

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: The Risen-ness of Christ
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Introduction:

In this season of March Madness, I was listening to NPR interview the great basketball player Bill Walton about his new book *Back from the Dead*. It's about his journey from a crippling back injury to living a full and joyful life, "back from the dead." It's a fitting parallel for our Easter sermon, as Alida and I look at the two frameworks for the Easter story.

There's the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as proof of our own eternal life; and there's the experience of resurrection in our daily lives, as hopes, dreams, relationships "come back to life"; as neighborhoods, cities, businesses "come back from the dead."

On the one hand, on Easter, the dead Jesus sits up, climbs out of his burial clothes, walks out of the tomb, talks with people, cooks breakfast, eats dinner. It was that real; and we want to help you embrace that reality. On the other hand, we can also rejoice when the hopes of Easter come true in our daily lives. Both are good and true, and a fair use of Scripture.

We do it all the time, taking old-time Bible stories to make practical applications. Remember the story of Moses parting the Red Sea—Moses puts his hands up, holds back the mighty waters so the Israelites could walk on through to freedom? Even if you find that hard to believe, we can preach it, we can turn it into a parable about how God helps us overcome intractable problems, immovable obstacles, impossible situations. So whether you believe the story or not, you still get the point.

One Easter when I was a pastor in New York City, I told about a neighborhood in Harlem where a supermarket had just reopened. This was the 1970s. Very graphically I laid out a picture of Harlem as it was then: destitute, ravaged, despairing, blighted; abandoned buildings, the symbols of community and normality gone, shuttered, empty. It was dead. And then a supermarket moved in, opened up, a light went on; business came back, people got hired, families went shopping. It was a grand resurrection! That too is an Easter story.

The truth of Easter is that Jesus was raised from the dead, so you and your loved ones will be too. And the truth of Easter is in the evidence of fresh life, new life, revival, renewal, resurrection all around us that leads us to say, "See, resurrection happens there. It can happen to you." Either way, there is *Life after Death*.

Sermon: The Risen-ness of Christ

If you haven't already guessed, our sermon titles today are inspired by the recent movie, *Risen*." I could have used "The Hateful Eight" or "Zootopia" or at least "Creed," but we went with "Risen," which I liked.

It tells the story of Jesus from the crucifixion through the next week: his resurrection, his meeting up with people, convincing them that yes, by golly, he really is alive!

It isn't Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ," full of gore and special effects to dramatize Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. Instead, it's a rather earthbound story of the Roman soldier in charge of Jerusalem, the tribune, who has to investigate the disappearance of Jesus's body. After the resurrection, nobody could figure out what happened to the body. Was it grave robbers? Did the disciples steal Jesus's body to create a legend so they could start a religion in his name? Even today, some say Jesus wasn't really killed. He was drugged on the cross and then revived in the tomb. Nobody, at the time, nobody believed that he just stood up, walked out of the tomb and lived again.

Two thousand years later, people still wonder was it real? Or a parable? And even if it was real, was it just a "one-off"? Good for Jesus, but it isn't happening to me!

I had double knee replacement surgery a few years ago and am glad I did. I move like a Frankenstein monster, but at least I can move. A couple of weeks ago I had breakfast with a man who also had knee replacements, and he's back running! And I thought *Good for him, but it's not happening to me!* It doesn't really change my life.

Easter's message is different. Easter says, "*This is what happened to Jesus. Good for him! And good for us! It does change my life!*" As you can guess, in the movie "Risen," Jesus has risen, the Roman tribune finds it hard to believe, tries to disprove it, meets the "Risen" Christ, then becomes a Christian. As that soldier struggles with this impossible reality, the "Risen-ness of Jesus," he says a few things that really struck me. First he says, "I can't reconcile this with the world I know." As a soldier, he spent his whole

career with death all around him. He knew death. When he went into battle, there'd be a soldier next to him, maybe a friend of his. One moment the soldier would be alive, vibrant, athletic, powerful, hopeful, full of life. The next moment, that same soldier is struck dead by an arrow or spear. The tribune himself had extinguished life, he had killed the enemy. And this Jesus, he had been the enemy. He had been killed. So, this idea that Jesus was back, alive, confronting the Roman tribune, well, he admits, "I can't reconcile this with the world I know."

Fair enough. Resurrection is tough to reconcile with what we know. But modern language offers some help. You've heard the term "new normal." Something that isn't supposed to be, all of a sudden is, and we'd better get used to it. It's the "new normal." "Sixty is the new 40," "Orange is the new black." Eternal life is the new normal. Get used to it.

Next, the Roman tribune is asked, "What frightens you about believing?" "Being wrong," he says. Being wrong. Looking foolish. Putting your hope in something that's not true. You invest in something, you give your all to something, you pour yourself into something you believe in, and it turns out to be nothing. This happens all the time. We put people up on a pedestal, we call them "heroes," and then they let us down. We find a product, an idea, a movement; we know it's the best, we know it's going to make a huge difference . . . and it doesn't. The letdown is crushing.

St. Paul actually addresses this. Paul was the one who turned Christianity into a world religion, so he was confronted all the time by folks who had a hard time believing the "honest-to-God" 100 percent real resurrection. Paul is very blunt. He says, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, our religion, our church, our faith is a waste, the dead are lost, and we are pitiful." (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

I don't want to look foolish either. I don't want to lie to you. We had Jim Oram's funeral last week. It was my 1,201st funeral. If there is no resurrection, that's a lot of lying, that's a lot of false hopes. Like the Roman tribune, I don't like being wrong.

Forgive me, it's a little gauche to mention my new book today, but I'm here to help you believe. Chapter 8 of my book is called "The Last Enemy: Church Meets Death." That chapter grew out of a sermon I preached last year on death and after death. I poured my heart and soul into that chapter. Everything I believe, everything I've experienced—the mystical, the personal, the spiritual—everything I want you to know about the power of resurrection, the reality of eternal life, is there in that chapter. That's your "Blessed Assurance," your "Amazing Grace"—we're not wrong.

Finally, when the Roman tribune is convinced that Jesus is alive, he says, "I believe I can never be the same again." That's really the whole idea of Easter. It's supposed to be the ultimate game-changer so that we "can never be the same again."

God's victory over death, over sorrow, over every imaginable hurt in life, every failure, every loss, every wrong, every sin, God's victory over that changes our outlook on everything so that we "can never be the same again."

I know there are a lot of UCONN basketball fans here who remember three weeks ago, when UCONN was losing to Cincinnati in the third overtime. Cincinnati had just scored to go ahead by 3 points with .8 seconds left, *.8 seconds left*. UCONN took the ball, threw it 75 feet, $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the basketball court, and it went in! They went on to win. The Cincinnati coach was furious. He said, "You can't inbound a pass, catch a ball waist high, turn around, and shoot a basketball in .8 seconds. It can't be done. It's impossible!"

But then again, it happened. *It happened*. It happened because UCONN didn't think it was over, didn't believe it was impossible, didn't roll over and play dead.

Now, of course, basketball isn't really life or death, but in the middle of a basketball game, if you're into it, that's all there is. So you might as well go for the impossible.

That's what Jesus did on Easter. He went for the impossible. He made Easter the "new normal." So we're not pitiful. We're not wrong. And it's true: we can never be the same again.

Thanks be to God.