location furnished just the way you like it. The home in heaven that Jesus is preparing for you and for all who believe in him is infinitely better. We can only imagine the beauty of the place he is preparing for us.

Finally, he is making sure that the gospel is preached, and administered through baptism and the Lord's Supper, and is reaching more and more souls, so that more and more may believe

in him and join him in heaven. To that end, he is especially involved in using current believers to call and send some as public ministers of the gospel throughout the world (Ephesians 4:10–16). The fact that you and I are believers and are listening to God’s word today, the fact that I am your pastor in this place and at this time, is because Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God. It is therefore further proof of our salvation.

The final proof of our salvation will be when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead and to take his own with him to heaven. But we want to save Jesus’s return and eternal life in heaven for another sermon down the road. For today, we simply want to rejoice and celebrate all the proofs of our salvation that Jesus has already given us—his descent into hell, his resurrection, his ascension, his sitting at the right hand of God and all that goes with it. He did all of these things so that we could be certain of our justification, that we are righteous and innocent of all sin in the sight of God because of Jesus alone. To him be the glory forever. Amen.