

Hey Creek Family! On this very special day, I want to begin by saying, from my family to yours: happy Easter! For all of our guests who are new here, we're glad you joined us today. For everyone who calls this their church home, can I just say that I *miss* you?! I miss being with you on Sundays. I miss the handshakes and the smiles, the hugs and the opportunities to circle up and pray together. This virus has been hard at a biological level as it attacks the body, it's been hard at a cultural level as it has shut down our country and our world, and it's been hard at a relational level as sheltering in place and keeping our social distance from one another is not the way God created us to live. But I am so glad that we have a love for one another and a unity in Christ that far transcends this difficult season - a love and unity that will only grow stronger and more resilient during this time.

Today is Easter Sunday! For Christians, of all the days we celebrate during the entire year, this day is by far the most important. This is the day when we remember the price Jesus paid for the salvation of the world and the victory Jesus won over the forces of sin, darkness, and death. Today, we are obviously celebrating Easter in a different way than any of us can remember. We aren't gathered together with hundreds or even thousands of other believers. We don't see all the bright colors, flowery dresses - all the elements that so frequently mark this occasion. We are in our homes - some of us are all by ourselves and are feeling pretty lonely right now. Others of us have been locked up with the same few people for a month straight, and we're beginning to lose our minds!

Some people have posted a few pictures online to try to help us cope through this time - for example, this is a legit public service announcement from Malaysia. I know we can't read their language, but this symbol is telling the women at home not to nag their husbands. This symbol is telling them to still get dressed and do their make up every day so they look nice and pretty, and this one is telling them to work hard from their home office. I told my buddies I was going to share that with Keren, just to see how she might react - one of the guys sent me this picture in response. The caption reads, "after day 7 of quarantine, my wife took up gardening - but won't tell what she's going to plant..." You've got to have fun, even when you're on lockdown, right?

I know none of us expected we'd be spending Easter like this, and though it is understandably disappointing, there is something about what we are going through right now that sets the stage perfectly for our celebration of Easter perhaps better than we've ever experienced before. Let me explain: biblically speaking, the first Easter wasn't a time when every follower of Christ gathered together in a church for the most celebratory, climactic worship experience of the entire year. It was quite the opposite. On the first Easter, and the days following it, those who believed in Jesus were huddled together in a house with the doors locked, hiding out, because they were afraid for their lives. In John 20:19 we read this: "On the evening of that first day of the week when the disciples were together (so we know it is Sunday night - Easter Sunday) with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders." So on the first Easter, everyone was together in one house with the doors locked because there was a threat outside. Sound familiar? Of course their threat was a lot different than ours - they weren't afraid of a virus, but they were afraid that the same people who killed Jesus were going to come and try to kill them, too.

And while they were under this self-imposed quarantine, something really unexpected happened. Like, really, really unexpected. Like the most unexpected thing in the history of the entire world. They heard something, and of course when they heard a sound they shielded their eyes and grimaced, certain it was the authorities and that it was all over for them. But after the initial shock was over, they realized the sound was actually a familiar voice. John 20:19 says, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.” He showed them the parts of his body where the nails went in, where the spear went in. This wasn’t some stunt, a trick, or a ghost. This was Jesus, in the flesh, with the marks of the crucifixion, and somehow, at the same time, with the marks of glorious resurrection life and power. And the passage ends by telling us this: “The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

So that’s what happened on the evening of the very first Easter. Let’s go further back to the night before Jesus’ death and talk about the events that led up to this point. We’ll look at the promise Jesus made, the victory Jesus won, and the hope Jesus offers. We’ll see that though these events happened two thousand years ago, they are as relevant today as ever.

First, the promise Jesus made. On the night before Jesus was crucified, he was together with his disciples and he made them a very ominous promise. He said, in John 16:1-2, “All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue (which in the Old Testament was like the equivalent of being kicked out of the church, the established religious community); in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.” How about that for a promise made by Jesus! Not, “Everything’s going to be okay,” or, “You’ll make it out of this just fine,” or, “I’ll protect you no matter what and make sure not a single hair on your head is harmed,” but rather, “A lot of people are going to hate you - they will kick you out of their religious community, and in their minds they will think the best way to honor God is to chase you down, arrest you, beat you, and kill you.” That’s why the disciples were hiding in a room on Easter evening. Jesus told them what to expect, and their hearts were gripped with fear.

So often these days, when people talk about the plans and promises of God, it is painted as clear skies and butterflies, a gentle stroll through a garden on a beautiful, sunny day. Now that’s what we want to hear, but that’s not what Jesus actually said! Later on in John 16:33 Jesus actually distilled his promise for his disciples into one clear, unmistakable message. He said, “In this world you will have trouble.” That was his promise. Trouble. Hardship. Opposition. Challenge. Difficulty. Jesus’ own life on earth was filled with all those things. And he told us as his followers that we should expect them, too! But luckily for us, Jesus didn’t end his promise there. He began by saying: “In this world you will have trouble,” but he ends by saying, “Take heart! I have overcome the world.”

So listen in on this: no matter the challenges we may be facing, no matter the persecution we might one day experience, no matter the physical ailments we might be suffering from, no matter the loved ones we might have lost, the message to us today on Easter Sunday is the same message Jesus offered to his disciples 2,000 years ago: “Yes, this world is full of trouble and

hardship and pain. But don't be afraid, don't be discouraged. Have faith, take heart. There's good news! *Jesus has overcome the world.*"

That's the promise Jesus made; now let's talk about the victory Jesus won. At first, what happened to Jesus looked like anything but a victory. It actually looked like the furthest thing from a victory anyone could possibly imagine. It looked like utter defeat: arrested in a garden, paraded to six different trials where he was falsely accused and handed a death sentence, then taken to a military barracks, stripped naked, flogged and beaten to within an inch of his life, struck on the head, people spat in his face, a robe was put on him and a crown of thorns on his head, and he was mocked by people pretending to worship him as if he was their king. Finally, they put a 75 pound beam of wood on his back and marched him through the city streets. He was forced to carry the vessel of his execution to the place of his death. But that beam of wood was so heavy and he was so weak from his beatings that he didn't even have the strength to carry it, so they had to get a random guy from the crowd to take it the rest of the way for him. When they made it outside the city gates, to a place called Golgotha, Jesus was nailed to the cross, through his hands and his feet, and then the cross was lifted up and set in its hole in the ground. In his final moments of utter vulnerability and weakness, as he was praying to his heavenly father, offering comfort to his earthly mother, and giving hope to the thief on the cross who was dying next to him, people passed by, mocking and ridiculing him. And then finally, when his body could take no more he said, "It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," and he breathed his last. And just like that, the author of life was dead. For his followers, all hope was gone. His body was laid in a borrowed tomb. A heavy stone was rolled over the entrance, then a seal was placed over that stone and four Roman soldiers were stationed there to guard it. But I am here to tell you that four Roman soldiers weren't enough. That stone that weighed thousands of pounds was far too light. Something took place in that tomb on Easter morning that no power on earth or in hell could contain. On the first Easter morning, Jesus came back to life. In the face of what looked like certain, utter defeat, the greatest victory in all of history!

I don't want to be irreverent, but let me draw an analogy from the sports world. It's been weeks since we've seen live sports, and I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to go into withdrawal! Many of us will recall just a few months ago when the 49ers were playing the Chiefs in the Superbowl. We had about 25 friends over at the house, we were dialed into the game and the commercials and tried our best to avoid the half-time show. If you remember, the Chiefs were down and it didn't look good. The score was 20-10 with the 49ers up with just nine minutes left in the game, and there was this growing sense of hopelessness on the Chiefs' sideline. They were the highest-scoring offense in the league throughout the year, but they had only scored 10 points in the first 50 minutes of the biggest game of their lives. How were they going to score at least 11 more points in just 9 minutes, especially with all the momentum against them? Almost everyone assumed it was over - I know I did. But then, unexpectedly, somehow, somehow, in 9 minutes they scored 3 touchdowns and they went from being down 10 points to winning the game by 11. A victory no one saw coming!

Now that was a truly unexpected victory, but how about a crucified man who had been lying dead in a tomb for three days coming back to life! A man who all those with power had conspired to destroy - now he's standing with his followers saying, "I told you, you have nothing to fear, I really *have* overcome the world."

And do you know the best thing about the victory that Jesus won? It wasn't just a victory for him. It was a victory he shares with us - with you and with me. Think about it this way: if a king or a general wins a battle, it's not just a victory for them, it's a victory for everyone they lead - a victory for everyone they represent. Jesus is our king, he is our leader, our mighty warrior. He represents us in battle. He fights the enemy we could never subdue on our own, and his resurrection is the most definitive victory in the history of the world - a victory over Satan, sin, and death. And if we are his followers, it's a victory he shares with us, too.

Some might ask: what does Jesus' victory mean for us today? One of the things that Jesus' victory means for us today is that our past can be forgiven. When I say that our past can be forgiven, I mean every sin you've ever committed, every mistake you've ever made, every lie you've ever told, the cumulative weight and impact of every wrong you've ever done can be forgiven by Jesus when you place your faith in him. Listen to what we read in Colossians 2:13-14 where the apostle Paul describes our condition before Christ, and then the change made by Christ: "You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross." I love that image. Paul says it's like there's a list of every wrong you've ever done - I don't know about for you, but for me, that's a long list! God takes it, reads it, he's fully aware of all of it, and what does he do with it? He takes it to the cross and nails it there. And then Jesus, who was also nailed to the cross, says, "*Paid in full.*"

Think about the joy it is to have your debts forgiven! When I graduated from college, I lived with two other roommates in a house for several years. We were best friends who did everything together - we played sports together and watched sports together, we held Bible studies and prayer meetings in our house, we cooked together, did yard work together, you name it. It was such an incredible community. My roommate Eric and I specifically liked to compete against each other in cornhole. And as can be typical with young guys, there was a lot of bravado and a lot of trash talk, and on occasion there were some wagers made. One night I beat Eric bad. Beat him like a drum. I won 10 straight games and he ended up owing me \$20. But the problem was he didn't have any cash on him at the time. I wasn't so sure he was going to pay up, so that night I made him write me a check. He wrote it out and handed it to me - and let me tell you, he wasn't happy about it. Now, Eric worked as a teller at a bank in our neighborhood. So the next morning, when he was at work, what did I do? I went to that bank, I made sure to stand in his line, and when it was my turn I approached the counter (his boss was standing right behind him, so he had to be on his best behavior) and then I slid that check across the counter and said, "I'd like to cash this, please." You could see the steam coming off the top of his head. It was one of my finest moments! Later that week we played cornhole again, this time he beat me, he beat me bad, and I now owed him \$30. I was down in the dumps, but I knew I had this coming fair and square.

I fully expected him to rub it in, shout it out and tell the whole neighborhood what had happened. But as we picked up our boards and walked in the house, he looked at me and smiled and said, "Hey Dan, your debt is forgiven. You don't owe me anything." I couldn't believe it. I thought he was joking but he assured me, he was being for real, I didn't owe him anything. After what I did,

I just *knew* he was going to make me pay every penny - but he canceled my debts. Eric taught me a valuable lesson about mercy that day...and he also taught me a valuable lesson about gambling!

Now it's one thing to have a friend cancel a debt of \$30. But do you remember that there were a few occasions during Jesus' earthly ministry where he looked at people and said, "Your sins are forgiven?" *That's* a debt that no one else could pay. Not you, not me, not your mom, not Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos. Only Jesus can take your sins away, and Jesus' resurrection proves that he has the ability and the authority to say those words. Please hear me on this: I know so many people who feel weighed down, burdened, guilty, and in despair because of their sins. And that feeling might be the result of God convicting you for the life you've been living, telling you that you need to make a change and call out to God for mercy. If you do that, if you turn from your sins and you look to Jesus, if you place your faith in him, with mercy and love he will say to you, "your sins are forgiven."

The victory of Jesus means my past is forgiven, and it also means my present is secure. Right now, very little feels secure. This is a difficult moment for the world, for our nation, for our community, for our church, and for each one of us. I was talking to a man in our church in his late seventies and he said to me, "Dan, in my entire life I've never seen anything like this before." Everyday we see infection rates going up, we see local and federal leaders giving updated directions and pushing back timelines. We've all been touched by this in one way or another. People have lost their lives, people have lost their loved ones without even the opportunity to be by their side, others have been sick and isolated for days on end, others have lost their job or are afraid of losing their job - it feels like everything around us is shifting. And when that happens, when everything in the world feels so uncertain, we can cling to the promise given to us by God in Hebrews 13:5-6 where he says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid." And that wasn't just a promise for God's people back then. Two verses later, in Hebrews 13:8, we are told: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." A lot of things might change. Jesus never will. And because he will never change - even if everything else does - we can be secure in him.

Jesus told a story in Matthew 7 about two different men who chose to build houses. He says in verses 24-27: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Remember, Jesus was a carpenter - and he knew how to build a lot more than just bookshelves or cabinets or even a house. He knew how to build a *life*. And he said if we build our lives on him and his teaching, we can have confidence, and we can be firm and secure, no matter what storms life might send our way, be that a virus that is spreading across the world, or any other difficulty we might face.

So we've talked about the promise Jesus made: that in this world we are going to have trouble. We've looked at the victory Jesus won: he defeated Satan, sin, and death, and like a generous king or general, he shares that victory with all who follow him, which means our past is forgiven and our present is secure. I want to end this message by talking about the hope Jesus offers.

In the days following Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to more than 500 people. They saw him, touched him, spoke with him, shared meals with him. They knew it was real. And one of the men Jesus appeared to on several occasions - a man named John - later on in his life had a vision where he was called up to heaven to see Jesus from a different perspective. Not the lowly, humble, meek Jesus who walked the dusty streets of Galilee, but rather the heavenly resurrected Jesus, clothed in majesty and power, blazing with supernovae brilliance, every word from his mouth reverberating with Niagara thunder. In Revelation 1:17 John said, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." As a mere mortal in the presence of the resurrection Christ, he was petrified. Then we're told that Jesus laid his right hand on him and said, "Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

That is the hope that Jesus offers. He was dead, but he is alive - and he's not just alive, he says *he holds the keys of death and Hades*. In the first century, Hades was the word that was used to refer to the realm of the dead - it was the place souls went when they died. Now Hades was divided into two regions: there was a place for the righteous where there was peace and bliss, and there was a place for the unrighteous where there was judgment. But everyone who died went to Hades, and there was no way out, no escape. Once you were there, you were there for good - the doors are locked. No one comes back from the dead. No one, that is, until Jesus. And he not only came back from the dead, he not only busted out of Hades, he not only says, "I was dead, but now look, I am alive for ever and ever," but he says, "I have the keys!" The door to the realm of the dead is no longer locked, because Jesus broke out and conquered death! It's a hope that no one besides Jesus can offer. In John 11:25 he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." *That's* the hope of Jesus, the greatest hope of all.

We need that hope now more than ever. The death toll in America is in the five figures, and around the world it's in the six figures. These aren't just numbers - I have friends who have lost loved ones and my best guess is that you do, too. I was on the phone two days ago and learned of a 3-year-old little boy who lost his life. We might be tempted to look for hope from a variety of places. Hope from the doctors that we'll have a treatment and a vaccine. Hope from the government that we are given the all clear and can return to life as usual. Hope from our financial advisor that we can earn our money back. Hope from our schools that they'll take our kids back! And all of those things are good and nice. But sooner or later, even if this virus were to vanish tomorrow, and everything were to go back to the way it was before, or somehow be even better than before, sooner or later, every one of us is going to die. We will all face death. If it's not this week or month or year, it'll be sometime this decade or this century. No one can escape death. But because Jesus defeated death, we have no reason to fear. He has conquered the grave. And he offers that hope to us!

Friends, on the very first Easter, followers of Jesus were locked in their houses because of a very real threat outside. They were afraid. But Jesus entered their midst and said, “I told you, in this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” That is the message to us today, too. We are locked in our houses, there is a real threat outside, but because Jesus rose from the dead we know he is in our midst, too. He speaks realistically about the situation we are in and says to us, “I told you in this world you would have trouble, but I also told you to take heart, for I have overcome the world!”

I want to respond to the message of hope in three ways: First, I know we can’t celebrate this all together as usual, but we had a few people who surrendered their lives to Jesus and were baptized, and we want to celebrate that as a church family. Let’s watch these two videos together.

Death, burial, and resurrection are not just things that *have* happened, they are things that *do* happen.

Second, I want to give an invitation to anyone who is hearing this message and is ready to place their faith in Jesus. If you want to trust Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and be restored into a right relationship with God, I invite you right now, right where you are, to pray, confess your sins to God, ask for the saving mercy of Jesus to cover you, and tell God you want to live for him all your days. Use your own words. If you have made that decision, please send us an email through the “contact us” page at TheCreek.org. We would love to follow up with you and help you be baptized as soon as possible.

Third, we get to celebrate communion together. As a family of believers, followers of Jesus all over the city, and some all over the country, we get to thank Jesus for dying for our sins and rising again, and we get to express our devotion to him and our unity with one another. So as you take the elements today, focus on the love of Christ for you, the price he paid so you could be restored to God the Father, and the hope we have in his name. You have time right now and during the next two worship songs to take communion when you are ready. Friends, I love you, this church loves you, and God loves you. Happy Easter!