

YES!

John 20:1-18

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Happy Easter! I'm so glad you all are here to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and on behalf of my colleagues we are honored to serve you and help you experience God's presence this glorious morning. I actually started my celebration last night. Knowing I would be focused on my work this morning, I worshipped last night at a local church in hopes my well would be filled for this morning.

Well, it didn't quite happen because I let theology get in the way. The preacher was a bit fire and brimstone and actually asked the question, "If you die tonight, where are you going?" That's a fear-based question. I'd rather ask the question, "If you live tomorrow, what are you going to do to make the world better?" That's a love-based question. The preacher went on in a very methodical way to try and prove that the resurrection was a historical fact. He said, "We have four main sources to prove the Resurrection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Well, yeah, OK. But that's using the Bible to prove the Bible. That's like me writing down on a piece of paper that eating lots of BBQ cures cancer, and then saying to my wife, Leigh, "Hey, honey, guess what I read?" Now, I'm not doubting the resurrection was real, but it's that kind of circular logic that drives a lot of people away from the church.

That's why not everyone is here today. This is the biggest day for church attendance all year and the second-biggest Sunday for prayer behind the Sunday before when Kentucky plays Louisville, and yet there are still folks who stayed home. Why? Maybe they feel church doesn't have anything to offer them, that the story we just read doesn't apply to them, and that the God we claim to worship isn't interested in them. Maybe they've been hurt by the church, told they weren't welcome or didn't belong. Maybe they don't believe in God because they think God is behind all the bad things that are happening in the world right now. That's OK, I don't believe in that kind of God, either.

Who would want to worship someone like that? I believe God has been given a bad rap. Instead of being known as the life-giving creator who resurrected Jesus, God has the reputation as being a curmudgeon, that cranky next-door neighbor who chases kids who look or think or act differently off his lawn and is constantly saying, "No!" Unfortunately, God gets that reputation by proxy, because in actuality it's God's people, the church, who have a reputation for saying "No." No drinking, no smoking, no dancing, no playing cards, no going to movies. None of those are in the Bible, by the way. Basically, if it feels good, it's probably a sin and you shouldn't do it. The church has the stigma of being a place that says "No," and by extension, people think of God as doing the same.

To be fair, there are contexts in the Bible where does God say "No," primarily because God was dealing with ornery, hard-headed humans. Thankfully, we've evolved so far since then. He tells Adam and Eve not to eat of a particular tree in the Garden of Eden, and we know how that ended up. When the Israelites were wandering around in the desert, God gave them a set of laws to let them know what they could and couldn't do as God's people. There were a lot of "don'ts" in those laws, not "don't go to movies," but things like "don't kill," "don't steal," "don't commit adultery." It's sad to think that people had to be reminded of that. It's even sadder to think that we still need to be reminded of that.

So there are some instances of God saying “No” in the Bible, mainly to save us from ourselves. But we have plenty more examples of God saying “Yes.” The Hebrew Scriptures are full of “Yeses.” God says “Yes” to the creation of the world. God says “Yes” to Abraham’s faithfulness by initiating a covenant of blessing and prosperity. When the Israelites are trapped in slavery and ask for deliverance, God says “Yes” and sends them Moses and parts the Red Sea. When the shepherd boy David agrees to stand up to the evil giant Goliath, God says “Yes” and delivers a victory. The God I read about in the Bible is a God who says “Yes.”

Here’s the thing: For every time God says “Yes” in the Bible, God’s creatures say “No.” God is not the one who gets pleasure from saying “No” to us; we are the ones who constantly say “No” to God. We’re like toddlers who are learning their first words and beginning to test boundaries. Right after Leigh and I were married, we witnessed an epic tantrum in Target once where a sweet little girl in pigtails and a frilly dress laid in the middle of the toy aisle and screamed, “No! No! No!” over and over again while her poor, exasperated mom just stood there helpless. At that point I turned to my Leigh and said, “Let’s get a dog.” As soon as we learn the word “No,” we begin to master its usage.

Why? Because saying “No” gives us power. Say it with me. “No!” Now, say it like you really, really mean it. “No!” Doesn’t that feel good? When we say “No,” we are in control. Now, don’t get me wrong, there are many, many situations in life when it is very appropriate for us to say “No” and mean it. But when it comes to our relationship with God, I believe we say “No” way too often because we like to think we’re in control, that we really know what is best for us.

God says to Adam and Eve, “Don’t eat the fruit of this tree.” “No! You can’t tell us what to do.” God says to the Israelites wandering around in the desert, “I’m your God.” “No you’re not! We don’t like you. This Golden Calf we just made is our God.” Later God says to the Israelites, “You don’t need an earthly king, you have me.” “No! All the other nations have a king, we want one, too!” I just wish God had said, “Well, if all the other nations jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?” God says to God’s people through the prophets, “Please follow my laws so we can have a good relationship together.” “No! You’re not the boss of us. We’ll do whatever we want.”

The problem here is not that God says “No” to us; it’s that we say “No” to God. No, I won’t give up my Sunday mornings. No, I don’t have time to do those things at church. No, I need my money to pay for things I want. No, I don’t want to be nice to those people. No. No. No. And yet we expect God to say “Yes” to us every time we want something.

I believe God got tired of all our “Nos.” It was clearly obviously that we were not capable of following God’s instructions, that we were going to insist that our way was the right way, and we were willing to lie down in the middle of Target and scream “No!” to God’s call for us to love each other, to respect each other, to take care of each other. And I’m sure it grieved God to watch us suffer the consequences of our stubbornness.

So, rather than wipe the slate clean and start over, rather than continue to knock God’s head against the wall in the face of our hard-heartedness, God did something amazing. God sent us the biggest “Yes” in the history of the world. Jesus is God’s ultimate “Yes” to us. Jesus is a “yes” to all the promises God has made to us about love and grace and forgiveness and eternal life. It’s more than ironic that Jesus’ name in the Hebrew language is “Yeshua,” because he is God’s greatest “Yes” to us.

And yet... what did we say to Jesus? Here is God made flesh, dwelling among us, healing and teaching and showing us what God is like. If there was ever someone to whom we could say an emphatic “Yes!” it would be this guy, right? Right? No. We questioned him. We arrested him.

We mocked him. We spit on him. And on the cross at Golgotha, as we hammered nails into his hands and his feet, we said, “No. No. No.”

But this day, Easter Sunday, is a reminder God’s “yes” is greater than our “no.” No matter how much we say “no,” God never gives up on us. God’s promises to us are good, they have no expiration date, even when we turn our backs. Jesus is not only a “yes” to God’s promises, he’s God’s “yes” to each one of us. Think of all the questions we ask of God to which Jesus is a “Yes”: Do you know me, God? Do you love me, God? No really, knowing what I’ve done, do you love me? Am I forgiven? Is there a purpose for my life? Is there life after death?

The resurrection shows us the answer to each of these is “yes.” One writer said that Jesus is God’s “grand consummating affirmative.” We do not worship a fickle, wishy-washy God. We are imperfectly human, and sometimes we are unfaithful to God. But God is never unfaithful to us. It doesn’t matter how far you’ve run away. It doesn’t matter how badly you’ve behaved. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve questioned and doubted and given up. Through Jesus, God says “Yes” to you.

So then, as we stand in front of the empty tomb, as we soak in the magnitude of the “Yes” God has said to us through the resurrection, we are faced with our own ultimate question. Will we say “yes” to God? Doesn’t matter if it is for the first time or the millionth time. Today, this Easter, will we say “Yes” to God? That’s dangerous, you know. When you say “No” to God, that means you’re still in control – or at least you can think you are. But when you say “Yes” to God, it opens up a whole new universe of possibilities. Saying “Yes” to God means joining God on this grand adventure of making God’s kingdom real here on earth. It means partnering with God to make a difference in this world, starting with your life. Saying “no” is control; saying “yes” is freedom.

Will you say “Yes” to Easter? Will you say “Yes” to letting God’s love guide your thoughts, actions, and decisions? Will you say “Yes” to being more like Christ tomorrow than you were yesterday? Will you say “yes” to committing all that you have and all that you are to God’s purposes? Will you say “yes” to reflecting God’s radically inclusive love and unending grace to the people around you, especially to those who least deserve it? And, when you have that moment of weakness in the coming days and you say “no” – because we all know it’s going to happen to every one of us - will you say “yes” to coming back here next week for worship, so that you can be reminded of God’s “yes” once again?

God knows who you are. God knows what you’ve done. And God knows your true worth. God knows your infinite value. God has looked at you and said, “You are my priceless child!” God has looked at you and, through Jesus, has said, “Yes. Yes. Yes.” What will you say?