

"Easter at Valley Creek"
March 31, 2024 | Pastor John Stickl

Did you ever wonder why every year we gather together at Easter in church? Why are you here today? Isn't it interesting that every year no matter where we are, no matter what's going on in our life. No matter how we feel about our relationship with God, there is something at Easter time that calls us; that draws us. Almost something beyond us. Something deep inside of us. Something supernatural that draws us back to church. People all over the globe, all different walks of life, from all different places, all gather together and we come in and we sit in a pew, we sit in a chair, we sit in a row. And whether this is your first time at Easter or you've come every Easter for the last 50 years, there's something that's drawn you into this place. And we all come in with our questions. Every one of us brings all kinds of questions into the seat that we're sitting in. You see, we're humans. We're curious. We're inquisitive. We ask lots of questions because we have a mind, an intellect, reason. We long for knowledge and understanding and wisdom and insight. And so, we ask questions all day long. Daily questions like, how are you doing? What time is it? What do you want for dinner? But beneath those surface daily questions are our deep and profound questions that we're asking all the time whether we realize it or not. Questions like, is there a God? And if there is, what is He like? Questions like, where did I come from? And why am I here? And where am I going? Questions like, am I significant? and what does significance even look like? Questions like, what is good? What is true and what is real? And whether you realize it or not, consciously or subconsciously, you are asking those questions. Those kinds of questions all the time and your entire life is built in pursuit of the answer to those questions. Or lived based on what you believe the answer to those questions are. Your entire life is pursuing the answer to those questions or you live based on what you believe the answer to those questions are. I mean, just think about it. Think about how you try to look and where you go. And how you do your work and how you do your time. And how you do your finances and your relationships. How you deal with conflict. How you respond to circumstances. All of those consciously or subconsciously, are based on the pursuit to the answer of the deep questions of your heart. And beneath all those questions, there's one more foundational questions that all humans ask. And it is this simple question, am I loved?

At the deepest part of you, you want to know the answer to the question. Am I loved? Like, does anybody see me? Does anybody know me? Does anybody care about me? Am I loved? And loved not like, "I love ice cream," or "I love a sunny day," but like, loved. Like 1 Corinthians 13, the biblical definition of love. "Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrongs and it does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects. Always trusts. Always hopes. Always perseveres. Love never fails." You see, we're all asking the question, am I loved? Because we know where we've been and we know what we've done. We know the sin and the shame and the brokenness. We know the darkness of our own heart. The wickedness, the rebellion, the things of darkness that no one else knows. And so, we are asking, "Am I loved?" And that's why you're sitting here today because Easter answers that question once and for all. You see, Easter is the answer to the question, "Am I loved?" This is why Scripture says, "God demonstrates His love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ

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died for us." Easter is not only the declaration of God loving you. It is the demonstration that God loves you once and for all. While we were still sinners, while we were against God, an enemy, hostile. While we didn't understand Him, didn't believe in Him, wanted nothing to do with Him, He demonstrated that He loved us by laying down His life for us.

Or how about John 3:16, that great verse that we use at Easter time, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish. But shall have everlasting life." Easter is when God demonstrated His love for us by giving us Jesus and offering us eternal life. Or how about John 15, when Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that He laid down His life for His friends." He calls you friends and He lays down His life for you. And He says there is no greater love than that. Or how about 1 John 3:16, that says, "This is how we know what love is, that Jesus Christ laid down His life for us." The only reason we even know what love is, is because Jesus offered Himself up for us. You see, Easter answers the deepest question of the human heart, am I loved? And that's why we're drawn back to it year after year after year. You see, Jesus saw you. He saw you in your sin and your shame and your brokenness. He saw your misery and He was concerned and so, He came. The Son of God stepped out of heaven and took on humanity and became the Son of Man. And He moved into our neighborhood with grace and truth. He came to walk among us. He lived the life that you're living. He walked in your shoes. He faced every trial, every circumstance, every hardship of your life and every place where you and I fail, He was victorious. And He showed us what it was like to be human. What it was like to be alive. He showed us what it was like to live free in love. And He laid down His life for us. The godly for the ungodly. The righteous for the unrighteous.

He was arrested, and He was beaten, and He was whipped, because love always protects. And He was nailed to a cross, because love is not self-seeking. And when He hung on that cross, He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," because love keeps no record of wrongs. And when He breathed His last breath, He cried out, "It is finished." And in that moment, He forever answered the question, "Are we loved?" with a resounding, "Yes." So, we would never have to ask it again. And He was dead and they buried Him in a grave. And three days later, He rose again from the grave, because love never fails. And He defeated sin, death, and the grave. And now, He offers us a new life, abundant life, eternal life. He invites us to be a new creation, to be included in Christ. He invites us to repent, for His kingdom is at hand. He invites us to a life with God, a life lived free in love. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus, our Lord. What we deserve was death, but what He gave us was eternal life. And eternal life is not just the forgiveness of your sins, going to heaven when you die. In fact, in the only place where the Bible defines eternal life, Jesus defines it by saying, "This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." In other words, eternal life isn't about heaven when you die and the forgiveness of your sins. Eternal life is about knowing, experiencing, and living in this loving relationship with God in the here and now. Easter answers the question, "Am I loved?" So, have you discovered that you are loved yet?

You see, recently, I was talking to this old-time farmer. A guy I just recently met. And as we were talking, he found out what I did. And he looked at me, and he kind of squinted his eye, and he said, "So, you're a preacher?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "Well, what kind of preacher are you? Are you an angry preacher that is constantly telling people to try harder, do better, behave because God is mad at them? Or are you the kind of preacher that says, 'God loves you. So, do whatever you want, because it's all going to work out in the end anyways?'" And I sat there and thought about it for a moment. And I looked back at him, and I said, "No." I said, "I'm the kind of preacher that says, 'God loves you. And when you figure that out, it changes everything.'" You see, when you know you're loved, it changes everything. Love makes you fearless. Love makes you secure. Love sets you free. It frees you from yourself. It frees you from your flesh. It frees you from sin and shame. It frees you from the love of this world. Love frees you from the lust of the eyes, the cravings of the flesh, the pride of life. It's love that fills you with hope and faith. It's love that changes you from the inside out, giving you the character of Jesus, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. When you know you're loved, you become a person of love, and you start being able to be free to love the people around you. And so, you're not angry, and you're not bitter. And you're not resentful and you don't hoard. And you don't hate and you're not greedy. And you're not selfish. Why? Because we have been loved, and so, now we're free to love others.

When we figure out that we're loved, we no longer have to seek our own good. Because when you realize someone else is seeking your good – when you realize someone else has good will towards you – it changes everything. When you realize that Jesus is constantly seeking your good and that His will for you is always good, you can submit and surrender your will to His. And you can trade your kingdom for His. You see, love is the deepest question of the human heart. And so, when that question is answered, it answers all the other questions we have, too. Because when you know that you're loved, all of a sudden, I know there is a God, and He is love. And all of a sudden, I now know where I came from, from the Father's heart of love. And I know why I'm here, to live in a loving relationship with God as a person of love. And I know where I'm going. Because I came from love, I'm living in love, and I will return to the love of the Father. And I know I am significant. Why? Because I am as significant in this moment as I will ever be because I am as loved in this moment as I will ever be. In fact, right now, wherever you're sitting, you are as loved as you will ever be. Because Jesus already demonstrated and declared once and for all that you are loved. Have you figured that out yet?

You see, that's the kind of preaching we do here at Valley Creek. But the real question is, what kind of preacher are you? You see, it's great to sit here for 30 minutes once a week, once a year. But what really matters is, what kind of message are you preaching to yourself all day long? Because you are the most important preacher in your life. Because you are constantly preaching to yourself 24 hours a day, 168 hours a week, 365 days a year. Make no mistake about it, you're sitting in a pew in your mind, and you're preaching to yourself. A voice, a

narrative, a message, thoughts, opinions, perspectives, preferences. You're constantly preaching to yourself. So, let me ask you, what kind of preacher are you? Are you an angry preacher? Just talking about trying harder, doing better, getting it together, because God is mad at you? Are you a tolerant preacher? God is love, so do whatever you want, because it's all going to work out in the end anyways. Are you an atheist preacher? You don't really believe in God so you got to take control and you got to make it happen. Are you an agnostic preacher? Don't really believe in much of anything, so why bother? It doesn't really matter. Who cares anyways? Are you a worldly preacher? Preaching the message of the world to yourself. Are you a religious preacher? Preaching condemnation and judgment and rules and regulations. Are you a self-preacher? Preaching that it's all about you. That basically you're your own God so do what you want, when you want, how you want. Or are you a gospel preacher? Preaching Christ and Him crucified, raised from the dead. That Jesus loved you once and for all. Demonstrated and declared it, and now invites you into His kingdom in the here and now. What kind of preacher are you? And are you sure you're preaching the right message?

You see, after that first Easter when Jesus rose again from the grave and ascended to heaven, the disciples preached the first gospel message and there were two types of responses to it. One group of people thought it was foolishness. They thought it was ridiculous. They laughed. They jeered. They criticized. They mocked. They thought the disciples who were preaching the message were drunk, they thought it was so foolish. But then, there was a whole another group of people who when they heard it, they were cut to the heart. They were broke. They were humbled. They were laid bare. And all of a sudden, all the answers to their question came clear. And they knew they needed Jesus. And so, they said, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter, one of Jesus's disciples says, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." So, can I just ask you on this Easter, in your pew, which type are you? Is the gospel foolishness and a stumbling block? Or is it the power of God and the wisdom of God? Has the cross of Jesus answered your questions yet? And if not, maybe you need to look at it again. And maybe you need to look a little harder. Because sex, and money, and power, and fame, and possessions, and significance, and achievement, and time, and travel, and fame, and fortune will never answer the questions you're really asking. Because they never have, have they? And that's why there's no peace and rest in here, because only Jesus can answer that question.

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God." You see, you spend your life trying to search the answer to your questions or living in response to what you believe the answers to them are. And the reason you're here today sitting, the reason we're drawn back year after year is because Easter answers the deepest question of the human heart: Am I loved? It answers it once and for all with a resounding, "Yes." It is finished. And you are loved. And when you get that, it changes everything. May you have eyes to see and ears to hear. That you are loved. And that love will change you from the inside out.

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So, Jesus, thank You for the cross. Thank You for the grave. And thank You for the resurrection. Thank You that You saw me in my sin, in my shame, in my fear, in my brokenness, and You came for me because You loved me. You didn't just declare it somewhere way far off. You demonstrated it and You came close and You laid down Your life that I might live. So, Lord, I pray for every one of us in this room because we have questions in our soul. Whether we're aware of them or not, conscious of them or not, we long to know that we are loved. And so, I pray for my friends that are here today, that we would be cut to the heart by the supernatural power of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The cross of Jesus and Him crucified and raised from the grave. That we would cry out now, "What shall we do?" And have the faith to respond, to repent, be baptized, receive the forgiveness of our sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and start living in Your kingdom. Jesus, we walked in here today whether we realized it or not with the question, am I loved? May we leave with the answer. In Jesus' name, yes, I am.