

“The Empty Tomb”

Saint Matthew's Passion, Pt.6

It's Easter Sunday – the strangest Easter Sunday I've ever spent, how about you? Somebody said this week, “Pastors the church is going to be empty on Easter...just like the tomb! Amen?” But we do come *fittingly* to the empty tomb today as the conclusion of our series on Saint Matthew's Passion – we've been studying what the gospel writer had to teach us about the last days of Jesus Christ on this earth.

Now each week, we have featured a great work of art that illustrates the story we are focusing on from the sacred text. And today's is a true masterpiece. If you make your way to a far corner of Italy's Tuscan Valley, you will find an ancient little town surrounded by walls. Sansepolcro is not on many maps of tourist destinations, which is a shame, because if you make your way into the council meeting room of the town hall you will find one wall covered in a fresco. What the iconic 1920's writer Aldous Huxley called “the best picture in the world.”

Now such a description might surprise you because chances are you've never heard of Piero della Francesca, much less his painting *The Resurrection*. Piero is considered an avant-garde master who was ahead of his time and influenced later painters as

renown as Michelangelo. But he did not produce much – at least not much that has survived – and his best work is not in museums, but hard to reach locations off the beaten path like Sansepolcro. By the way, the town's name means “Holy Sepulchre” so it's fitting that the town fathers would have commissioned a depiction of Jesus' sacred tomb.

In Piero's depiction, Jesus stands regally with his foot resting on a classic sarcophagus – a dominant pose that is fundamentally important to the message. Jesus is not some apparition flying off to the spirit world. He is on the earth and very physical indeed. Muscular – check out that six-pack! – and stoic, physically perfect in every way save the wounds that remain from the crucifixion, this is the picture of a conquering hero. He plants the flag of victory like he's ready to have his photo taken. Contrast his body language with the guards – the picture of earthly power – that sleep impotent at his feet. This is the God who has conquered death and the grave. This is the defiant, victorious King of kings and Lord of lords.

Whether or not you think Piero's *The Resurrection* is the best picture in the world, I'm here to say that the event it points to, *THE* Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best occurrence in the world. And that's what Easter tells us as well. We may not get to have a lot of bells and whistles this Easter. No, we're not starting *God at the Movies* today. There are no mass Easter egg hunts. We won't have engorging lunches with extended family. I can't see your fine Easter clothes – be honest, you're wearing a Snuggie aren't you? And those things are nice, and we miss them, but none of them are what makes Easter, Easter.

And none of them are what give hope and meaning to your life in times of crisis like we find ourselves in today. I can tell you every pastor I know has been asking, "What are we going to do for Easter this year? How can we make it special?" Guess what? Easter doesn't need our creativity and pizzazz to be special. Strip away all the consumerism and the programming and Jesus standing before us on his own two nail-scarred, resurrected feet is everything you need.

So I'm going to read for us Matthew's account of the resurrection in its entirety – the *entire* 28th chapter – the words with which the disciple chose to end his gospel account of the life of Jesus Christ. Don't just check out, *listen*: listen with the ears of your spirit for

the voice of *the* Spirit in this sacred story. **Matthew 28:1–20...**

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."

15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. 16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

There's the account, but as we've seen each week, Matthew doesn't just give you an *account* of the event, but he always embeds in the event some very significant sayings of Jesus. And the effect is Matthew is not just *reporting* the historic event and then leaving it up to us as the readers to interpret it as we will; but by putting the words of Jesus into every event, he's actually giving us Jesus' *own interpretation* of the event.

And therefore, when he shows us the Lord's Supper, when he shows us the arrest, when he shows us the trial, when he shows us the crucifixion, he always gives us Jesus' own interpretation of what it means. But that presents a bit of a problem with the resurrection, because where does Jesus explain his resurrection in Matthew 28?

See most people present this chapter in two parts, you've got the narrative of what happened on that Sunday morning, and then you've got what is called "The Great Commission", the last part, where Jesus says - very famous words - "All authority is given unto me, go and make disciples, and lo, I am with you, even to the ends of the world." And we present those as two separate things.

But while studying this week, I've come to discover that those final words are in fact, Jesus explanation of what his Resurrection means. Each week we've seen Jesus explain another facet of what his *death* means, this week he explains what his return to life means. So what Matthew's *actually* doing in these final verses is answering this question, "Where is Jesus today?" *Where is he?*

Jesus is explaining where he is. And he tells us *four things* right there. He's by the right hand of the throne of the universe, he's in the ministry of the gospel, he's with the community of his people, and he's at the end of the world. Got that? *That's* the meaning of the resurrection. *Because* he's raised, that's where he is. Now I know what I just said is very hazy, and that's why I'm going to explain it. That's what the sermon is about. Let me tell you what Jesus himself says is the meaning of the resurrection, where he is now. Four things.

First of all, Jesus is by the right hand of the throne of the universe. Because he's raised from the dead, he says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...*" Now Saint Paul really ups the ante in his description from **Ephesians 1:20-21**, he says that God, "...*raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion...*"

Now, "the right hand of the throne" – and because we have mostly legislatures and presidents the only "thrones" we have are in museums and bathrooms - so this might not immediately hit you. But what is he saying when he says, "I've been raised to the right hand of the throne"? The right hand of the throne, first of all, was the place where royal power was *executed*. In other words, if you had a throne with a king or queen sitting on it, who would be at the right hand? The prime minister, the one who *executed* – who carried out - the decree of royal power. So it was the place of *rule*.

But secondly, it was also the place of *favor*. The person who was at the right hand of the throne had the favor of the king. If the prime minister asked for something, chances are they got it because they were at the place of favor. So the right hand of the throne was not only the place of rule; it was the place of favor. Now what does all that mean? Let me give you a case study.

The book of Acts tells us about one of the early Christian leaders named Stephen. And we are given a historical account of how he was seized, tried for heresy for his faith, and he was executed - he was stoned to death. And we're told that *during* the trial, all through the accusations and even during the execution itself, he conducted himself with enormous calm.

In fact, the text says, (**Acts 6:15**) "*All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*" And if you read the speech he gives in front of this tribunal, he is *utterly* fearless, tells them the truth, calls a spade a spade, and reveals their hypocrisy. After his trial they drag him out and brutally stone him and Luke records his last words, (**Acts 7:60**) "*Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* When he had said this, he fell asleep." And he never woke up! But he's praying for the forgiveness of the people who were killing him.

So there was an enormous calm, and yet, also, there was a tremendous fearlessness. Where does he get this *enormously* calm fearlessness, this relaxed courage? Where does he get it? Well, Luke tells us directly in **Acts 7:55-56**, "*But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*" There it is. Why was he so calm? Why was Stephen able to handle his imminent death with such calm acceptance?

And the answer was he saw Jesus Christ at the place of *rule*. He saw Jesus Christ at the right hand. He saw history was *not* out of control. He saw his life was *not* “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” He knew that even though he wasn’t sure *how* it was working out, something glorious and good was being worked out through what was about to happen. Well how did he know that? Here’s why: Because the one who loved him enough to die for him was now in charge.

He got a vision of Jesus at the right hand of the Father, and therefore, there was this enormous acceptance. *But* that’s not passivity; he wasn’t just resigned. At the same time, as I mentioned, if you read the text you’ll see there was an enormous fearlessness. There was a fierceness. There was a resistance as well. He was not afraid of dying at all. He was willing to call them hypocrites and so on.

And here’s the reason why: When Jesus Christ was at the right hand of the Father, that’s not just the place of rule but the place of favor. It’s not just the place for the prime minister; it’s the place for the defense attorney. And in other words, Stephen is on earth and *every* power - his tribe, his people, the religious authorities, the civil authorities – they were all calling him a liar, betrayer, and heretic. They were condemning him, “You failure. You slime.” And he didn’t care. Why not? He saw Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father. Do you know what that means?

In **1 John 2:1**, John says, “*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an **advocate** with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*” And because Stephen understands that, he can look at *all* the people. He looks at everybody condemning him. He looks at all their evaluations. He looks at all their assessments. He looks at all the things they’re saying, and he says, “I don’t care what you think. I do not take my identity from you. I do not take my cues from you. Jesus Christ is in front of the *only* power - the only throne - that counts, and he is *for* me. He’s my advocate.”

In other words, on the one hand, Stephen is not passive, saying, “Oh well, it can’t be helped. I’m going to die. That’s life.” On the other hand, he’s not active in the sense of being combative, “I won’t go down without a fight!” There is this enormous dialectic in his life of *absolute* calmness and acceptance and *absolute* resistance and fearlessness. Why? Because he knows where Jesus *is*. He heard Jesus say, “All authority is given to me. I’m at the place of rule. I’m at the place of favor. I am *your* representative. I am *your* Lord. I am *your* brother. I am *your* friend. I am *your* King, and that’s where I am.”

To the degree *you* grasp that...to *that* degree you will walk through life with confidence and with calm fearlessness. Are you doing that? If you aren't, you don't understand where Jesus is. That's the first thing we learn here...Where is he? He's by the right hand of the throne of the universe.

Number two, we see Jesus is in the ministry of the gospel. The second thing he tells us about where he is and what the meaning of the resurrection is he says, “*Therefore go and make disciples...*” He is saying, “When you go and make disciples, I'll be with you. I'm *present* in the ministry of the gospel.” He even goes on a little further and says what it means to make disciples. He says, “...*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*”

And so what he's talking about is when people take the message of Jesus, when people take the *words* of Jesus, when people take the *gospel* of Jesus, when the accounts of his life, the accounts of his words, the accounts of his work are expounded, or taught, or preached, or read, or listened to, or meditated on, or reflected on, there is a special, special promise here.

In **Ephesians 2:17**, Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians, and he says, “*You know how you were converted. Christ came and preached peace to you who*

were far and to you who were near.” Now, how can Paul say that? Jesus Christ was never in Ephesus. He was never even in Asia Minor. He *never* went to the places where Paul was writing these letters to the Christians there. So how could he say, “Christ *came* to you”?

John tells us that after the Last Supper, Jesus was walking with his disciples and comforting them about his coming death – he knew how hard these next few hours would be for them. But he tells them that what's about to happen is actually a good thing and one of the big reasons why was because, **John 14:26**, “*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*”

One of the roles of the Holy Spirit – who comes and lives inside you when you become a follower of Christ – is he makes the words of Jesus become *alive* to you. There is something mysterious in the Word of God. Jesus Christ is not like Abe Lincoln; he's not *dead*. When you read the Gettysburg Address, you get some general understanding of the spirit of Lincoln. But Jesus is alive. So when you read his words and you read the accounts of his life, wherever the gospel is ministered, something mysterious can happen. Through the Spirit, Jesus will come and *meet* you in the Word. He will come and *meet* you in that ministry.

Sometimes people will come up to me after a sermon and say, “Anthony, you were speaking right to me this morning.” Well, I want you to know, that wasn’t me. That was the Holy Spirit, taking my words and adding a power to them that goes way beyond my ability to communicate. The same things happens to you when you participate in a Connect Group, or have a conversation with someone about Jesus or just read the Bible even. Every now and then you just feel a presence. It’s *because* Jesus has come to you; Jesus was preaching to you.

Jesus says, “Because I’m resurrected, I want you to know you will not just know me doctrinally. You will not just know me practically. You will not just know me by trying to follow my commandments, in the general sense of doing what I want you to do and living in a theologically correct way. There is the possibility, because I’m resurrected from the dead, of *spiritual intimacy with the infinite*, spiritual intimacy through my Word, through my gospel, through the accounts of my life. *Sometimes* I will come to you when you’re reading, listening, hearing, and reflecting, and I’ll make myself real to you.”

And that’s how you find the resurrected Lord. It’s in the ministry of the gospel. He *comes* to you. Do you know that? By the way, you may say, “I know I’m a Christian.” If you’re a Christian, why do you need to know that? Because sometimes – too often frankly –

we run through our day and never give Jesus a chance to be present with us. Sit down with his Word. Sit down with the descriptions of who he is. Sit down with the Scripture and realize he’s present, realize *he* could come to you, realize he could teach you, he could show up and tell you something right that day that you’ll never forget. It’s like the wind, you can’t control it, but you better have your sails ready for when it starts to blow.

And if you’re *not* a Christian - and I am so glad you are watching, we built this church for you, you are welcome here wherever you are on your spiritual journey – but you should know the Christianity you are exploring doesn’t work as a totally rational, cognitive thing. I’m not saying it’s irrational or non-cognitive – not at all – but there is an element of sacred mystery here. This isn’t accounting. This isn’t engineering.

This is more like music, more like dance. There’s a need for inspiration – which literally means “filling with spirit.” And so you should sit down with the Scripture and say, “Jesus, I don’t know if you’re there, but *if* you’re there, will you make yourself real to me?” Because you see, if he is there, that’s how he’ll work. He won’t *strictly* work through the cognition – through the mind - he also works through the heart.

So the second thing he says is, “Because I’m resurrected, not only is there the possibility of calm fearlessness, but there’s the possibility of spiritual intimacy.” Because he is not just at the right hand of the Father, he is also in the ministry of the gospel.

Thirdly, where is he? What does his resurrection mean? **Jesus is with the community of his people.** I’m going to use the old King James translation of the last verse, which I think is actually a better one. It goes like this, “... *and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*” Now, that little word “lo” packs a punch.

If you remember, the NIV says, “*And surely...*” That’s weak sauce. And it always reminds me of the *Airplane* movie. “Surely you can’t be serious?” “I am serious – and don’t call me Shirley.” But there is a Greek word there that’s best translated “behold”, *hidou*. “Behold!” Which means, “Look! Surprise!” Jesus says, “Let me show you this incredibly surprising thing.” And he tells us two things here.

First of all he says, “...*I am with you always...*” Now being Americans and being the radical individualists that we are in our culture - when you and I read that, what do we think of?

You say, “What that means is he’s with *me* always. So when I walk through Zilker Park, he’s with me there in Zilker Park. When I drive along Mopac at rush hour, he’s there with me on Mopac. Yea, even tho I venture into Costco on a Saturday the Lord is with me! Isn’t it wonderful he goes with me no matter where I am.” And do you know what? That’s *not* what it means. I am very sorry.

By the way, he *will* go with you into all those places and more, but that’s not what this is talking about. And the reason we don’t understand what he’s saying is a fault in our language as English speakers. This is second person plural – and in English our second person plural pronoun is the same as our *first* person plural pronoun, “you”. We don’t have a *ustedes*, we don’t have a *vosotros*. English has it’s limitations.

Fortunately we are Texans, so we have a better shot at understanding what Jesus is saying. Because the correct translation of this is, “... *and lo, I am with y’all...*” And so here’s what he is saying, “Because I’m a risen Lord, you will find me in *community*. Because I am not a dead person of whom you learn through historical research, but I’m a *living* person; therefore, you *best* know me in community.”

In fact, the average American Christian who says in response to the question – 80% of American Christians say - “I can be a strong Christian without going to church.” Jesus Christ says, “Nope. You’re not going to find me all by yourself. You’re certainly not going to be able to grow in me.” And of course, I have a really great quote on this from...C.S. Lewis. You knew I’d have Lewis quote. My daughter says it’s a drinking game – whenever I quote C.S. Lewis take a shot of communion. Grape juice!

This comes from his book, *The Four Loves*, and it really hits the daily double, because it’s C.S. Lewis talking about J.R.R. Tolkien. And if you *know* me...Because I’m legally required to preach to no one, some of you taped up quotes and pictures of church folk to the backs of the seats so I won’t feel quite so alone. And two of the pictures are Lewis and Tolkien! You know me well. So this quote is the peanut butter *and* the chocolate.

Lewis was part of a group of very close friends, writers in Oxford, called “The Inklings”: the three closest were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. And when Charles Williams died, C.S. Lewis, trying to find a bright side in the tragedy, thought well, at least it meant he wouldn’t have to, in a sense, share Ronald, what he called J.R.R. Tolkien – one of the R’s is “Ronald”.

By the way, Tolkien called Lewis “Jack” and I have no idea where that comes from. But Jack figured now that Charles was gone, even though that was a terrible loss, he’d have more of Ronald. But this is not what happened.

And this is what he says in *The Four Loves*: “In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald’s reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him ‘to myself’ now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.”(61)

Dropping down he says, “...we possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious ‘nearness by resemblance’ to Heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to one another.” (62)

See what Lewis discovered is he lost the part of Ronald that only Charles brought out when Charles died. Instead of getting *more* of Ronald, he had *less* of Ronald. Then he said, “Wait a minute! If it’s really true that no one person can draw another human *being* out completely into reality, but we need a *group* of each other to really know one human being well, how much more is that true of Jesus?”

And here’s what that means. Your Christian friends see *parts* of Jesus Christ you will never know or love unless you know and love *them*. Your Christian friends see things in Jesus you’ll never see, you’ll never know, because of who they are, because of what they’ve been through, because of their experiences. In a sense, because of where they’re *standing*.

Take a look at an object. Any place you stand, you see the same object, but you see it *differently*. It depends on where you’re standing. You see a different aspect, a different side. Your Christian friends know *parts* of Jesus Christ you will never know or love unless you know and love *them*. Why? Because he’s *real*, because he’s *risen*, because he’s a real person. He’s not someone you know through historical research. He says, “Lo, I am with y’all. I am with you in the community of my people. *That’s* where you’re going to really find me *fully*.”

And so now we see three things: Where is Jesus? Where is the risen Christ? At the right hand of the Father...in the ministry of the gospel...and in the community of his people. And if we understand that, we have the potential for enormous, calm fearlessness. We have the potential for spiritual intimacy. And we have the potential for deep relationships with other people who believe in him.

But lastly, Jesus is at the end of the world. There is one more thing he says. Where is he with us always? “...*even unto the end of the world*.” Where is Jesus? Where is the risen Christ? He’s at the end of the world. What Jesus Christ is saying is, “When the world’s history is over, I’ll be there.” In fact, what he’s saying is, “Because I’m risen from the dead, *I am* the world’s happy ending.”

The history of the world...how will it end? You’ve heard the famous Robert Frost poem? “Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice. From what I’ve tasted of desire...I’m guessing probably a pandemic virus of some kind. Am I right?” Listen, the world has a story. You have a story. I have a story. But every story has an ending. What is the world’s story? How’s it going to end? And Jesus Christ says, “I’ll tell you how it’s going to end. *I’ll* be there. Because I’m risen, I’ll wipe away every tear. I’ll make everything right.”

While we're talking about J.R.R. Tolkien – let's keep it in the family – he said one of the big problems we have in the modern world is we think of a serious drama as “real art”, and we think of the fairy tale - the fantasy, the romance - as not true art anymore. But he offered a powerful critique of this in a 1939 lecture called “On Fairy Stories”.

He created two words: dyscatastrophe and eucatastrophe - “*eu*” in Greek means good, “*dys*” means bad. So dyscatastrophe literally means a bad catastrophe, a catastrophe that ends in sorrow. And eucatastrophe is a catastrophe that ends in joy: a turn of events, life out of death, triumph out of what looks like failure, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

Now he says the essence of drama is tragedy, dyscatastrophe. I'm telling you, the only reason *La Land* was even considered for Best Picture a couple of years ago – a “serious” picture – was because the guy *doesn't* get the girl in the end. But Tolkien says there is a kind of art form, which he calls fairy stories, that is the happy ending, the success beyond hope.

And he says it's something, of course, that in the twentieth century – and still today – serious people *insist* is only for children. This is why Martin Scorsese says the Marvel super-hero movies aren't

real art. That's just kids stuff. But Tolkien disagrees with Scorsese and his crowd and argues that's not now and has never been true. Fairy tales were *not* for children. Legends were *not* for children. The old stories were not for children until the twentieth century. This is what he says about them, and it's very, very interesting.

He says, “It's the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher and more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes – the twist, the eucatastrophe - a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality...In such stories when the sudden ‘turn’ comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.” (23)

Now what's he talking about? What he's talking about is fairy stories - romances, fantasies - where everything looks dark and all kinds of dyscatastrophes are happening, all kinds of terrible things. Things look worse and worse and worse. Things look like there's *no* hope, and all of a sudden there's a turn. All of a sudden, beyond anything we could've imagined, it's all right! Happy ending.

The modern world has said, “That’s for children.” You know they punished Steven Spielberg for years because all of his movies had happy endings. All the money at the box office, but no awards. Because they said, “That’s for kids.” And they wouldn’t give him an Oscar until he started making movies that had sad endings – look it up; *Schindlers List*, *Saving Private Ryan* – Holocaust, war, dyscatastrophe! All the stuff that had eucatastrophe – *Indiana Jones*, *E.T.* - “No, that’s for children.” He’s got *West Side Story* coming out this year – that is *not* a happy ending, “Tony!” – I predict big things from awards season!

And here’s why. The modern world says, “Oh, look at that, the guy gets the girl, the hero saves the day, light triumphs over darkness – fake news, fantasy, kids stuff.” Do you know why? Because the modern world says, “Life’s not like that. The universe is not like that.” But Jesus Christ says, “Oh, yes it is. The world *is* like that. The crosses *will* be swallowed up in a resurrection. I stand at the end of the age. I *am* the world’s happy ending.”

See, there’s a place at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien’s great novel, in which one of his heroes, Sam Gamgee, after the final battle, has a great reunion and he says, “Gandalf, I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?”

And what’s the answer of Jesus Christ? Yes, everything sad is going to come untrue. That’s what the happy ending is.

Back in his lecture, Tolkien says this, “The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: ‘mythical’ in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation.”

“The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy... There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits... To reject [the gospel story] leads either to sadness or to wrath... Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The [gospel] has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy ending.’” (23-24)

What difference does that make? If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when you get to the end of any Steven Spielberg movie, when you get to the end of any story, any legend, any great story that just has you filled with tears of joy because of life out of death, because of triumph out of defeat... There are so many stories like that. He described it. You *cry*; you *weep*.

If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, every time you see one of those stories it's going to heal your heart a little bit, because you're going to say, "And this *will* happen. The end of the world will be like this. The stories are all *true*. There *is* a knight who will slay all the dragons. There *is* a superhero who will save the world." The stories are true! Man, I wish we could do *God at the Movies!*

And if the resurrection is true, then every time you get one of those stories it'll heal your heart. And if the resurrection is *not* true and you don't believe in the resurrection, every single time you start weeping at a happy ending you're going to have to tell yourself, "Ah, just kid's stuff, the world is not really like that." And it will just sour you, and pollute you, and embitter you. And those are your only two choices: Believe in the resurrection and embrace the art of the world and let it heal your heart. Or disbelieve in the resurrection and embrace the "great" art of the world, and it will just take you down. Oh, but believe it.

Where is Jesus? What does the resurrection mean? The resurrection means fearlessness, spiritual intimacy, deep community, and a joy that swallows up all sorrow, a happy ending that swallows up all the crosses that have ever come into your life. Including the crosses we are all carrying in this frightful moment.

Where is Jesus? What does he say? "*All authority is given me. Go and make disciples. Lo, I am **with you all**, even to the end of the world.*"

Let's pray...

Father, on this Easter of all Easters, help us to think about what the meaning of the resurrection would be for us if we took it seriously, if we embraced it. We need that calm fearlessness. We need that intimacy with you. We need that depth of community with others – oh God, we *long* for that community!

But most of all, we need to know there's a happy ending that will swallow up all our dyscatastrophes, all our crosses – crosses of disease, crosses of financial ruin, crosses of addiction, crosses of mental illness, crosses of loneliness.

Maybe we can't imagine it in this darkness, but there *is* a happy ending coming. In the light of a final resurrection, that at the end of the world, you will stand the resurrected Christ...the world's happy ending.

We pray, Father, you would help us understand that. We pray, Holy Spirit, that you would help us take that in and change us with it. And we ask all of it in Jesus' name – the one who made it all possible on that first Easter morning – in the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.