

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Acts 10:34-43 & John 20:1-18

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Acts 10:34-43 (NIV)

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts [people] from every nation who fear Him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything [Jesus] did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen. ⁴¹ [Jesus] was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. ⁴² [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the One whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."

John 20:1-18 (NIV)

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put Him."

¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," He said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking He was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get

Him.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that [Jesus] had said these things to her.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Dr. John Trent tells about a wedding video he once saw. The video was shot from the back of the church looking up the aisle toward the bride and groom. Because of the camera angle, you could see several members of the congregation. Suddenly, during the vows, a man jumped up from his pew and yelled, “Yes, Yes, Yes!” as he pumped his fist. Then he froze and slid down into his seat — and sheepishly took off his headphones. It turned out he had been listening to the Auburn-Alabama football game, and his favorite team had just scored.

Easter is a day for Christians to pump their fists in the air and shout, “Yes, Yes, Yes!” Yes is what Easter is about! God’s yes to humanity, as God grants to us the gift of immortality! God’s yes to Jesus and all Jesus taught us about the meaning of life! God’s yes to the victory of life over death, love over hate, faith over fear, hope over despair. Everything about Easter says, “Yes, Yes, Yes!”

Recently I read a hilarious story about a six-year-old boy named David who was taking a walk one day with his grandmother. They decided to detour through the local graveyard. Stopping to read the tombstones, Grandma explained that the first date on the tombstones was the day the person was born and the second date was the day the person died.

“Why do some tombstones only have one date?” little David asked. “Because those people haven’t died yet,” his grandmother explained.

David was obviously stunned by his grandmother’s explanation because, that night, he couldn’t stop talking about the excursion. “Mom,” he said with wide eyes, “some of the people buried there in the cemetery aren’t even dead yet!”

Leave it to a six-year-old to put a different twist on things. But Easter puts the grandest twist to the story of all. Easter says that the people who are buried there who are in Christ are not dead at all. They’ve simply exchanged a worn out or hopelessly damaged physical body for a new perfect, spiritual body that will last for all eternity. What can we say to this, but “Yes!”?

You know the basic story. The details vary according to the Gospel you are reading. These are eyewitness testimonies passed along by word-of-mouth before they were written down. Different people remembered the story in different ways. But the gist of it all is that early on Sunday morning after Jesus’ crucifixion some of the women who loved Jesus went to the tomb where His body lay, and they found the large stone guarding the entrance to the tomb rolled away. Jesus’ body was gone.

Later, the risen Christ appeared to His followers on many occasions, beginning with Mary Magdalene on that first Easter Sunday. The Apostle Peter in a sermon recorded in the book of Acts

described the whole episode like this: “We are witnesses of everything [Jesus] did... They killed [Jesus] by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day... [Jesus] was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.

“[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the One whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name (Acts 10:39-43, NIV).” Let’s look for a few moments at Peter’s words as we reflect on some of the ways Easter is God’s “Yes!” to humanity.

FIRST OF ALL, EASTER IS AN ACT OF GOD!

God raised Jesus from the dead, says the Apostle Peter. Easter is an act of God. We benefit from Easter, but we did nothing to bring it about.

It always amuses me to hear natural disasters described as acts of God — floods, hurricanes, all kinds of pestilence. Sometimes this is even the language that appears in legal contracts. “This insurance policy protects you against floods and other acts of God.”

Friends, these are acts of nature; they are not acts of God. You surely realize that. When the atmosphere in the Atlantic gets agitated and the temperature of the water below is just right, those natural conditions — under just the right circumstances — may cause a hurricane. This hurricane is an act of nature, not an act of God. When people who have the love of Jesus in their hearts open their homes to hurricane victims, then that is an act of God.

Easter is the ultimate act of God. God raised Jesus from the dead. No human being can achieve immortality on their own. Many people have tried. But it cannot be done.

It’s like a story that Earl Nightingale used to tell about a man who was observed running toward a large river. As he reached the dock he increased his speed and when he came to the end he threw himself as high and as far out as he could before hitting the water, landing about ten feet from the dock. As soon as he surfaced he swam back to the land and tried it again — over and over again.

An onlooker asked him, “What are you doing?” He said, “A friend of mine has bet me a million dollars to one that I can’t jump across the river and after thinking over those odds, I couldn’t help but at least try.”

So it is with those who would defeat death on their own. No one can work their way to immortality, no one can will it or even merit it. Only one way does a person who is truly dead come back to life, and that’s by an act of God.

Pastor Craig Barnes compares our human struggle to that of a person pushing against a huge stone — a stone like the one that blocked the entrance to Christ’s tomb. He writes that we have all been pushing against something for a long time. And we push hard.

“Maybe we’ve been pushing against a supervisor who is hard to satisfy, or against the threat of having our job downsized. Or maybe we’re pushing against a marriage that seems destined for the ditch.

Or maybe pushing against chronic pain, against depression, against loneliness and grief, or against some other obstacle that is between us and our dreams. Lately, we've all been pushing against the anxiety that terrorists will strike again."

We work so hard to save our lives. We push and push and push, and in the end, Barnes says, "in one of the worst ironies of life," it seems all that waits on the other side is death. But then we come into this room on Easter Sunday morning and we realize that the stone that we have been pushing against already has been rolled away — the stone of our mortality, the stone of our inadequacy, the stone of our impurity.

God has given us His divine "Yes!" and suddenly we have a new picture of our lives. That supervisor will not get the best of us — the loss of a job will not destroy us; neither will the loss of a marriage, the loss of a dream or even our failing health. These tragedies that come to us all do not have the power to destroy us because, in Easter, God has given us His "Yes!" In Easter God says to us that there is nothing in this world or in the next that will forever defeat one of God's children. Easter is an act of God.

SECONDLY, EASTER IS AN ACT OF GRACE.

Easter says that God accepts us just as we are, not because of anything we've done, but because of what Christ has done.

In Peter's sermon we alluded to earlier, he links Christ's death and resurrection to the forgiveness of sins. "...God appointed [Jesus] as judge of the living and the dead," Peter declares. "All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name." Easter is an act of Grace. We did not deserve to be delivered from the power of the grave. We are sinners. We are imperfect, flawed, despoiled. But still God loves us and invites us into His eternal house.

In April 1995, Edye Smith lost her two small sons, Chase and Colton, in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, two men with a deep hatred for the American government, set off a truck bomb that destroyed the front half of the federal building, including a day care center, and killed 169 people. Edye and her mother, Cathy Wilburn, were devastated by the loss of Chase and Colton. But hatred and suffering did not have the last word in this family's story.

At the trial for Terry Nichols, Cathy Wilburn, grandmother of the murdered toddlers, noticed that Terry Nichols' mother and sister were alone in the courtroom, bearing the brunt of hatred from the victims and the public. And as a Christian, a person who knows God's "Yes!" in her life, Cathy Wilburn knew what her responsibility was. So Cathy befriended Terry Nichol's mother and sister. In fact, she opened her home to them, offering hospitality to two women she could easily have hated.

Such love, such forgiveness is possible in this world. It is possible because of what God has done for us in Christ. Easter says that Christ has forgiven our sins — not because we deserve it, but simply out of His great love for us. Easter is an act of God. Easter is an act of grace.

AND THIRDLY, EASTER IS A SUMMONS TO GRATEFUL LIVING.

We have God's favor. God has rolled away the stones of fear and death. Now it is our turn to live as Easter people, to let our lives say, "yes!" to the people we meet each day.

Dr. Ellsworth Kalas points out that the disciples seemed aimless and confused after Jesus' resurrection. Some of them even returned to their old job, commercial fishing. What was their problem? According to Dr. Kalas, they were viewing the resurrection as the end of the story. Jesus arose from the dead, now what? What does that mean? They didn't immediately understand that Jesus' resurrection was really the beginning — the beginning of a new victorious life in Christ.

It's like something that Max Otto once wrote. He writes, "Along the upper reaches of the Ohio where the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains hem in one of America's beautiful streams you sometimes awake at daybreak to find that a heavy mist has obliterated the landscape leaving only a narrow circle of [the landscape] dimly visible about you. When this happens you can resign yourself to the weather and wait for a change — or you may do what you have on hand with the best cheer you can muster, calling to the neighbor whose shadowy form you can see, though you cannot be sure what he is doing. If you keep busy, the mist rises. You see the river rolling on toward the Mississippi. Then you see the opposite shore, the houses of the city, the taller buildings, the towers of the schools, the steeples of the churches highest of all. Slowly the mist climbs the hills, hangs for a little like a torn veil on the summit, then vanishes, disclosing a blue sky. And the work you began in the fog you continue in the sunlight."

The disciples were in a fog following the crucifixion of Jesus, but His resurrection and later His appearances to them caused the mist to rise and to reveal the light of a beautiful new day. What they "began in the fog" they continued in the sunlight. And so it is for anyone who hears and believes the message of Easter.

Eugene Smith was a minister who never sang much because he didn't have much of a voice and couldn't read music. But one year, on Easter Sunday, his daughter persuaded him to sing along with the choir when it came time for the "Hallelujah Chorus." And he really got caught up in the last part when they were singing all of those "Hallelujah's." He said that as they were singing all of those Hallelujahs, he got carried away. He loved to sing those Hallelujahs and he was just about to sing a couple more when all of a sudden the choir stopped, the director stopped and the organ stopped. He said that they stopped too soon. He said, "Since that time I've been going around with a couple of Hallelujahs inside of me just waiting to get out."

What a way to live and die — with Hallelujahs just waiting to get out. Like the excited football fan yelling "Yes! Yes! Yes!" This is how life is in the light of Easter! Easter is an act of God, Easter is an act of grace, and Easter is a summons to grateful living! The fog has lifted! Now let us live in the light!

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