

First, but Not Last
Pastor John Mars
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No, we will not be praying for the Rams or the Bengals. We're going to allow God to relax and enjoy the game!

I want to read a passage of scripture from I Corinthians, chapter 15, beginning with verse 12. Paul is writing.

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that God raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of all those who have fallen asleep."

May God bless the reading of His Word.

I am consistent. I have been called boringly predictable. I like my spontaneity planned way in advance. I rarely do anything out of character. When my friends hear that I've done something, they say, "Well, that fits." In 2000, New Year's Eve, 2000, I did something that made my friends say, "You did what?" On New Year's Eve, 2000, I found myself in Las Vegas. That was astounding in and of itself. But I found myself on New Year's Eve in Las Vegas at a concert. I don't listen to the radio. I can drive all the way to the coast and back in complete silence and I'm happy as a clam. I don't listen to the radio and I was at a concert in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve. It was Alabama, their farewell tour, kicking off in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve. I was there. The concert let out a little after 11 o'clock on New Year's Eve, 2000. It did not just let out in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve; it's on the Strip. We got out of the concert and there's this mass of humanity, so that we could only go about 15 feet a minute. I did not live a sheltered life. I grew up the son of a sailor. I am not a worldly man, but I certainly am not a sheltered man. But I saw things that night that I have never seen before and don't have to see again. But the images that are etched in my mind, that I have reflected on many times since that night, happened among our own tribe. What I mean by that is there were Christians doing them. Virtually every light pole, tree or high place had someone from our tribe with a poster. I don't remember any of them being positive. Most of them were, "The world is going to end tonight and you're all going to burn." "The world ends tonight and you're going to hell." And I have reflected on that a good bit. And I wonder if someone who didn't know Christ, if that was their only encounter with Christianity, with our faith, and they were to drive by Central Church and see that we are here worshipping today, what would they think of us?

From the inception of Jesus' life through the resurrection, the message was consistent. When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they did not say, "You're going to hell." They said, "Don't be afraid. For I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you." My friends, we have good news for a world that is in desperate need of it. We have good news, not bad news. We offer the world hope, not despair. I read a very disturbing article two weeks ago. Among teenagers and young adults, ages 15 to 30, in the United States and around the world, they are contemplating, attempting and committing suicide at a record rate. You know why? Lack of hope for a better tomorrow. And we have that hope. We have that hope and our world needs to hear it; the good news, not the bad news. Jesus' resurrection is our hope, our assurance, that everything is going to be okay. I hate to ruin the end of the story, but it's going to be alright. Y'all hear me? It's going to be okay. We have good news for a world that is in desperate need of it. I don't know what the future holds but I know Who holds the future and it's gonna be alright. The resurrection gives us many reasons for hope.

Let me stop here for just a moment and talk to you, do a little teaching. There's a difference between being raised from the dead and being resurrected. In the Old Testament, there were a number of people who were raised from the dead. In the New Testament, there are a number of people who were raised from the dead. I'm looking out at you and I bet you there are some of you who have been raised from the dead. You say, "What?" Yes. How many of you (I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand), but how many of you wouldn't be here if it weren't for modern science? How many of you were clinically dead at some point and because of modern medicine they brought you back? You were, in essence, raised from the dead. So, what's the difference between being raised and resurrected? If you're raised from the dead, you're gonna die again. Sorry! Jesus was resurrected from the dead, rose with a glorified body that will not decay, that will not change, and will last for eternity. That's the difference. And resurrection gives credence to everything Jesus said, everything he did, and everything he was. Without the resurrection, Jesus was a very interesting teacher that taught some counterculture stuff but is another tragic figure in a long line of tragic figures in Jewish history. But because of the resurrection, that gives credence and hope to everything else including you and I. It's going to be okay. The resurrection proves that truth is more powerful than falsehood. Jesus said, "They're trying to kill me because I tell them the truth." The truth about what? The truth about themselves and the truth about God, the truth about God's love for all of humanity, the truth about God's love for everyone. They killed him because they preferred their lie to the truth. There's an amazingly sad story during the last week of Jesus' life. Those that were bent on taking his life go to him and say, "Teacher, we know that you're from God because no one can do what you do unless God is with them." And they killed him. They knew he was from God and they still killed him because they preferred a lie to the truth, because he told them the truth and showed them who God really was. Without the resurrection, falsehood would have triumphed over the truth. The resurrection is our assurance that truth wins. Are y'all tired of lies, falsehoods, misinformation, deception, conspiracies? All of that garbage is going to be destroyed. Truth wins. Amen? Truth wins.

The resurrection is our assurance that good is stronger than evil. The forces of evil crucified Christ, the only perfect person that has ever lived. If evil accomplished its task, then evil wins. But evil loses. Good is stronger than evil. You do not overcome evil with evil, you overcome evil with good. There's a passage of scripture in both the Old and the New Testaments that says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing, you heap coals of fire on their heads." I used to think, "Boy, I'm going to kill them with kindness. I'm going to kill them with kindness. I'm going to make them feel really bad. I'm going to be really good to them!" Did you know I missed the point completely? That passage has nothing to do with making your enemy feel bad. It is a Jewish saying pertaining to Jewish hospitality customs. If you have a traveler staying with you, when they get up in the morning you take coals from the morning fire. You take a clay jar. You put sand in the bottom. You put coals from the morning fire into the jar so that they can take it with them, so they might have a fire that evening. They take that jar of coals and they carry it on their head. You're heaping coals of fire on their head so that you might have a positive impact on their life long after they're gone. You see, good wins. It overcomes evil. The truth wins, good wins, and the resurrection proves that love is stronger than hate. Jesus Christ was love incarnate. He was God incarnate and God is love, so Jesus Christ is love incarnate. If you want to know what love looks like lived out, read the account of Jesus' life because he personifies love. It was hate for his loveliness, hate for his graciousness, that sealed his fate. They didn't want to love their enemies. They didn't want to pray for those who despitefully used them. They did not want to feed their enemies. They did not want to give water to their enemies. Without the resurrection, the hate of man overcomes the love of God. But love overcame the worst that evil could do. The resurrection is proof that love is stronger than hate. Love wins. Love wins! The resurrection is our proof that life is stronger than death.

I have news. You may consider it good news, you may consider it bad news, but it's news. Ain't none of us getting out of this gig alive. If Jesus tarries, ain't none of us getting out of this gig alive. Aren't you glad that death does not have the last word? This is not an ending but a new beginning. Without the resurrection, death wins over the greatest love and the greatest life that ever lived. Without the resurrection, Satan wins. You see, at the cross, Satan thought he won but he lost. He lost.

How many of you know what the Sunday after Easter is called in the ancient church? Any of you? (My wife does. That's cheating!) In the ancient church the Sunday after Easter was known as Holy Hilarity Sunday. I'm serious. They felt like the resurrection was the greatest "Gotcha!" there ever was. Satan thought he'd won and Jesus' resurrection said, "Gotcha! Gotcha! You lost. You lost." Life wins, truth wins, goodness wins, love wins. Life wins over the lie, over evil, over hate and over death.

Folks, our world needs good news and we got it. The Christian is to be a walking, talking billboard of good news, of hope. Jesus was the first to be resurrected, but also his resurrection is our guarantee that he was not the last. He was the first to be resurrected but not the last. Love wins. Period.

So, I don't know where you're at right now. I don't know where your mind's at, I don't know where your heart's at, I don't know where your soul's at. But I want you to hear, I want you to take home with you today good news. Love wins, has already won. I want you to have that personally. I want you to have that hope personally. And I want you to take it and I want you to share it with the people in your sphere of influence. "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today is born for you a Savior." The resurrection is our proof that love wins.

Let's pray. This morning I want you to allow that to just wash over you that we have been given, we have received good news. It's going to be okay and we need to share that with the people in our world.

Gracious God, You have given us good news to share with Your people. Help us to be that person that draws people to You, that loves people into acceptance and not beats them into submission. May we be that positive advertisement that defeats the Enemy. May we be the spreaders of love and grace that You were. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.