

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark Peters, and I'm one of the pastoral staff members here at North Shore Alliance Church. It's been great to sing and to celebrate what God has done for us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. My thanks to Dean and Cindy, and the choir for their dedication in the weeks leading up to this morning.

And speaking of celebration, just this week, my family hit a new milestone; I am now officially the father of a teenage son. On Monday, Luke turned 13, and next year he begins High School. Unlike other societies, there aren't really coming of age rituals in North America. At the age of 16, you can apply for a driver's license, at 18 you can vote, and at 19 you can legally drink alcohol. But driving, voting, and drinking don't exactly signal the entry into adulthood.

Last week I took Luke away—just the two of us—to mark his entry into his teens; we drove to Portland and spent 4 days taking in the World Indoor Track and Field Championships. The action on the track was phenomenal, we saw some of the best athletes in the world, and we even had the opportunity to meet some of them.

In between morning and evening sessions, Luke and I explored Portland. Portland is a great city to visit; there's lots to see and do, there's great food, and it's easy to get around using transit—but it's a bit of an odd city, and by odd, I mean weird. And apparently, calling Portland “weird” isn't an insult...that's what the city is going for. All over the city you will see signs that read, “*Keep Portland Weird*”.

Last Saturday, Luke and I explored Portland's Waterfront Market—there was music, food trucks, and market stalls everywhere; it was really fun. As we wandered through the markets, we began to pick up

on one aspect of the Portland vibe—they have a deep affection for mythical creatures. In celebration of St. Patrick's Day, there were dozens of people dressed up as Leprechauns, and market stall after market stall displayed items featuring Sasquatches and Unicorns.

After seeing dozens of Sasquatches and Unicorns, I came across a market stall that featured a particular kind of greeting card—these cards fit in well with the “Keep Portland Weird” vibe. Many of the greeting cards featured Jesus, and, dinosaurs. I've displayed two of my favourite cards on the screen behind me.

The first card features Jesus, friend of children, and dinosaurs—you can see that both children and small dinosaurs are welcome on Jesus lap, both equally in need of His blessing. The second card features a Jesus riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—apparently the rental company opted to upgrade Jesus from the donkey to the always popular Velociraptor.

In the moment, these cards had Luke and I laughing, but later that night it got me thinking about what people think about Jesus. In a church like this, we talk about Jesus in reverential terms—fully God, fully man—He came to demonstrate His love for the world; Jesus came to rescue and save. But as these greeting cards indicate, not everyone sees Jesus as I do. There is a skepticism in our society about Jesus—*is He real, or does He belong in the same category as the Sasquatch and Unicorn? When we talk about Jesus, are we dealing with fact or with fairy tale?*

More than 100 years now, a German Philosopher by the name of Friedrich Nietzsche uttered a phrase that caused a shaking in the already shaky foundations of Western society. This phrase came to

define the man, and has profoundly influenced how our society thinks about the source meaning and purpose—Nietzsche's thinking was significant in redefining the basis of society's moral compass. As many of you know, the phrase in question is "**God is dead.**"

Nietzsche wasn't suggesting that God had once been alive, had taken ill, and died quite suddenly. Instead, Nietzsche suggested that Western society had outgrown the myth of God, rather like a child outgrows the myth of Sasquatch and Unicorns. We don't need the concept of God to give order or meaning to life. Nietzsche and many after him suggested that the human need for a higher power is essentially absurd.¹

We can explain how the world works better without God. We can direct the course of human history better without God. And with time, money, technology and innovation we can even heal the world's hurts without God. They conclude that the world would be a much better place if we simply allowed the myth of God to die. Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have joined in this chorus, writing books like *God is Not Great*, and, *The God Delusion*.

But I'm not here this morning to tell you what Nietzsche, Hitchens, or Dawkins believe, I want to share with you the perspective of the first eyewitnesses—those who watched Jesus die and three days later saw His resurrected body. They believed—as I do—that God's not dead, in fact, He is very much alive. At this time I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles to Luke 24:1-12. If you're using the Blue Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 858, or you can direct your attention to the text on the screen.

"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. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' "
8 Then they remembered his words.

9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened."

On Good Friday, Naomi's family came over for dinner and her sister gave me an Easter Card that she thought I'd get a kick out of. The card has Jesus tweeting out a message on Good Friday to all of His followers—it reads, "*Save me some chocolate eggs, I'll be back in three days. #resurrection*" We can safely assume that Jesus didn't

¹ <http://www.philosophy-index.com/nietzsche/god-is-dead/>

send out a pre-resurrection tweet, but, the resurrection shouldn't have been a complete surprise.

On a number of occasions, Jesus told His disciples that He would die, and three days later be raised from the dead. Clearly they didn't understand what He had said because no one expected to find an empty tomb on Easter morning. The women didn't go to the tomb saying, "*We've brought the spices to anoint Jesus body, but wouldn't it be great if He was alive?*" They may not have had the advantage of medical science, but they knew a dead body when they saw one—they had watched Jesus die, with a gasping last breath, and a spear thrust through His heart for good measure.

The 11 disciples weren't expecting a resurrection either, in fact, Luke tells us that they immediately discounted the women's report "*because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*" Of course it sounded like nonsense—dead people don't come back to life. Peter ran to the tomb, thinking to prove the women wrong, but their story checked out—the tomb was empty, save for Jesus' grave clothes. In vs. 12 Luke tells us that Peter "*went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*"

That first Easter Sunday, celebration was absent—confusion, fear, and disbelief ruled the day. Now, if the disciples had decided in advance to create a brand new religion, centred around Jesus, and to make up a fictitious but credible resurrection story, this is not how you would go about it. Luke tells us that everyone was confused, no

one knew what was going on, and the Resurrected One was nowhere to be found.

In his book, *Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel writes, "In a communist Russian dictionary, Jesus is described as 'a mythical figure who never existed.' No serious historian could maintain that position today. There is a great deal of [historical] evidence for Jesus' existence. This comes not only from the [Bible] and other Christian writings, but also from other non-Christian sources."² The 1st century, non-Christian historians, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus wrote historical accounts about a historical Jesus.

The historical evidence is clear, Jesus did exist, but there is debate about whether the Jesus of history has been "**super-sized**" in order to create the Jesus of faith. *Who was Jesus? Why did Jesus die? And why does the resurrection matter?* In the time remaining, I want to answer these three questions, beginning with the nature of Jesus—

Q 1: *Was Jesus merely human, or was He something more?*

The apostle John writes the following, "*In the beginning the Word [or put another way, God the Son] already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God...the Word [God the Son] became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son...No*

² Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 23.

one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us."³

Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus in the following way, "*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*"

Philippians 2:5-11 says, "*You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*"

The words Jesus spoke, the way He lived, the miracles He performed, the character He displayed... was Jesus merely human, or was He something more?

The witness of the Scriptures, the testimony of those first eyewitnesses is clear—Jesus was very God of very God, and at the same time, He was bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Christians make much of this point—Jesus was fully God and fully human; as we turn our attention to the second question, I trust the “why” will become more clear.

Q 2: *Why did Jesus die?*

This is one of many questions that falls into the “why didn't God just...” category. Why didn't God create the world without the possibility of pain? If God is loving and all-powerful why doesn't He eradicate sickness and disease? Why did God the Son take on our humanity?

John Stackhouse, a Christian theologian, writes the following, “In each of these cases, the Christian answer is the same: God elected either the best of the available choices or, indeed, the *only* choice available for God to pursue his purposes.”⁴

Why did Jesus die? The Christian answer is that Jesus' death on the cross was either the best of the available choices, or indeed the only choice available for God to pursue His purposes. Jesus died to atone for the sin that separates God from humanity.

“**Atone**” is an important word. To atone for one's misdeeds is to “**to make amends for, to make restitution for, to compensate for, to pay for**”. This concept is important to our understanding of forgiveness. Some people say, “*Ok, I get it, we're human, we're not perfect, we make mistakes; why doesn't God just forgive and forget? Why did Jesus have to suffer?*”

From a biblical perspective, sin causes a break in our relationship with God and others; this break requires forgiveness and reconciliation. But the Bible also describes sin as fundamentally affecting the order of things. Once again quoting Stackhouse, “Sin...

³ John 1:1-2, 14, 18, New Living Translation

⁴ John Stackhouse, Web-blog, <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/2011/04/22/why-didnt-god-just/>

makes a mess, incurs a debt, infects a soul...[which] all points to a problem in the nature of things that needs solving.”⁵

Stackhouse uses the following analogy. “Five-year-old Billy uses his crayons to decorate Mom’s heirloom Irish linen tablecloth. He has been told not to do so, and he does it anyway. When Mom calls him to account, Billy sees how sad she is and repents. Mom forgives him. All is well—except that the tablecloth still needs washing. The relationship of Mom and Billy is restored by forgiveness, but someone still needs to take care of the objective state of affairs caused by Billy’s sin.

I owe you a thousand dollars. It’s time to pay up, and I tell you that I need the money for something else. You compassionately see my side of things, and you decide to forgive the loan, and forgive me. We thus remain friends. But the fact remains that you are out a thousand dollars. Either I pay it, or you do—no matter how we feel about each other.”⁶ When it comes to sin, God’s forgiveness restores the relationship, but something more is required to make amends for the disorder sin has caused.

Heb 2:14, 17, “*Because God’s children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death... Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers*

and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people.”

“In the Cross of Christ there is a disorder that is rectified, a stain that is removed, a disease that is cured, a penalty that is paid, a *something* wrong that is made right by Jesus’ sacrifice... Jesus anticipates that horrible reality in the Garden of Gethsemane and acknowledges that the “cup” of suffering must be drained by someone—either us or him. However we feel about him and however he feels about us, the cup is still there. And he chooses to drink it on our behalf.”⁷

Let me now turn your attention to the final question:

Q 3: *Why does the resurrection matter?*

There’s a few things to be said here. **First**, the resurrection was the vindication of Jesus’ identity. Dead people don’t raise themselves. With the resurrection of Jesus, God the Father was declaring, “*This is my Son, whom I love—listen to Him!*”

Second, the resurrection is the guarantee that Jesus’ sacrifice accomplished what He intended—at the cross, sin was atoned for. At the cross, sin and death did it’s worst to Jesus and three days later He rose victorious.

⁵ John Stackhouse, Web-blog, <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/2007/04/05/whats-good-about-bloody-good-friday/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

In 1 Corinthians 15 we read, “*if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins...But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead...just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.*”

Death is still considered an enemy, but through the resurrection of Jesus, death has been defeated and we have been given the promise of new life.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus is **the** defining event of the new creation. Tom Wright suggests that “the central Christian affirmation is that what the creator God has done in Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the whole world”.⁸

The early Christians did not subscribe to a form of evolutionary optimism—the idea that the world, and humanity with it, would simply get better and better on its own. Those first Christians knew that God needed to act within history in order to make something beautiful out the mess we find ourselves in. They believed that what God had done for Jesus on Easter Sunday, He would do for the cosmos.

The resurrection tells us that there is life after death. The Christian hope is not that we will be whisked away to heaven when we die, and sentenced to a life of eternal robe wearing, cloud riding, and harp playing. No! The Christian hope is for God's return, for restoration,

for a renewed heaven and earth. The resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of what is coming for us and for this world.

Testimony—George Canvin: Jesus came that we might experience life to the full and life forever. This morning I've asked one of our members to come a share about the difference that Jesus has made in their life. Let's welcome George as he comes.

God's not a myth, He's not dead, nor is He irrelevant—I know this to be true because He lives within me.

Gospel presentation?

Worship

Benediction

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 91.