



THE CROSS

There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. Paul declares the cross the very core of the Gospel. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world—even life itself. When we consider all that Jesus did there, we stand amazed.

THE CROSS • Luke 24:1–6a; Romans 10:8–13 • Tim McConnell • April 21, 2019

Happy Easter. How many of you got an Easter basket this morning? Who got a chocolate bunny? What about those Cadbury Eggs? Now, here's the real question: How many of you left all that chocolate there, didn't open a single bit of it and came to church today without even a taste? You guys blew it! I'm saying that in love. You blew it. The message today, everything I'm going to talk to you about, is about actually receiving the gift you have been given, actually taking it in. Don't leave it behind. You can be at the greatest brunch there is and still go hungry if you are not willing to step forward, take something on your plate and eat it. You may have been given the greatest chocolate bunny in the world this morning—real chocolate, not that waxy rubber stuff they tell kids is chocolate these days. It's nothing until you break it off and eat.

How do you do that with the Easter message? With Jesus and what He's done for you, the whole thing revolves around this one word: Believe. Jesus did it, but you don't get it until you believe. That's what Romans 10 is about. I wanted to read that because, the truth is, a lot of us are leaving Easter behind. We're leaving what Jesus did for us behind. We say, "Jesus did what Jesus did. Maybe He died on the cross; maybe He rose from the dead. What does it have to do with me?" What I'm going to explain to you this morning is that Jesus did all this for you. Jesus died on the cross for you. Jesus rose from the dead for you. He wants you to live the life He died to give you. It starts when you believe.

Easter is empty tomb day, right? Up from the grave He arose! "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus" (Luke 24:1-3). No body! Where's the body? Then the angels told them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:5-6). I love the attitude on these angels, don't you? "Why are you looking for a living person in a dead place?" Well, eh, he was just here! A little attitude-y. Where's the body? In many ways, Christianity was created by an empty tomb; did you know that? Christianity was born out of an inability to answer the question: Why is that dead body not in that tomb anymore? The Jewish leaders who had Him killed couldn't answer. The

Romans who executed Him couldn't answer. Even His own followers had no idea what to say. Why is that tomb empty? These guys say they saw Him alive again.

Something happened. Jesus of Nazareth was a real person, really crucified by Roman authorities. It would be easier to disprove the existence of Julius Caesar than to disprove the existence of Jesus. He lived, he died, no doubt, but the claim of His followers and of the Scripture here before you is that He died for you, and His resurrection—His being alive after He was dead—has something to do with you. We are here this morning to testify one more time: not only did He die, but He rose again. There is no getting around the empty tomb and the sightings of the risen Jesus. On the day Jesus died on the cross, there were 11 shaky disciples. Today there are 2.2 billion followers of Jesus. It's not because Jesus taught us to love each other (although He did). It's not because Jesus promised health and wealth (He didn't). It's not because Jesus promised some spiritual rocket ship out of this world. It's because the followers of Jesus saw Him alive after He was very much dead, and suddenly everything He taught and everything He did meant something new.

The tomb is empty, we celebrate. But you don't get to the empty tomb without going through the cross. Why was Jesus killed? Why did He have to die such a horrible death? If He was God, didn't He have power not to die, not to be killed like that? Until you get the cross, you don't get the empty tomb. Thousands of people died on crosses in the Roman Empire, but not one was like Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross—that was the hinge of history. That was the moment everything changed. Jesus died on the cross to demonstrate his God-sized love for us, arms open wide as He embraced the whole world even when it killed Him. Jesus died on the cross to show us the way to new life; there's a place where the old can go and the new can come. Jesus has power to change your life. Jesus died on the cross to show how real power works—not by dominating people, but by going low to help them up. But more important than all of these is this final, definitive truth: Jesus died to give you life. The cross is everything. But it means nothing until you believe, and live the life He died to give.

That's where Romans comes in: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Romans 10:9–10). Here's the thing; this verse is in the singular. A lot of times in the Bible, God is actually talking to a group, to the church, "Hey church, believe and be saved." Not here. This is singular. "Hey you." I'm talking to you right now. The question isn't whether the church believes, the question is do you believe? The question isn't does your wife believe, the question is do you believe? It isn't do your parents believe, it is do you believe? Jesus means nothing to you unless you believe. You. You alone. If it sounds like I'm putting the pressure on you, I am. Your personal response to Jesus' work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead determines your eternal destiny.

I remember sitting with a student years ago. She wanted to clarify what she had heard me say to the youth group. "So you say what I believe about Jesus matters?" "Yes." "And what I believe about Jesus determines whether I go to heaven or hell?" "It determines your relationship with God. Heaven is eternal life with God. Would you want to spend eternity with an all-powerful stranger you don't trust?" "So," she said, "God doesn't love me unless I believe in what Jesus did?" "That's not what I said," I told her, "God loves you no matter what. That never changes. His Son Jesus died to pay your debt of sin, and He rose from the dead proving the debt was paid. Believe in Him and the love of God will not be a distant idea but a healing joy within you. But that means nothing to you because you don't believe." She gave her life to Jesus. Things started to change.

Listen, God cares that this world is hurting. God cares that you are hurting. If you don't feel God, it's because you don't love God. If you don't love God, it's because you don't know God. If you don't know God, it's because you don't believe what God is telling you right now about Himself, and the conversation ends before it begins. I met a cage fighter recently. Seriously. The first time he told me he was a cage fighter, I didn't believe him. "Yeah, I was a cage fighter in Las Vegas." "Ha-ha! Right!" That closes the conversation, doesn't it? If I tell you

I'm a cage fighter and you don't believe I'm a cage fighter, we're done. Especially if I'm a cage fighter. Then you might be done! But if you believe the first thing, you get to hear the second thing. God says, "I'm here. I care that life isn't working right. I made it, of course I care about it. I sent my Son..." "I don't believe you." Conversation over. When we disregard God, when we act like God doesn't exist, when we waste the world He made and abuse the people He made and wreck our own lives He made, we divorce ourselves from the presence of God... and we are lost. It's over. But it wasn't over for God, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Jesus died on the cross to fix things. I know that sounds strange, but it's true. You know when you break relationships, you have stuff, they have stuff, and you each need to own your own stuff to heal the relationship? Well, with God, God has no stuff. We have all the stuff, and there's no way for us to own up to it all, because that stuff is a sickness that leads to death. So God takes all the stuff, even the death, he takes it all on Himself on the cross in his Son Jesus. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). God, seeing us lost, would not let us go. He took on flesh in his Son Jesus Christ, ran ahead of us into the death we deserved, died on our behalf and rose to life again, so that you and I could turn around, free and forgiven, and go home. He died to give you life. It doesn't mean a thing unless you receive it. Unless you believe.

Back when I was an Army Chaplain, Staff Sergeant Ryan Hallberg was one of my soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2005. His convoy team was hit by an IED. It killed one of our guys and tore up Ryan's legs pretty badly. I went to visit him once he was back here in Walter Reed Hospital. When I got there, the doctor had just told him to make a decision. One of his legs was infected and it was all they could do to keep him alive trying to repair it. "You can try to keep that leg and you might die, or we can take that leg off tomorrow morning." We sat there a long while talking, praying and staring at that leg. Hallberg said, "Chap, I'm going for it. I want to keep that leg. I like that leg." Then he said something I will never forget. He said, "If I die, promise

to tell my team something. Tell them Hallberg said, "Live the life I died to give you." He lost the leg but is still alive, and I'll never forget that: live the life I died to give.

What Jesus did on the cross, He did with you in mind. Live the life I died to give. Jesus died on the cross. Jesus rose from the dead. The tomb is empty. Jesus beat death. You might say, "Well that's interesting. I'd like to know a guy who beat death." But this isn't a death question this morning; this is a life question. It isn't "Do you know the way to heaven?" It's "Do you know the way to live?" Jesus died to see you live! Live the life Jesus died to give. You can begin to live that life right now. Only believe, "declare with your mouth," proclaim Jesus as Lord of your whole life, "believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead." You say, "I can't. I wish I could, but I can't." You can. God is here right now to move in your heart and make faith possible. A man once came to Jesus for help and Jesus told him to just believe and the help would come, so the man said "I believe! I believe" but he knew he was faking it, so he said to Jesus, "I believe... help my unbelief." Jesus did. God gives you the words, God gives you the faith, God gives you the help—only open your heart. "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame," it says; "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:11,13).

You have an opportunity this morning to pray with me, to declare faith, to believe, in a prayer. Here you are in church this morning. I know, it's Easter, a lot of people are in church this morning—but here *you* are. Jesus died on the cross, He was cold and dead in the grave, and He rose again to new life, for you. It means nothing until you take it in by faith. Salvation isn't about getting you into heaven when you die; it's about getting heaven into you right now while you live. Life with Christ. Heavenly life today when you believe. Pray with me, receive it, believe. Live the life He died to give: *My Lord and my God; With an open heart I pray; Thank You for sending Your Son to be my Savior; I declare Him my Lord; I believe He died and rose again; I believe, help my unbelief; You gave me Your life; Now I give You mine; In Jesus' name. Amen.*

STUDY GUIDE
THE CROSS • "Believe"
Luke 24:1–6a; Romans 10:8–13

UP: **Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word**

Read aloud the passage for the week: Romans 10:8–13. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) Read Deuteronomy 30:11–14. How does verse 14 relate to your understanding of who Jesus is?
- 2) Read Psalm 25:1–7. What does verse 3 mean when you think about faith in Jesus? What is the relationship between faith in Jesus and shame?
- 3) Read Joel 2:32. How does this verse enrich the way you think about following Jesus?
- 4) Reread Romans 10:8–13. This passage is filled with allusions to Old Testament texts. How does this influence your understanding of what it means to "be saved?"
- 5) How does this passage inform our understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross?

OUT: **Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)**

First Pres is launching an "Alpha" course this week. Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith, designed for non-believers. Pray that people who do not know Jesus will be open to an invitation to Alpha at First Pres and would be challenged to consider faith in Christ in the next eight weeks.

IN: **Connect with Each Other**

Pray for the Alpha team leaders who will be leading discussions, praying with people, serving food, etc. Pray that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and given wisdom in their interactions with guests at Alpha.