Over the past couple of decades, I've had the opportunity to travel to a number of countries around the world. One of the great challenges of traveling, of course, is that people around the world don't all speak English and most native-born Americans, unfortunately, are monolingual. We speak only one language, and we don't speak even that very well. The basic American approach to communication with someone who speaks a different language is to speak slowly and loudly. We think the problem of not understanding is that the person can't quite hear us.

But it is a challenge navigating around another country. Marlene and I traveled to France a few years ago. And we decided to take the subway in from the Paris Airport to the center of Paris. Here we are dragging our suitcases through this enormous metro station looking for an exit sign. Well, the French don't use the word “exit,” and Marlene and I didn't take French in high school, we took Spanish. We walked up to several people to attempt to communicate with them. And without stereotyping, they looked at us as Americans the way we might look at a piece of chewing gum that was stuck to the bottom of your shoe. We finally guessed that the word “sortie” meant “exit” and wasn't the name of the train station stop. We followed the “sortie” signs out. Of course, it is more complicated when a country doesn't use the Latin alphabet and you are trying to read Arabic or Chinese or Hindi.

But you know you have the one advantage when you are trying to read a sign that's written in a foreign language. The advantage is that you know you don't understand.

What is most confusing for an individual is when they think they speak the language and they really don't. When you are an American in England, you quickly realize that you don't speak English, you speak American. There is an old joke about England and America being separated not only by an ocean, but by a common language. American speakers have made some outrageous mistakes when trying to communicate to an English audience.

One of the simple words that trips up American speakers in England is the word “pants.” In the U.S. we use the word “pants” to refer to trousers. In England, the word “pants” means underwear. The founder of the Vineyard movement, a man by the name of John Wimber, was doing a conference in England some years ago. I was teaching along with him. John was up on the stage and he looked down and saw some mud that had apparently splattered on his pants. He said, “O my goodness. I'm standing up here and I've soiled my pants.”
Well, the audience just broke up laughing. And then this look of recognition came over John’s face and he said, “No, no…not my pants…my trousers. I haven’t soiled my pants. I’ve soiled my trousers.”

An American woman was speaking to a large conference of women. She had just arrived in England and didn’t have an opportunity to change her clothes. So her opening remarks were these: “I’m so sorry that I didn’t have an opportunity to change before I began. I feel very uncomfortable speaking to you wearing pants. I normally never get up in front of an audience when I’m wearing pants.” She later learnt to her extreme embarrassment that the audience thought she was disclosing some extremely personal information about her underwear-wearing habits.

Fortunately, these mistakes don’t just work in one direction. An Anglican Bishop, for whom I’m going to do a conference next month, was once speaking to John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement. Bishop Pytches put his arms behind his head and said, “John, I’d really love to come to America and expose myself to your people.” John was drinking a diet coke at the time and just spit it out. He said, “WHAT?” Bishop David Pytches repeated what he said, “I’d like to go to America and expose myself to your people.” So John said, “okay.” When Bishop Pytches, an Anglican Bishop, came to John’s church, John stood up and said, “This is Bishop David Pytches. He is an Anglican Bishop and he’s come here to expose himself to you.”

Well, the reason I raise this confusion of languages is because when a 21st century American approaches the Bible, he or she may not be aware that they are traveling to a different country. Because the Bible has been translated into English, you may have the illusion that you use the words that you are reading in the Bible the same way the Bible writers understood those same words. So many errors in thinking about God and Christ, in thinking about the Christian life have arisen simply because we Americans living in the 21st century, don’t realize that there is a language gap between us and the writers of the Bible.

Now, nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to the heart of the Easter story and we discuss the meaning of the word “resurrection.” For most people, and I would venture to say most Christians, there is a serious misunderstanding regarding what the Bible writers were talking about when they talked about resurrection. Most folks assume that they are talking about life after death. Sure. I understand resurrection. It means after you die you go to heaven. Oh, I understand resurrection. It means that your immortal soul will be with God after you die.

Now, the Bible doesn’t know anything about an immortal soul. That is a Greek philosophical idea. And as we’re going to find out, it is not a biblical idea. You do not have an immortal soul. And people in the Bible did not talk vaguely about life...
after death or dying and going to heaven. They talked about resurrection. Resurrection means that a person who has died has come back to life as that same person in a new transformed body. Resurrection tells us about a fully embodied existence following after death. And it is resurrection that the writers of the New Testament all claimed to have happened for one person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Tonight we are going to explore the meaning of resurrection and why it matters to us. I’ve called tonight’s talk, “What a Difference a Word Makes.” Let’s pray.

1 Corinthians 15:12-19 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 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 your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

The Greeks and Romans had a wide variety of beliefs regarding what happened upon death. The Greek poet Homer thought that the dead resided in a place called Hades as shadows, a sort of murky, sub-human dark existence. The dead continued on in this dreamlike wisp, but they couldn’t be grasped. And they certainly did not return to this world in a body. For Homer, and indeed, for all the Greeks, death was a one-way street. You couldn’t make a U-turn on the street and come back around. And those who tried to make a U-turn were judged severely. So, for example, there is an ancient Greek myth about a poor man named Sisyphus who tried to make a U-turn on the one-way street of death and was condemned forever to pushing a large rock up hill only to have it roll down the hill again.

The Greek philosopher named Plato believed that a person had a mortal soul and that the soul lived forever in some other place, a happy place, and had the opportunity to discuss philosophy eternally with some other souls. In some of Plato’s other writings, he taught a doctrine that is very similar to reincarnation. It was called the Transmigration of the Soul. That your soul would come back, but not as the person you were, but that you’d come back in some other form – an animal, perhaps, or another person. But you would have no recollection whatsoever of your prior life.

Some Greeks taught that upon death you became a star in the sky.

Jewish people believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world. But they believed that all of the dead would be raised up at once.
No one in the ancient world at the time of Jesus believed that one person could be put to death, be buried, and then come back to life in this world in a new body as the same person, except the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. These followers, these disciples of Jesus, began running around the Mediterranean world proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth was uniquely and singularly, by himself resurrected from the dead. They weren’t simply talking about life after death, your soul floating around like the ghosts did. They weren’t talking about coming back as a dog, cat, cow or as a new person like the philosopher Plato taught. They were talking about Jesus after being dead and buried coming back in an embodied existence, a transformed body to be sure, but an embodied existence as the same person.

Well does it really matter what happened to Jesus? Does it really matter if we use this word “resurrection” as it pertains to the state of Jesus’ body after death, or if we say along with one famous Protestant pastor, his body lies cold in the grave, but his Spirit marches on?

The apostle Paul says resurrection matters. Verse 12, *But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?* What Paul is saying is that the denial of the resurrection is not a Christian option. Some Corinthians were perhaps saying that Christ’s immortal soul continued on in heaven but his body didn’t rise or perhaps that the resurrection was a spiritual experience like being born again but there wasn’t a future literal hope of bodily rising from the grave after death.

You can believe a lot of silly things and still be a Christian. I suppose you could believe in UFO’s and that the government is secretly keeping Martians under lock and key at Roswell, New Mexico. You could believe in the Loch Ness monster and Big Foot and that Saddam Hussein is the anti-Christ and still be a Christian.

But Paul is saying that there is one thing you cannot believe. You cannot believe that the body of Jesus is still in the ground and be a Christian.

I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one of those domino exhibitions at a shopping mall. Every so often on TV they will show this exhibition that might take place at the Great American Mall in Minnesota or some other place in which dozens of people have set up hundreds of thousands of dominoes into various patterns. And then at just the right moment someone gets to push over one of the dominoes and if everything works right over the next several minutes hundreds of thousands of dominoes fall in various patterns. They’ve been shaped in the patterns of flowers and they are climbing up staircases and cascading over waterfalls. The idea is that if you push over one domino, the other dominoes fall.

The apostle Paul is arguing if you push over the resurrection of Jesus, every thing else that a person believes about Christianity falls down with it. Here are
the dominoes: Verse 13, *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised from the dead.* To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to deny the uniqueness of Christ.

As I said before, the resurrection declares Jesus to be in a category of one. No one in the history of the world, neither ancient nor modern history believes that anyone else died, was buried, came back to life fully embodied in a transformed body to be sure, but as the same person and that they lived eternally now in an embodied existence. There's only person about who you can say that and that is Jesus Christ.

It was because of two irrefutable facts – the fact of the empty tomb, and the fact of Jesus’ repeated appearances to a multitude of people over the course of 40 days that finally, finally folks were convinced that this one man uniquely in the history of the world was resurrected from the dead.

You say, yes, but does it really matter if Jesus was resurrected from the dead? Isn't what matters is the impact of his life and teaching and words? There have been hundreds, literally thousands of other great men and women who have died and were not resurrected and yet their lives had continuing impact. You can read the writings and listen to the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Abe Lincoln, or the Buddha. You can imitate the life of Mother Therese, St. Francis, or Socrates. You can stare at photos of dead people and think about them. You can remember the dead. You can dream about the dead.

What you can't do is have a relationship with a dead person. Hundreds of millions of people around this world and thousands of people sitting here today claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Literally billions of people throughout history claim to have had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Try substituting any other dead person’s name for the relationship people make claim to have by Christ and you will quickly have people suggesting the name of a good psychiatrist.

Imagine, for example, if someone said, “You know, I really felt the other day that Napoleon was leading me to reconcile my broken relationship with my mother.”

Or “The other day I was really anxious, but I felt like George Washington was telling me to give him my burdens and that he would be sufficient for me.”

How about, “I just really feel like Julius Caesar is sending me messages.”

You see, Christianity is not about some vague spirituality. Become a Christian and you will become a more spiritual human being. Christianity is about entering a relationship with a person who was dead and who is currently bodily alive because he is resurrected from the dead and his name is Jesus Christ. The best
thing about being a Christian is the capacity to enter a relationship with a living person.

It is only with respect to Jesus Christ that anyone can say, “You know, I’m having a relationship with a person who died hundreds of years ago” that we would not immediately recommend that you get psychiatric care.

Verse 14, Paul goes on to say, *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* Again, the disciples of Jesus were not going around the ancient world preaching some vague spirituality about our immortal souls, or simply talking about life after death. What the followers of Jesus went around the Roman Empire proclaiming was that all of the Jews had looked forward to for centuries; the hope of the Jews had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

See, the Jews looked forward to the breaking in of the Kingdom of God at the end of the age. The Jews looked forward to a time when God would defeat their enemies and peace would reign on earth. When God would enter a new covenant with his people. When people would be reconciled to God and to each other. They looked forward to a time when economic injustice would end. When people’s bodies would be healed. And most of all, they looked forward to a time when the dead would be resurrected.

Jesus of Nazareth came proclaiming that all the ancient promises that God had made to his people throughout the Old Testament were being fulfilled. If Jesus was not resurrected, then the most important sign of the new age, of the Kingdom breaking in, has not occurred—the resurrection of the dead. But Jesus taught that all of these promises were being fulfilled in his person.

Now, his followers learned that the fulfillment of these ancient promises were going to take place in a two-stage event instead of one stage as they formerly thought at the end of the age, but rather a two-stage event. The first stage was inaugurated with the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. At that moment, God would enter a new covenant with those who would embrace him. At that moment God was defeating their real enemy, Satan. At that moment, God was offering forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who turned to Jesus in faith. And in his resurrection, he was the first of many resurrections to occur at the end of the age. Jesus’ resurrection was a kind of first fruit of a coming harvest, like the first ripe tomato you pick from the vine in the summer. It was the promise that there was going to be a larger harvest.

See, the preaching of the disciples was not the sort of boring, insipid message that you hear in many churches today. God is nice and he sent Jesus into the world to tell us to be nice to one another. The preaching of the apostles was that the kingdom of God and the ancient hope of Israel was fulfilled in the person of
Jesus who is the Messianic King! And we know that all the promises of God are being fulfilled through Jesus because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Well, Paul says in verse 14, *But if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* Again, Christian faith is not some vague spirituality about life somehow continuing in another realm, floating around on a cloud as some wispy being. The Christian faith still less a “pie in the sky” optimism that “Oh, I just know that everything is going to work out.” The essential core of the Christian faith is that God has not given up on this world.

The 1st century Jews, to whom Jesus preached, were not looking forward to the world being destroyed, scrapped or replaced. They were looking forward to the world being cleansed from the taint of sin, a time when the lion would lay down with the lamb. When there would be no more wars, but people would beat their swords into plow shares. They looked forward to a time when children would not die or be ill and that old people would sit and enjoy watching their grandchildren and great grandchildren play in safety. They looked forward to a time when families would live securely. In the ancient Jewish hope, each man would live under his vine and fig tree. And no woman would ever be barren.

Now, many churchgoers today, because they are a little confused about the meaning of resurrection, do not grasp the importance of Jesus coming back bodily from the dead. They don’t understand that God, at that moment, was communicating the value that he puts on this world, on the stuff of the world, on our bodies. A lot of churchgoers believe that Easter is about some vague, immortal soul going to heaven. And so a lot of churchgoers struggle with valuing this creation. They think that in the end God is going to scrap this world. And so they wonder what difference does it make if we pollute the planet and gunk it up and gunk up the air and water. After all, this world is going to be scrapped.

Is it really valuable to feed a hungry person, or spend my life in a lab doing cancer or AIDS research? Isn’t the most important thing to preach to people so that you might save their souls?

The resurrection of Jesus declares loudly that God values this world in its entirety. God is not going to scrap the world. He’s going to cleanse the world from sin. But anything that you do that benefits another person – you fix their car, you do therapy on their body, you cut a person’s hair, you make this planet a little more beautiful by gardening or picking up trash, or being careful about conservation – it is all valuable to God, who showed his evaluation of the planet, our bodies, and stuff by resurrecting Jesus from the dead.

Paul continues his argument about the difference resurrection makes when he says, *More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise*
him if in fact the dead are not raised. If the resurrection did not occur, then the apostles who claimed that it occurred are liars.

You know, many people do not believe that Christ was raised from the dead. They think maybe it was a dream, or mass hysteria, or his body still lies in the ground, but his Spirit marches on. They wonder about the alternatives to believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At least they wonder, maybe you wonder, is it really true that Christ was raised from the dead? The apostles clearly believed it. They believed it because of two irrefutable facts—the tomb was empty. Nobody in the ancient world refuted that. If his tomb was not empty, if his body was still in the tomb, then it would have been the interest of the Roman government and in the interest of the opponents of Christianity to drag his dead body out of the tomb and display it and say, “Here is your resurrected Messiah.”

But everywhere Christians went preaching, “His tomb is empty.” That is the first undisputable fact!

And the second undisputable fact is that Jesus appeared alive to many people who touched him and ate with him, and talked with him over the next 40 days. But if you say that Jesus was not raised from the dead, then you are forced to say that the apostles were liars when they claimed that Christ was resurrected.

Now, let’s work out the implications of that for a moment. You may know that the Bible has played an important role in building the moral foundations of America. The founders of our country were rooted in a firm understanding of Christian ethics found in the Bible. And these ethics still continue to control much of America today. For example, when we were planning to go to Iraq, the basic discussion turned on whether this war was a just war. The whole discussion about just war comes from a Christian framework. The approach that America took in Iraq, we tried to limit civilian casualties, to care for Iraqi casualties, this too was the result of the shaping influence of the Bible upon our national character.

Why did the U.S. help to rebuild Europe, and in particular, Germany, or to help rebuild Japan after WWII? Why did we pour in literally billions of dollars of humanitarian aid to help rebuild our former enemies? No one in the history of the world treated a defeated, powerless enemy the way we treated Germany & Japan. Would our former enemies, Germany and Japan, have treated us the same way, if they had won the war? Would terrorists kill thousands of people on Sept. 11 and then make it their first priority to bring in humanitarian aide if they had succeeded in throwing over the American government? It is because of the Bible and the teachings on the Bible that formed our national consciousness that our Americans at our best (we have lots of faults), but at our best we approach the world with a certain kind of compassion.
And you understand, of course, that the New Testament was written by followers of Jesus, who were good and decent people, and who tried to live out the highest of Christian ethics, particularly the ethic of honesty and truth telling.

But if Christ is not risen, then what you are saying is that the apostle Paul and Peter and Matthew and John, who went around the Roman Empire saying, “I personally saw Jesus with my own eyes come back to life. I’ve seen him raised from the dead,” what you are saying is that every man or woman who claimed this was a liar. That they deliberately deceived audiences. What you are saying is that if Christ is not raised, though they claimed he was, was that these folks were no better than the worst kind of religious deceivers – Jim Jones, David Koresh. Even worse than that, many people have gone to their deaths following this message.

Not only did they deceive about a relatively unimportant point, they deceived people regarding the core of Christianity, the resurrection. And as a result, thousands of people were led off to be slaughtered in the Coliseums in Rome.

Friends, are you going to say that the apostles were just rank liars? That this book, the Bible that formed much of the moral foundation of America is just a book of fairy tales? You cannot say that the Bible is good and helpful in laying out the moral foundation for our country, the charge to us to be forgiving, to not retaliate, to not respond in kind, to offer humanitarian aide, even to a former enemy – you cannot say that the Bible is good and right there. But regarding its most basic testimony that Jesus of Nazareth was uniquely raised from the dead is false. That’s the center of the New Testament. The New Testament is about Jesus and how he came to die in our place as our substitute, to pay by himself the penalty that our sins deserved, about Jesus dying on the cross to satisfy God’s judgment and wrath against sin.

The New Testament at its core is about Jesus Christ dying upon a cross for our salvation, being buried and then after three days being raised from the dead and offering us the forgiveness of sins, a new better life now, and an eternal life in the future.

But Paul says in verse 15, But if there’s no resurrection, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. Paul goes on in verse 17 and says, And if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

If Christ is not risen, what are you going to do with your sin, Paul is asking? Many people don’t tie the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the problem of our misdeeds, our words that are mis-spoken, and our thoughts, things that we are particularly guilty about in the past. You know, all of us have done things that we know are wrong. Isn’t that true? Can anyone say that you have never done anything that makes you feel guilty? The only people who don’t struggle with
guilt are the criminally insane – psychopaths and sociopaths. Normal people all feel guilt about things we have done wrong. That is why we defend ourselves so vigorously. That’s why we feel the need to make excuses for our behavior. That’s why we rationalize and revise the past and minimize our part in relational failures and marital failures and child raising failures. And some of the things that make us feel guilty are quite serious.

For example, we may have not done as good a job as we now wish we would have in raising our children. Maybe you see that you spent too much time at work and you should have taken more time with your child when they were young and now you are seeing problems. Maybe discipline is unwise or inconsistent. Maybe you said something to one of your children and that really wounded them. You were neglectful or bad-tempered or dealing with your own issues. Perhaps you weren’t as good a husband or wife as you should have been or could have been. Maybe at some point in the past you had an affair. Maybe you were divorced and share at least some of the blame for your marriage failure. Maybe you weren’t as good a son or daughter as you wish you would have been or could have been and now one of your parents or grandparents is dead. Maybe you have dealt pretty shamefully with a former girlfriend or boyfriend or boss or employee. Maybe you were disloyal to a friend. When someone needed you, you weren’t there. You were too caught up in your own stuff.

We all of us have done and said things we should not have done. And we all have failed to do things we should have done. All of us have run up a huge debt with God that no amount of creative financing can pay off. How do you deal with your guilt? What do you do with it? Understand that in the Bible the resurrection is the way that God assures us that our sins are forgiven. A lot of people don’t understand what connection does the resurrection have with the forgiveness of my sins?

Let me explain that for you. You know on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus at the Last Supper picked up a glass of wine and said, “This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” In other words, this wine symbolizes my blood, which is about to be poured out on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. And then when Jesus was nailed to the cross, from the cross he prayed, “Father, forgive them [all of them] because they don’t know what they are doing.”

How do we know that Jesus’ blood, shed for us on the cross, would pay the price before God for our sins? How do we know if God the Father granted Jesus’ prayer from the cross and forgave our sins because of the sacrifice of the Son of God?

The Bible says that the way we know that Jesus’ death on the cross really did take care of our sins is the resurrection. The resurrection is God’s stamp of
approval. God was saying, “I accept the sacrifice of my Son, Jesus” as the full payment for your sins. You don’t need to defend yourself or make excuses for all you’ve done wrong or haven’t done that you should have done. All you need to do is tell the truth to God. That is what confession is. Just tell the truth to God about yourself, about your life. Don’t defend yourself. Just admit your failures and then trust that God has taken the enormous bill we have run up and has accepted Jesus’ death on the cross as the payment for our sins. Don’t try to pay God off yourself. Just trust that he has made a way for your fill to be paid. The way is the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

If Christ is not risen, friends, we all have no way to deal with our past sins and guilt. We have no way to, in the present, have the power to overcome our sins if Christ is not risen, because it is only the power of the resurrection that can break life controlling habits. And friends, in the future, when you and I go before God in judgment, understand that all that we have done in sinning against God and in sinning against another, in sinning against other people, will be read out of the books. We will see it all—all the stuff that we have done wrong. Witnesses will come forward to testify against us regarding when we have lied to them and how we have mistreated them. Children will rise up against us. Parents will speak against us. How will we ever be forgiven by God our judge?

The Bible says that there is only one way. The Bible teaches that Christ is our advocate, our defense attorney, who will rise up in the presence of God and say, “Father, let me present a defense for this poor child, this poor man, this poor woman.” And Jesus Christ will defend us as our advocate by presenting to God his blood that was shed on our behalf. But if Christ is not raised from the dead, we have no advocate, no defense attorney, no one to speak on our behalf and in our favor and we will have to face God alone without Jesus. If Christ is not raised, what will you do with your sins?

The apostle Paul goes on and suggests to us the seventh implication of the great alternative to Easter, if Christ is not raised. And he says, “If Christ is not raised [in verse 18] then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” What he is saying is the resurrection of Christ offers hope in the face of death. If Christ is, however, not resurrected, then Christians who have died in the past are not in heaven. They are simply rotting in the ground. Death really is the end. If Christ is not raised, Paul says, there is not after life. Some of you have recently lost loved ones. Perhaps in this past year, you’ve lost a mom, a dad, a husband or wife, a grandparent, or a child, or sibling or friend.

Friends, I keep saying this over and over again, but I have to underline this thought for you. If Christ is not raised, then all that we go through in religion, in church, in preaching, regarding our faith and even in Christian funeral services at funeral homes, it is all just a big charade. It is all just empty words, fond wishes, a nice face put on an awful reality if Christ is not raised. When a pastor or priest says at a funeral service the separation between you and your loved one, your
parent or child, your grandchild or spouse, is just temporary not permanent, they are just lying to you. If Christ is not raised, then the words that are read at Christian funerals, the words of Jesus are lies when he said: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me, in my father’s house there are many rooms. If it weren’t not so, I would have told you. But I am going ahead of you to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

This idea that Jesus went ahead to heaven to prepare a home for those who have died in him is just a myth. It is just a fairytale. There is no homecoming for the dead because there is no home. And there is no home if Christ is not raised. No heaven. No hell. Nothing after the grave, if Christ is not raised.

Not only is there no homecoming if Christ is not raised, but there is no great reunion, friends. You know, the New Testament urges us, especially at times of death, when the loved one of somebody just passes on—a mom, a dad, a child, a spouse—that we can comfort each other at those moments and assure Christians that death is not the end. That there will be a great reunion. That death just means, “I don’t get to see a loved one.” But it doesn’t mean I won’t see a loved one ever. For Christians, it is not the case that we will never, ever see our loved ones again. It just means for a period of time we must bear with the ache and the grief of having our loved one’s absence. But it is just not now that you and I can’t see deceased love ones, it doesn’t mean not ever.

But if Christ is not raised, then there is no great reunion. Then widows will never see their husbands again. And children will never see their parents again. And parents will never see their children again if Christ is not raised.

I can tell you that if Christ is not risen, we have no answer to death. No way to deal with our own death or the deaths of loved ones. A brilliant philosopher and atheist named Bertrand Russell said better than I could ever say what death is like if Christ is not risen. And he said “the life of man is a long march through the night surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain toward a goal few can hope to reach and where none can tarry long. One by one as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man’s life, on him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent death rolls on its relentless way.”

Bertrand Russell says that death is omnipotent. Death has the final say. Taking from us our loved ones and ourselves, cutting the string, turning us all back into various bits of matter that fertilizes the ground. If Christ is not risen, that’s all there is.

What shall you say in the face of death? Our answer, friends, must be nothing other than to try to live as long as possible. To try to preserve our health. To try
to eat right and stay fit. But even though that sure relentless road to death may be slowed, it can’t be stopped. How do you not become utterly hopeless in old age or when dealing with the death of a loved one, if there is no resurrection?

Listen, if death is the final end, then the best we can do is escape from thinking about death very much. Instead of our grief being transformed into hope and faith through Jesus’ resurrection, we, at best, just need to avoid discussions about death. We need to dull the pain.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you generally avoid all discussions of death? Do you always say, “Let’s not talk about that?” If you really believed, really believed in the resurrection, you wouldn’t have to be like that. Are any of you dulling the pain of loss, the loss of a mom or dad, dulling the pain? I have seen people turn to some substance – drugs, alcohol or affairs or some other form of medicating their pain, because they have no way to deal with the loss of a loved one. Without the resurrection, what else other than not thinking about death or medicating away our pain do we have to deal with the awfulness of death?

And finally, Paul writes in verse 19, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” And I would ask if Christ is not risen, what do you say to those who have suffered and sacrificed? Paul says that we Christians who have sacrificed to spread this message and suffered in order that other people would hear the message of Christianity—we have gone out to many lands. Some have died. Others have been imprisoned. Others have been tortured for our faith. Others have given up careers. We have left homes. We have given up large incomes. We have caught diseases. We have been cold and hungry. We have gone without. If Christ is not risen, then we are to be pitied above all men because we have made the most foolish choice in the world.

Christians who sacrifice and suffer for Jesus are fools. Are you willing to say that, friends? That everyone who has died for Jesus Christ, everyone who has suffered, everyone who has given up something, everyone who has gone without, Mother Theresa who spent her life among lepers and the poor of Calcutta, India that she was a poor fool?

Are you further willing to say that the people who try to do good, who spend their lives sacrificing and loving and caring – that ultimately they will receive no reward and that there will be no ultimate justice, so long as you can get away with your stuff? And the people who step on others, the users, the manipulators, the aggressive and the pushy – they are the really smart ones. The child molesters and concentration camp commandants, and spouse abusers and torturers – all these folks get off scott free so long as they are not captured and not tracked down in this life. That the abusers and users will never face a risen Christ in judgment.
What do you say to the suffering, to the sacrifice, to those who have died for the name of Jesus, to the martyrs, to those who died in the Coliseum? And what do you say to the criminals, to the oppressors, to the killers, to the murderers? If Christ is not raised, there is no justice. There is no balancing of the scales and there is no point in trying to live a good Christian life, to being faithful. If only for this life we have hoped in Christ, Paul writes, we are to be pitied more than all men. And then he goes on and says, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.” Because Christ is risen, church does not have to be boring. It can be filled with excitement and morale and momentum because Christ is raised. The people in the church can gather, filled with excitement, with momentum, with purpose because they know that they are serving a risen King. They can go out to all the world in his name knowing that he is with them.

But Christ is raised from the dead. And because he is, believe it and allow that fact to impact our lives, we give honor to Jesus that we accord to no one else in the history of the world. We call Jesus “Lord,” “Master,” “King,” “Messiah.” Because Jesus was uniquely resurrected, the only one in the history of the world to be resurrected from the dead, we can have a living relationship with Christ today, talking with him, being guided by him, hearing him in our hearts and no thought to need psychiatric treatment. Because Christ is resurrected from the dead, he can make a difference in your life and in your world today.

Because Christ was raised from the dead, all the ancient promises made by God to the Jewish people are being fulfilled. The kingdom of God that the Jews looked forward to, did break in with Jesus Christ. The certain sign of that is the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Because Christ was raised from the dead, we know that this world still matters to God. He’s not going to scrap the world and our future is not some vague spirituality floating around in some wispy neverworld. We are going to be embodied, in transformed bodies to be sure, but we will be embodied and live in this world cleansed from sin, cleansed from death, cleansed from suffering, cleansed from illness, but in this world. God has not given up on this world.

Because Christ is raised, the apostles did not lie about seeing Jesus walking around after he had been crucified and died and was buried. They were telling the truth. This book is true! Because Christ is raised from the dead, our sins can be forgiven. The sacrifice of the cross was accepted by God. Christ has paid your bill and mine. We don’t need fake and inadequate ways to deal with our feelings of guilt. God answered the prayers of the cross and said, “Yes, I have heard your cries for all of the people who would put their faith in you and I will forgive them.”

Because Christ is raised from the dead, death is not omnipotent. It is not the last word. It is not the final chapter. It is not the closing of the book. It is simply the turning the page. Because Christ was raised from the dead, there will be a great reunion, friends. If your loved one was attached to Jesus and you place your
faith in Christ, rest your full confidence in his saving ability, you will see one another again. There will be a great reunion and a great homecoming.

And yes, sacrifice for Jesus matters. It matters to God that you put yourself on the line for Christ. It is not all for naught. Mother Theresa was the wisest of women. Those who have died for the name of Jesus will be rewarded. Justice will be done. The scales will be balanced and God will be victorious because Christ is risen from the dead. Let's pray.
I. The Meaning of Resurrection

II. The Importance of Resurrection

The Resurrection:

A. Is Central to the Christian Faith (1 Cor. 15:12)

B. Gives Honor to Jesus (1 Cor. 15:13)

C. Fulfills the Jewish Hope (1 Cor. 15:14)

D. Declares that the World has Value (1 Cor. 15:14)

E. Confirms the Apostles' Credibility (1 Cor. 15:15,16)

F. Provides a Way to Deal with Sin (1 Cor. 15:17)

G. Offers Hope in the Face of Death (1 Cor. 15:18)

H. Grants Meaning to Christian Suffering (1 Cor. 15:19)