

**April 21, 2019**

## Saved From Fear of Death

Hebrews 2:14-18

2:14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,

2:15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

2:16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.

2:17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

2:18 For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Today is Easter, the day when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Annually, the day when the highest number of Americans attend church is on Easter. Meanwhile, in Japan, Christmas may be celebrated by even non-Christian people, but Easter is hardly celebrated. This is because the people there still believe that the resurrection of Christ was a mere legend. Everyone is born, so they don't see anything strange about celebrating Christmas, the day that celebrates the birth of Christ. However, it is difficult for them to accept that Jesus Christ was the one and only person in history to be resurrected after dying. This is why the majority of newcomers to church on Easter Sunday say to me, "I'm just here to let my kids enjoy the Easter egg hunt." It is rare to meet someone new that is taking into serious consideration the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Rather than being just a mere legend or myth, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical fact. There is countless evidence that can be provided to prove this as well. I would like everyone here to seriously consider the resurrection of Christ, so I will raise a number of these evidences as we go through today's message.

## **1. Empty Tomb**

The first evidence of the resurrection: the empty grave. For most religions of the world, the grave of the founder is going to be respected, and people may even travel to worship the founder in their grave. Yet, if you go to the grave of Jesus in Jerusalem, you will find that it is empty. When Jesus was laid to rest in the grave, a large stone was placed at the entrance and Roman soldiers protected the gravesite. However, come Sunday morning, the stone was moved aside and the soldiers had fled the scene. The grave, and even death, could not tie down Jesus. Victorious over death, Jesus had been resurrected.

The Jewish leaders tried to stop the disciples from telling others about the resurrection of Jesus. If they were able to, the Jewish leaders could have pointed to the remains of Jesus in the grave and disproved the claims of the disciples, but they were unable to do so. This is because the grave was empty. The resurrection of Jesus could not be refuted by even those that were against Jesus.

## **2. Records of History**

The second evidence of the resurrection: historical records. A large majority of the New Testament was written around AD 50 through AD 70. The first letter to the Corinthians was written by Paul around AD 55. In this letter to the disciples in Corinth, Paul wrote the following:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5) Many have attempted to claim that the resurrection of Christ is legend or mythology, but it takes generations to create legends and myths, not a mere few decades. The resurrection of Christ was proclaimed immediately after the resurrection and recorded in the documents in the same generation.

Ancient texts other than the Bible also record the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. A Roman historian named Tacitus, who lived from around AD 60 through AD 120, wrote in his book titled “The Annals”:

Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. — The Annals (Book XV Chapter 44)

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, wrote “Antiquities of the Jews” in AD 94. In this text he writes:

He appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. — Antiquities of the Jews (Book XVIII Chapter 3)

Even these historians testify that the resurrection of Christ was a

historical fact.

### **3. Sunday Worship**

The third evidence of the resurrection of Christ: Sunday worship. We Christians hold our worship on Sundays. Why is this? It is because Jesus Christ was resurrected on Sunday. Worship is not a “memorial service” to remember a person that died two thousand years ago. We gather on Sundays to glorify the victorious Lord that has defeated death – the one that lives. In this sense, every Sunday is Easter. Today is the Sunday of Sundays, the Easter of Easters.

### **4. Many Eye-witnesses**

The fourth evidence of the resurrection of Christ: witnesses. The women that went to the grave of Jesus early in the morning found that it was empty. Peter and John also saw the empty grave. Peter even went as far as going into the grave and confirming that it was indeed empty. Later on, many disciples, including the Twelve Apostles, met the resurrected Jesus. Before returning to heaven, Jesus spent forty days meeting with many of his disciples. In 1 Corinthians 15:6, we find that there were still more than 500 witnesses alive even after 25 years from when Jesus was resurrected. Maybe if there were only a few witnesses, one could claim that these people saw an illusion or made up this story, but how could this be the case when there are hundreds of witnesses? The resurrection of Christ is a fact, and this truth is what brings our lives to victory. The person that believes in the one that was victorious over death can also be a victor as well!

## 5. Change of the Disciples

The fifth evidence of the resurrection of Christ: the changes to the disciples. Those that met the resurrected Christ had their lives changed in significant ways.

Let us first look at Peter and the changes that came upon him. Peter, who had claimed to be first among the disciples, went with Jesus to the house of the high priest when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. However, when someone near him claimed that he was a disciple of Jesus, Peter feared for his life and denied even knowing Jesus.

Just a short while after this incident, Peter was once again standing at center of the disciples and told the people of Jerusalem, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” (Acts 2:23-24) He boldly testified to the resurrection of Jesus.

One day, as Peter was healing a crippled man in the temple, Jewish leaders tried to have Peter arrested and interrogated. Even then, Peter said, “8 Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead-- by him this man is standing before you well.” (Acts 4:8-10) The same man that denied knowing Jesus out of fear is now boldly testifying the name of Jesus. Where did this sudden change come from? This cannot be explained

without the resurrection of Christ. Peter met the resurrected Christ and his life was changed.

Let us next look at Paul. He was a contemporary of Peter, but lived a completely different life. Paul was born to a wealthy Jewish family in Tarsus. He was born a Roman citizen, prideful of his Jewish background, and received a Greek education. Not only that, but Paul also went to Jerusalem to be taught under the greatest teacher in Judea at the time, Gamaliel. The three years while Peter was learning under Jesus, Paul was learning Jewish laws under Gamaliel. When the church first started in Jerusalem, Paul became one of the leaders of the Pharisees and stood at the forefront of persecuting the Christians.

Paul went as far as Damascus to persecute the Christians, but before he got to Damascus, he met the resurrected Jesus Christ. It must have been quite the shock for Paul, who had rejected the resurrection and Christhood of Jesus, to meet the living Christ. Jesus was resurrected and lives. Paul no longer relied on his own beliefs or reason, but now he thought through the fact of the resurrected Christ. There is nothing more powerful than the fact. Even the most sophisticated reasoning is powerless in front of the fact. As a scholar, Paul re-learned the Bible with his new understanding. He was finally able to confirm that Christ died for our sins, was laid to rest in the grave, and was resurrected on the third day. From this point on, Paul has testified to the name of Jesus Christ, even under the rule of Nero, until the day when he was martyred. What changed Paul from persecutor to evangelist is the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## 6. Joy of Faith

The Bible states, “8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:8-9) It has been two thousand years since the resurrection of Christ. We in the modern day cannot be witnesses of the resurrection, but the fact that he was resurrected will not change, and Jesus Christ is the one that lives. When we believe this truth, though we may not now see him, we can be filled with joy. Wherever the resurrection of Christ is being testified, there will be the joy of faith and the salvation of the soul. This is the sixth evidence: the joy of faith.

On April 10th, 2017, Rev. Akira Hatori passed away. He was one of the leading evangelists of Japanese evangelism. Rev. Hatori had a younger brother. He prayed that his younger brother would believe in Jesus Christ. One Sunday, Rev. Hatori invited his younger brother to attend church with him, but when he got to the church, he realized he should have invited his younger brother on another Sunday. This is because that Sunday was Easter and his younger brother was a materialist that was an active member of the communist party in Japan. He would probably close his heart and reject a message that claimed that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. However, rather than rejecting the idea, he accepted the message of the resurrection and from that day on, he became a Christian and would even go on to become a pastor himself as Rev. Junji Hatori. In later years, Rev. Junji Hatori would say about this experience, “I was actively trying to better society through politics, but when I looked around at my peers,

I saw betrayal, hostility, and living in ways that was the polar opposite of the values that they claimed to represent. I also saw this in myself – an insatiable greed – that was leading me down a life of chaos. As I sat there at the church, listening to the message of the resurrection, I realized that my life required the resurrection of Christ in order for me to be born anew.” The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the truth. Those that believe in him will have their lives changed by Christ that lives and they will have an everlasting joy in their souls.

I am also one of the people that experienced this change. I want to end today’s message with my small testimony.

When I was ten years old, I lost my mother. After she died, I fell ill and had to take about a year off from school. Even when I started going back to classes, I would still make at least one trip a week to the hospital due to falling ill. This continued on through my high school years.

My eldest sister was married, but did not have children, so treated me, the youngest one in the family, like her own. My brother-in-law also treated me with the same kindness. However, my brother-in-law was in a tragic accident while on the job, costing him his life. This was only two years after the death of my mother.

With these deaths in my life and my own illness, I found myself gripped by the fear of death. Even in high school, I would sometimes fall ill with a high fever and be bedridden for an entire week. It was during this period that I wondered what would happen to me when I died. Even if I were to live a long life, I would eventually die, so what is the meaning of this life? And, even if someone loved me or if I loved someone, they would eventually pass away too. I felt that



something had to change for me to know love.

This was around the time when I became interested in the Bible. I purchased the Bible at a nearby bookstore and began studying the Bible. I also started listening to a Christian radio broadcast. I remember hearing the broadcaster say, “technology has improved to the point where we can talk to people living in a country far away, yet we still fail to communicate with the people right next to us.” I felt this was true in my own life. I refused to talk to the people I disliked, I had placed my own heart into a cage. As I studied the Bible, I began to see the sins in my own life. Furthermore, I learned that Jesus Christ died on the cross and was resurrected on the third day to save me from my sins.

One day, I saw a poster that had written on it, “Worship & Message Gathering – Christian Evangelism Meeting.” The poster said the meeting would start from that evening, so I decided to go to this church to attend the meeting. That evening’s message was a strict one from the book of Jeremiah, “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars.” (Jeremiah 17:1) At the end of the message, the pastor said, “if you would like to accept Jesus Christ as their savior then please raise your hand.” Believing from my heart, I raised my hand. Once the meeting was over, the people that raised their hand stayed behind to talk one-on-one with a Christian from the church. With the person assigned to me, I prayed in the name of Jesus Christ for the first time in my life. Afterwards, I learned that the person that was assigned to me was actually the one that had placed the very poster I had seen earlier that day.

As I pedaled my bicycle on the road home from the church, I could not help but sing the hymnal that we had sung that evening during the meeting:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea billows roll,  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
— By Rufus H. McDaniel (1914)

Just as the lyrics say in verse 4:

There's a light in the valley of death now for me,  
Since Jesus came into my heart!  
And the gates of the City beyond I can see,  
Since Jesus came into my heart!

when I believed in Jesus, I was freed from the fear of death. It is just as the Bible says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Jesus Christ fills the void in my heart. He showed me a love that transcends even the love from my own parents. The next year's Easter, I was baptized. Ever since then, I have been living under the truth that

Jesus Christ died for my sins and was resurrected to become my savior.

If anyone here today wishes to take the first steps in believing, do so today on this Easter Sunday. Please open your heart to Jesus Christ and be baptized, as was commanded of us by Jesus. When you do so, you too can partake in the new life that is made possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**(Prayer)**

The Father of Jesus Christ, we thank you for loving us and for allowing us to gather together in love to worship you on this Easter Sunday. Jesus Christ has been resurrected. This is a historical fact that has changed the lives of so many people throughout the world. May you guide each individual gathered here today to accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ so that they may have their sins forgiven and begin their new lives in love, holiness, and joy. In the name of Jesus Christ, in who we place our collective faith, we pray, Amen.