

Jambo, Mabuhay, C'est va, Guten Tag, Wilkommen ... Welcome
On this Easter Sunday, we welcome you by the grace of God. Thank you for joining us. We pray for you to know and experience God's love and grace. If we can help you take a step on your spiritual journey, please contact us. We offer our traditional greeting on Easter:

He is risen. He is risen, indeed!

A Pastoral Prayer

“God of us all, we give you thanks for your love, your grace, and your power on this blessed Resurrection morning! We thank you for the many friends and loved ones who have made the extra effort to gather here with us today. We thank you for the brilliance of the colors on us and around us that remind us of new life!

Today, blessed God, we gather to *remember* and *celebrate*:

We remember Jesus, who healed the sick and raised the dead.

We remember Jesus, who gathered children to himself and dealt kindly with women centuries before our efforts at women's liberation.

We remember Jesus, who always kept the mission in the forefront, and the minutia in the lowest place.

We remember Jesus, Son of God, Song of God, who sang God's melody to us.

We remember Jesus, who consented to suffer and die at our hand.

Today, Almighty God, *we celebrate* the fact that death could not hold Jesus in the grave!

We celebrate that not even death is able to separate us from the love of God!

We celebrate the new life that we have in Christ!

We celebrate the assurance that we have of eternal life!

Today we *celebrate* and give thanks that in life, in death, in life-after-death we belong to God!”¹ **Amen.**

¹ A 21st Century Worship Resource by Safiyah Fosua. Discipleship Ministries (GBOD)

Message: It’s About Jesus!

Why are you here today?

Seriously. Why are you here? I have to ask the question. If I don’t, then all I’m doing is falling into the trap. There are too many elders, preachers, priests and leaders who are standing up in front of a group of people today, offering a beautifully crafted set of arguments about who Jesus is and why we should be happy we believe in him.

I apologize.

I apologize because I’ve done that in the past. But no more.

I’m not standing in front of you today to speak to your mind.

If you want philosophical or intellectual feeding, there’s a lifetime of reading to be found on the internet. We have classes and small groups that meet during the week. There are many opportunities to satisfy your intellectual needs. Please, be my guest.

I’m here so my heart can speak to your heart.

The only way to do that is to be honest with you. No masks, no presumptions, no hypocrisy. When I say “heart,” I’m referring to that part of me where my body, mind and spirit all come together. Soul is one way to think of it. It’s that deepest, most important part of us; the part where we have internal conversation. You know, the pro vs. con debate, good vs. bad argument, judge vs. being judged realization.

From my heart, I have to ask: why are you here today?

If it’s because I’m a good public speaker, that makes me sad. If it’s because of the music, decorations, food or time with family, that also makes me sad. Even if it’s because you think “these are good people,” that makes me sad. Today is filled with good things, but it means so much more.

Today isn’t about us.

Today isn’t about this beautiful church, the stained glass or the joy we’re filled with because you’re here. Today isn’t about the choir, praise band, hand bells, Bible readers, ushers, greeters, women or men. Today isn’t about the Youth breakfast or the Easter egg hunt. Today isn’t about colorful clothes and the family meal we’ll have later.

Today is about Jesus.

It’s always been about Jesus. Jesus is the most influential person who ever lived. Across the globe, we’re consumed with questions about him: “who is he?”, “what makes his life and teaching so different?”, “what sets him apart?” Jesus’ teaching was a radical change from what was taught in his day. His teaching on how we can directly go to God in prayer and loving others, even our enemies, is still countercultural.

It isn’t what Jesus said that brings us here.

If it was just about his teaching, the movement wouldn’t have survived the first century. It wasn’t Jesus’ parables or the events of his death that brought him fame and renown through the generations that followed, down to today and into the future. The reason men and women like the apostles and every day people have risked and sacrificed their lives for Jesus wasn’t because of what he said before he died, but what happened afterward. Three days afterward, to be specific. On the day we call Easter - today.

Jesus came back to life.

Jesus didn’t claim to know the truth about the resurrection. Jesus claimed to *be the* resurrection. Jesus didn’t ask Mary or the other disciples to *believe in* that. Jesus asked them to *trust him*. Jesus didn’t come to be a great teacher. He went too far. Jesus claimed too much. So we shouldn’t be surprised that when his disciples watched him die, they watched the movement die. Messiahs don’t die. Sons of God can’t be killed. But there he was, nailed to a Roman cross. There he died.

When Jesus died, no one believed he was who he claimed to be.²

When Jesus died, we were left with a choice. C.S. Lewis puts it this way, “You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. [Jesus] has not left that open to us. He didn’t intend to. ”

² Andy Stanley, *Starting Point*, Zondervan, 2014, pp. 14, 107

Jesus rose from the dead and nobody was outside the tomb waiting. Not even his most loyal followers believed Jesus had come back to life; until they saw him. Even then, Jesus had to say, “*don’t be afraid*” – twice! That’s when they believed. They trusted. In a heartbeat, those loyal to him went from unbelief and mistrust to belief and trust.

So there it is. The question that lies at the heart of Easter and every Sunday: do you believe Jesus rose from the dead?

What does your heart say? Do you believe in and trust God? Is your heart is “all in” with nothing left to spare? Or are you still looking for answers to questions, trying to put off making a decision, holding part of your heart back for yourself? What’s keeping you from believing?

I know. I rejected Christianity, faith and the church after college, living without Jesus in my life for 25 years. I went out of my way to make fun of others for their beliefs. I chased after power, fame and money. Drugs, sex and rock and roll were my appetites. Today, 16 years later, I can tell you that I was afraid. I was afraid people would find out the truth and reject me. I was afraid of being alone. I was afraid of being a failure. I was living half a life, in fear.

I couldn’t do it alone. Only Jesus could change my heart and life.

Why are you here today? As I see it, there are two groups of people here: those with a fish symbol (or it’s equivalent) on their car and those who wonder why someone would put a fish symbol on their car. Some of us are serious about our faith. So, when I ask, “do you believe in Jesus?” it’s the equivalent of going to a bar on Vin Scully Avenue in Los Angeles and asking, “are you a Dodgers fan?” You’re so sure of your answer, you dismiss the question.

Let me clarify. When I ask “do you believe in Jesus,” I’m not asking: “do you go to church?”, “are your parents or grandparents Christians?”, “do you own more than three Bibles?”, “did you repeat a prayer after a pastor one time?”, “is your name in the church directory?” or “do you know more than three names for God?” It’s easy for many of us to say, “yes, I believe,” but, truth is, we really aren’t sure what it means.

If you’re part of the “why is there a fish on the back of my friend’s car?” group, you’re probably chuckling. You don’t get it. You know that someone cared enough to invite you to come today. And you care enough about them to accept their invitation. When you hear the question, “do you believe in Jesus?”, maybe you skip over it. It’s not that you’re against the question or offended by it. You dismiss it, but for a different reason. To you, the question doesn’t seem worth answering. No offense. You’re just not into it. It’s like having a friend who’s a Trekkie who asks you things in Klingon. You don’t really care. If that’s what they like, fine. You don’t get the appeal.

But ... what if?

Would you pause for a moment and ask yourself, “what if all of life comes down to this one question? What if there really is a heaven and there really is a hell, and where I spend eternity comes down to this one question?” It may seem ridiculous, but if even the smallest part of your heart responds, I hope you will at least consider that it may be the most important thing you ever choose. I believe the truth is this: whether we do so consciously or not, we all answer the question.

I’m not here to sell Jesus. I’m not going to try and talk anyone into following Jesus by presenting the most appealing parts. Here’s the thing - don’t tell the people in the first group this, many of us assume we believe in and trust Jesus. Truth is, we haven’t heard the unedited version. We’re lukewarm, holding back and unwilling to fully commit ourselves.

I don’t mean to hurt anyone. I’m telling you have to make a choice.

Some of you may walk away and not look back. That will make me sad, because God loves you. We’ll wait. There’s room for all of us in Jesus’ kingdom. Don’t let anyone else tell you what to do. Make your own choice. Make it with your heart. Even if you don’t understand, your head will follow. When you do, when you really do, you’ll know it. In an instant you’ll be changed.

Trust God. Believe Jesus rose from the dead. Join the movement. Don’t be afraid; God’s got this.

If you believe Jesus rose from the dead and you’re ready to make that choice, I invite you to join me now in prayer:

Jesus, I need your love. I believe you are alive and you came to save me. Forgive me for all I have done, or failed to do. Save me from my sorrow, guilt and shame and give me joy with you in heaven. Amen.

If you prayed these words really and truly in your heart, Jesus has forgiven you. You are God’s child. May your heart be refreshed and renewed, filled with God’s love and grace. Tell us about your decision, so we can celebrate this joy with you.

Whether you made your choice this morning or not, please come back. There’s more to Jesus’ story to share.

Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus kept his promise to come back and save us.

I don’t know about you, but that’s good news worth sharing.

Let’s go.

Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSV)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”