

Alive!

A sermon based on Romans 1:1-7

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was a miracle! At least, that's what the astonished onlookers must have thought.

Essie Dunbar was well-known and dearly loved by her family and so many others from her small town of Blackville, South Carolina. She died in 1962 at the age of 70 years. Her death notice, however, said something unusual. It read, "Essie Dunbar. Died at age 70, 47 years after her first funeral."

I know, confusing, right? Well, the year was 1915. Essie had suffered from epilepsy, which resulted in periodic seizures. One day she underwent a seizure so severe she appeared to be dead. A doctor examined her body, saw no signs of life, and concluded she had, indeed, died. Dark grief smothered everyone who adored Essie and her shining smile. The family arranged for her funeral and her burial. To be held the very next day. At the conclusion of her committal service at the cemetery, loving hands carefully lowered her casket into the grave.

Just then, a late-coming relative arrived. She was so distraught at having missed the funeral she asked if they could lift Essie's casket back out and open it, so she could see her one last time. The family agreed to do so.

As it turns out, the timing could not have been better. At the precise moment the casket was re-opened, Essie Dunbar opened her eyes, sat up and gave everyone there her big, wonderful smile. It was a miracle, but you wouldn't have been able to tell by looking. The three ministers immediately fell backward into the grave; one sustained broken ribs as the other two trampled him trying to get out. The mourners fled yelling, believing she was a ghost...a zombie. Needless to say, no one living around Blackville, South Carolina would ever forget the story of Essie Dunbar...a modern day resurrection.

Except it wasn't. We know that. It wasn't a resurrection. It wasn't a miracle. It was just an unfortunate mishap by the doctor and a fortunate break with the relative arriving late.

Today, we're here to celebrate a real miracle...and no, it's not that I've almost successfully made it through three services in four days; you probably just assume I actually did some work this past week. And no, it's not an April Fool's joke. No, the miracle is Christ is alive! He is! We've journeyed with the women to the tomb; we've seen the massive stone rolled away and the grave empty; we've heard the angel speak, "He is not here; he is risen, just as he said."

And now here, we have Paul...an eye-witness of the resurrected Lord. As he begins his letter to the believers in Rome – our verses for today – that's all that's on his mind. I mean, look at the way he starts out, ***"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of god by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."***

You might not notice, but Paul strays from the typical format for a letter here. For our letters, it's usually the recipient at the top of the page, followed by a greeting...there's the body of the letter, with

author's name given at the end. For letters in Paul's time, it would have gone name of author first, name of the recipients, and then the greeting.

But that's not what Paul did. He goes away from the norm, inserting this extensive description of himself and his work...all before he even takes the time to say, "Hi!"

Why's that such a big deal? Maybe it wasn't. But to me, it says here was a man – a messenger of Jesus – who was thinking, "What I have to tell you is so great, so awesome, I can't even finish my proper greeting." I would think this certainly would have gotten the attention of his readers!

So, what was the news that just couldn't wait? Again, ***"the gospel [Christ Jesus] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."*** Or, to summarize, "I'm Paul, I'm here to share the gospel, and here it is: Jesus, true God, true Man...he's alive!"

And here's the proof...thousands of years of Old Testament prophecies...promises finally fulfilled, like Isaiah 53, where God said, ***"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied."*** Or, Psalm 16, ***"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body will also rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."***

The proof was in Jesus' own predictions coming to light, ***"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*** Numerous times he told his disciples how ***"he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*** He even said, ***"Destroy this temple (my body), and I will raise it again in three days."***

And then, finally, again, there was Paul...not just proof of the grace of God - taking someone like Paul, a vile enemy of Christ, and turning him into one of the greatest servants of the gospel – but here was someone who, at his conversion, saw the resurrected Lord himself.

I don't know any other way to say it...friends, Christ is alive!

Yes, but why's that so important? Here's what Paul wrote in another of his letters, 1 Corinthians, ***"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 our faith...If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."***

An atheist one asked his Christian friend, "How come atheists don't get an annual holiday when Christians get so many?" "You do get an annual holiday!" his friend replied. "Every April 1st! You get April fool's day!" And he quoted Psalm 14:1, ***"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"***

It doesn't happen too often that Easter coincides with April fool's day. And today, the unbelievers of the world would have us think we're fools for believing a man died and came back to life nearly 2,000 years ago and it means anything for us today. And if Jesus is still dead, they're right.

If Jesus is still dead, there's no Christianity. If Jesus is still dead, he's not who he said he is. If Jesus is still dead, there's no grace. If Jesus is dead, we have no peace. If Jesus is still dead, the joke's on us; we are but fools.

Fitting...because isn't that what we are...so many times? We have a God who loves us, yet we rebel...in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions. We think we're wiser than God, as we do what "I want...what makes me happy...what I feel is right." The fool says there's no God. We might not do that, but the fool also says God isn't watching. I've been there. And as fools, it wouldn't matter if Jesus rose or not; we still would – and do – deserve death.

"But," Paul tells, **"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!"** That is Paul message to us today. That is the resurrection theme Paul weaves throughout the book of Romans. That is the good news we we'll hear over and over again this Easter season...again, **"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!"**

He is who he claimed to be...and friends, that truth has mind-blowing implications for you and me, and it is more important than anything else...way more important than sticking to proper letter-writing format.

Jesus is God. As Paul writes, Jesus was powerfully declared to be the Son of God. Maybe that brings to mind his many miracles. We saw one on Friday, how as true man – a descendant of David – he could die, but as true God, that death was enough to pay for all sins of all time, our foolish sins included. In that death, he gave his perfect life to us and picked up our tab...our debt of sin...a miracle. Of the many miracles the God-man did while here on earth, the crowing miracle was his resurrection after he had died as our substitute.

His perfect life earned righteousness for us. His innocent death paid for our many sins and misdeeds. The Father's raising him from the dead proves that he is indeed the Savior, totally acceptable to his heavenly Father.

Again, friends, it's an Easter miracle. And today, the miracles keep coming. Take a look around. The miracle is you...and me. The miracle is this: I am alive in Christ!

Here's what that means. Think for a moment about Paul's greeting (I actually used it at the beginning of this sermon as well): **"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** Because we're alive In Christ, we have grace – that's God's undeserved love...that's the forgiveness of sins. In God's eyes, we are sinless, "saints," Paul calls us here. Because we're alive in Christ, we have peace. No matter what happens in this life, no matter how others might look at us and think us fools for believing this, we are at peace, things between us and God are good because of Jesus...because of his life, death, and resurrection, because of the grace and forgiveness he's given us. We're at peace, knowing that because Jesus lives, we also will live with him in heaven.

Alive in Christ, we now belong. We're not alone. We're part of a family...God's family, where "God our Father," who gives us grace and peace, is looking after us. And our brother, Jesus, he's already taken care of us...and our sins.

Finally, being alive in Christ, we have a job to do. Like the Apostle Paul (which, apostle means "one who is sent out"), we are being sent out as servants of Christ Jesus to **"call people out from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."** Two features of our work as servants from that verse. The first is to share our faith in Jesus. What better day to do that?!? Today, Christ is alive. Jesus is risen. He lives! Our first lesson encourages us to **"give praise, proclaim, make known, sing, shout aloud, sing for joy" ... "to call people out from among all the Gentiles."**

And the second feature of our job? Obedience. Christ is alive! The greatest of his miracles. I'm now alive in Christ...another incredible miracle. There is no better way to thank and praise our risen Savior than through our obedience to him in everything and stop being sinful fools. I know, proclaiming Christ and giving him obedience, it sounds like a lot of work. Don't be fooled! Basking in the grace and peace of Christ's life and death and resurrection today, there is no greater joy than to live for him.

You know, going back to Essie...as thrilling as her story is, even Essie's "resurrection" experience is no match for what the Lord has done for you and me. In a spiritual sense, you and I were dead and buried—dead and buried under the crushing weight of our own sins. But then, Jesus arrived. He lived a holy life on our behalf. He suffered and died for our every failure. Then he rose from the grave.

And now, through faith in Christ, God has performed a miracle. He's raised us up. He's given us life—a life pulsating with joy, hope, light, and peace in Jesus. What an incredible blessing! ***“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!”*** We've seen the proof. We've received his grace. We are at peace with him. We belong to his family. We have a job to do.

We are alive in Christ. And Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.