The Transforming Power of the Resurrection

It's my joy to proclaim to you the message of the resurrection. I do so today under the title, "The Transforming Power of the Resurrection."

In his book *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller has written—and it's a really important quote—"If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, why worry about anything that he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching, but whether or not he rose from the dead."

If Jesus really did rise from the dead and gave convincing proofs that he had indeed been risen, then there is no denying the fact that the implications are enormous. It would confirm who he is. It would confirm what he said. It would confirm what he did, especially what he did upon the cross. And it would confirm what will yet happen.

It would confirm that death is not the end, that there is life after death, and that how we live in the present affects our future destiny.

For almost two thousand years, Christians have confessed our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In the words of the Apostles' Creed, "The third day he rose again from the dead."

The central claim of Christianity is that Jesus of Nazareth was put to death by crucifixion at the hands of Roman soldiers on Good Friday. And sometime early on Easter Sunday morning, Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and lives forevermore.

So important is that truth to all that we believe that, were it to be proven false, the entirety of the Christian faith would collapse. If Christ did not rise, all preaching is useless, and so is all faith. We would remain dead in our sins, as the Apostle Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15.

Therefore, the vital question we must all answer is: Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Is it true? And if it is true, what does that mean for us, and what does that require of us?

The evidence for the resurrection is undeniable, and as such it is the most transformative and liberating truth in all of life. It utterly transformed the lives of all those who first witnessed it, who had a personal encounter with the risen Christ in the forty days between his resurrection and ascension into heaven. And it continues to transform the lives of all who have a personal encounter with the risen Christ today.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is true, it changes absolutely everything.

The first main point of my message is the evidence for the resurrection.

So, what is the evidence for the resurrection? Well, there are several facts that are beyond dispute.

Fact one: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, put to death by Roman soldiers on Good Friday, and was buried in an unused rock-cut tomb.

Crucified, buried. The centurion, an expert in execution, issued the death certificate. Pilate released the body for burial. Joseph of Arimathea took possession of the body, prepared the body for burial, and placed it in a rock-cut tomb. And throughout the whole process, Joseph saw no signs of life. He never doubted that Jesus was dead, and he never doubted that the grave was the only appropriate place for him.

So Jesus is an attested historical figure, and his death by crucifixion is an attested historical event.

Fact two about the evidence for the resurrection: the tomb, although made secure by a rolling stone with an armed Roman guard posted outside to prevent tampering, was found empty on Easter Sunday morning. Multiple people witnessed the empty tomb, along with Jesus' grave clothes folded mysteriously and left behind just where the body once lay.

Fact three: many people saw Jesus alive over a forty-day period. Each had an objective personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus under conditions that were conducive to verification and authentication, and each bore witness to what they saw.

Fact four: all those who encountered the risen Lord Jesus were forever changed by their experience and went on to devote the rest of their lives—indeed, to lay down their lives—for the truth of the resurrection they had witnessed, that they had come to believe, and that they proclaimed fearlessly from that moment on despite hostility and persecution.

And then fact five: on the basis of the eyewitness testimony of the apostles to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the Christian church was born and grew rapidly throughout the world, and has continued to grow throughout all nations, giving hope and purpose to millions of people around the world right up until the present day.

These are all the facts and evidence—objective facts and evidence—that we have for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

You could well understand, however, that a claim to be risen from the dead would be strongly contested. There have been many attempts to explain away the evidence.

First, there is an attempt to explain away the evidence by proposing that the disciples somehow interfered with the grave, stole the body, and then perpetrated a hoax that Jesus had risen.

Then there are others who have sought to dismiss the evidence for the resurrection appearances of Jesus based on hallucinations or visions, or some other subjective mystical experience—unverifiable mystical experience.

Still others have suggested that the empty tomb can be explained away on the basis of confusion over the location of the tomb: that the disciples on Easter Sunday simply went to the wrong tomb.

And still others dismissed the Gospel account of the resurrection as exaggerated or as legend, or that the texts have somehow become corrupted in subsequent generations.

All these attempts to explain away the evidence for the resurrection should be deeply dissatisfying to us at multiple levels.

For example, if the disciples had succeeded in overwhelming the Roman soldiers, removing the rolling stone, and then stole away the body, surely there is little credibility to the claim that the disciples would then be so successful in promulgating a hoax that Jesus had risen and then courageously give their lives in martyrdom for what they knew to be a lie.

Likewise, hallucinations rarely, if ever, occur in large groups or produce objective physical encounters as are described in the Gospels.

Furthermore, there is little credibility to the assertion that it was all a case of mistaking the location of the tomb on Easter Sunday morning when one considers that the location of the tomb was publicly known. The message of the resurrection began to spread in Jerusalem itself, and any false claims could have instantly been debunked by identifying the correct tomb, and indeed by producing the corpse—none of which happened, because the resurrection made that all impossible.

And finally, the claim that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection have somehow become corrupted or subject to exaggeration are proven false by the fact that the manuscript evidence supporting the authenticity of the Gospel accounts is the strongest by far of any ancient manuscript in existence worldwide.

If the resurrection is true, what does it mean for us?

The evidence surrounding the resurrection of Jesus cannot be adequately explained in any other way than as validation of the fact that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

But the all-important question that raises is: if Jesus did rise from the dead, what does that mean for us personally?

Surely it means that death is not the end for all of us, that there is life after death. It means that Jesus is who he says he is. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. His resurrection is, in fact, an invitation for each one of us to place our hope and trust in him, both for this life and for the next.

Because Jesus conquered death, because Jesus ever lives, we too may know victory over sin and the grave. We too may share in his eternal life. The resurrection is more than just a fact of history. It’s more than just a religious belief. It’s our only hope in life and death.

The first generation of New Testament believers are a prime example of what I'm talking about. Their journey to faith began in an upper room with doors locked and windows barred for fear of the Jews, thinking that, having put their friend Jesus to death, they would be next.

But as they each had a personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus—in ones and twos, in groups, in a variety of times and locations—those encounters changed absolutely everything for the first disciples.

In each case, it was not a subjective mystical experience that they had, but an objective encounter with their resurrected Lord Jesus that was sustained, that was repeated, that was face to face, that involved all of the human senses of hearing, touching, tasting, and seeing. In other words, the real-life encounter each of them had testified to the reality of the resurrection, not as an intellectual formula, or a coherent idea, or a subjective experience, but as an historical fact.

And as incredible as it must have been to their minds to see right in front of them someone who they had seen put to death now alive again, they could not deny that what they had witnessed with their own eyes was in fact true. They could not dismiss what they had experienced as a fairy tale, or as foolishness, or as a silly story made up.

For each of them, the resurrection was an historical fact based on their own personal experience of meeting the risen Lord Jesus face to face. They came to believe the resurrection because it was true, based on firsthand evidence given to each one of them.

And what was true for the first generation of believers is also true for believers in every subsequent generation, right up to the present day. We in the twenty-first century believe in the resurrection of Jesus not because it's the most logical idea or the most coherent belief, although it is those things.

We accept the resurrection of Jesus to be true because we've come to believe the testimony of those who were there, who saw him with their own eyes, and who testified to that fact—the truth of it. We also believe because of a personal encounter with the risen Christ ourselves, whom we've met in his Word, who has revealed himself to us by his Spirit.

Just like the disciples on the Emmaus road, the risen Lord Jesus has met us, has opened the Scriptures to us, has caused our hearts to burn within us as he revealed himself to us.

This brings me to the transforming power of the resurrection.

The Gospels bear witness to the reasonableness of believing the resurrection of Jesus to be an actual historical event. They do so by demonstrating the objective nature of the evidence for the resurrection and also the transforming power of that truth for all who received it.

It was the women who first met the risen Lord Jesus in the garden early on Easter Sunday morning. Seeing the risen Lord Jesus transformed their tears into joy.

Later that day, Jesus appeared to the two disciples returning to Emmaus from Jerusalem. They were feeling discouraged and defeated. He walked and talked with them, opened the Scriptures to them, revealed that suffering comes before glory, and then he broke bread with them, thus revealing his true identity. And in so doing, he transformed their despair into hope.

Jesus supernaturally appeared in the upper room on the evening of the resurrection. He spoke peace to his disciples. He revealed himself to them. He invited them to see the scars on his hands and feet and to reach out and touch him to prove that he was no ghost. He also ate some fish in their presence, again to prove that he was alive physically. And in so doing, he transformed their fear into faith.

Thomas was absent on that particular occasion, and he refused to believe the reliable eyewitness testimony of his closest friends unless he himself could see with his own eyes that Jesus was alive.

For a whole week, Thomas persisted in his unbelief. But a week later, the disciples were again together in the upper room, and this time Thomas was with them. Again, the risen Christ appeared. Having spoken peace to them all, he singled out Thomas and invited him in particular to place his fingers in the scars of crucifixion, to stop doubting, and to believe.

And immediately, having been presented with such authentic proofs, all Thomas's intellectual doubts fell away, and he declared and confessed his faith in the words, "My Lord and my God."

The risen Lord Jesus transformed Thomas's doubt into faith.

And sometime later, Jesus appeared to Peter by the lake in Galilee. After a miraculous catch of fish, followed by a barbecue breakfast on the beach, the risen Lord Jesus gently restored Peter to a position of trust and service. After the shame of his failure in denying Jesus three times, the risen Lord Jesus transformed Peter's failure into service.

And there were other post-resurrection appearances also, one of which involved more than five hundred people at the same time, many of whom were still alive at the time the Gospel was written and therefore able to verify as true the resurrection based on their own eyewitness testimony.

In each instance, Jesus appeared in such a way as to grant a personal encounter with himself as risen from the dead that contained convincing proofs and evidence, demonstrating that his resurrection was indeed a fact of history, which in turn utterly transformed the lives of those who witnessed him risen from the dead, transforming failure into defeat and fear into faith.

And these same disciples, at that time beginning their journey cowering in a locked-up upper room, went out from there to boldly go forth into all the world to proclaim the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to all people, even at the cost of their own lives.

My final point is Paul's encounter with the risen Christ as a particular example of the transforming power of the resurrection.

Prior to having a firsthand encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul was an enemy of Christ and he was a persecutor of Christians, and he did so thinking that he was doing God a favour.

The first time we meet Paul in the Scriptures, he was giving his approval to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Saul was filled at that time with a zealous rage against the followers of Jesus. He went from house to house arresting them and imprisoning them. He even obtained authority from the high priest to travel to Damascus to hunt down and arrest the followers of Jesus there and bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners.

But on the road to Damascus, Saul had a personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. He was encompassed by a blinding light. He heard an audible voice from heaven speaking directly to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul replied.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest those who were followers of Jesus. But even as he did so, the very same Lord Jesus appeared to him and arrested him.

Saul was temporarily blinded by the experience of witnessing the risen Christ. And as he was led into Damascus, he began to realise just how wrong he had been. He came to deeply regret his persecution of Christians.

And by his personal encounter with the risen Christ, Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle. He changed from being an enemy of Christians into a brother in Christ. He changed from being a persecutor to a proclaimer, from despising the name of Jesus to being an ambassador for Christ, from giving his approval to the stoning of Stephen to himself being stoned multiple times for the sake of the gospel, and ultimately to laying down his own life in martyrdom for belief in the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Friends, nothing can explain the radical transformation in the disciples, in the Apostle Paul, except that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an historical fact and that their personal encounter with the risen Christ was real.

Nothing else explains the transformation that came over them and the sacrifices that they made from that moment onward. They all became proclaimers of the resurrection, and most of them became martyrs for the resurrection.

What sparked the transformation and subsequent preaching of the first Christians was a genuine belief in and conviction about the fact that Jesus really was who he claimed to be, that his death truly paid for the sins of the whole world, and that he really did rise from the dead.

That changed everything for them. It changes everything still for all who believe in him.

Death was not the end for Jesus. Death is not the end for those who believe in him.

Jesus died to pay the price of sin, and he rose again to show that sin was truly paid for.

Praise God for his amazing grace. A blessed Easter to all of you. Thank you very much for your consideration of these wonderful truths as we take them to heart. Now Michael is going to lead us in a pastoral prayer before we sing our final hymn.