

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

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.

"Easter at Valley Creek"
April 20, 2025 | Pastor John Stickl

So, here we are once again, sitting in a pew, sitting in a chair, sitting in a row, because there is something about Easter that calls to us. And if you're new and this is your first time with us and you weren't here last Easter, I hope and pray that this will be your year to believe and receive that Jesus loves you. Whether you get it or understand it or it's not logical or it doesn't make sense, may you, by faith, grab a hold of it because you are worthy and deserving of love. And the cross of Jesus answers that question once and for all because if He gave up His life for you, He's proved once and for all that His will for you is good, which means you are loved.

And if you've been a part of our church and you were here last Easter, you might've been sitting here for these last few moments with this weird sense of déjà vu. You may have been wondering to yourself, "Have I heard this before? Have I experienced this message before?" And the answer to that question is yes. You see, that's the message we shared last Easter. And as we were seeking God and preparing for this Easter, we felt very strongly that we wanted to share that message again because it's actually more powerful the second time than it is the first time. You see, here we are, another year has gone by. You're a year older. Another Easter has come and gone, and here we are sitting in a pew, sitting in a chair, sitting in a row because there's something about Jesus, there's something about the cross, there's something about who He is and what He has done. There's something about His name that draws us back year after year. So, here you are drawn back another year again, sitting in this chair, the only question this time for you now is, is your life any different than last year? Have you changed? Did you grow? Have you matured? Have you walked with God? Have you become more of who you were created and called to be? Are you any freer than you were last year? The question that I want to ask those of you that were here last year is just simply this: did you live loved this year? Did you live like you were loved this year? And if not, why? And if not, what would your life be like if you actually did? Did you just live loved? Did you live like you were free? Free from sin and free from shame and free from this world? Did you live like you were free from fear and free from worry? Did you live like you didn't have to control things, and you could trust God, and His grace was more than enough for you? Did you live like the Spirit of the living God is dwelling inside of you and He has given you everything you need for life and godliness? Did you live like you were loved this year? And if not, why? Because the Bible makes it very clear that the cross changes us. And so, if I'm the same as I was last year, then I have to ask myself a really honest question. And that question is this: if I'm the same as I was last year, then either the cross has no power, or I have yet to actually surrender to it. If I didn't live loved this year and I heard this message last year, then I have to ask myself this question: Either God doesn't love me, or I have yet to open myself to His love. Because it's got to be one or the other.

You see, I love what Jesus says when He says, "Blessed are those who hear God's voice and make God's message their way of life." What a verse. Blessed are those who hear God's voice and make God's message their way of life. In other words, the blessing isn't in the hearing. The blessing is in hearing what God wants to say and then making that message my way of life. And so, last year, I heard that I was loved. Did I make that message my way of life this year? If I heard His voice saying I was loved, did that message become my way of life? And if not, why?

See, I love the patience and the graciousness of Jesus. He is so patient to us, and He will tell us that we are loved as long as it takes for us to finally believe it and receive it, and act as if it were so. This is why in Revelation, the last book in the Bible, Jesus, like all the way until the end is what this is saying, is saying to you, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens up the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me." See, Jesus is standing at the door of your heart, at the door of your life, and He's knocking. And He's saying, "If you hear my voice and open up the door, I'll come in and eat with you and you with me." And I love that it says He's knocking; He's not pounding, He's not banging, He's not yelling, He's not screaming, He's not going to kick down the door or force his way in. No, He's gently knocking. He's whispering, He's singing, He's wooing, He's calling your name, and He will do that as long as it takes for you to open up the door and finally let Him in. I love it. "If you hear my voice and open the door," there it is again. The blessing isn't found in hearing His voice, it's found in hearing His voice and then responding to God's message and making it my way of life – which is open the door and let me in and watch what will actually happen. See, I love that Scripture tells us and these three remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love. What that says to me on this Easter is, is even if you can't see your faith and even if you've lost your hope, you still are loved. Even if you have no faith to believe God for anything in any way and even if you have no hope for the goodness of God and the future of your life, you still are loved, worthy, and deserving of it, and nothing you can do will ever change that.

You see, every year we come back and we sit and we listen. We take a picture, we get a meal, we do some eggs and some bunnies, a couple of family arguments along the way, and all that's great. Have tradition, have a ham, have a turkey, do an egg hunt. But at some point in time, you have to ask yourself the question: Why am I sitting here, and what is God trying to say to me? And has my life changed in any way because of it? Because if not, it's my own version of insanity that I'm playing in my own life because I don't want to see you sitting here next year without any level of experiencing the love of God between this Easter and next Easter. Not that you're not welcome, you're always welcome, but there's so much more of God for you than to wait another year to hear once again that the cross of Jesus was for me. See, may this be the year that when you get up from this pew, may this be the year that when you get up from this chair, may this be the year that when you get up from the row that you're sitting in, may this be the year that you live loved, that you don't just know it, but that you live it. And even if you don't have the faith or the hope for it, you open yourself up to it. And you say, "Jesus, I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back to the world. I don't want to go back to the way of life. I don't want to go back to that sin. I don't want to go back to that relationship. I don't want to go back to the way I've been living. I don't want to go back to the anxiety and the depression and the worry and the fear and the brokenness. Jesus, I don't want to go back to controlling my own life, making it happen, holding all things together. Jesus, I don't want to go back to that. I actually want to live like I am actually loved, like I am free and forgiven and wanted and seen and protected and taken care of and noticed and included, like your spirit is actually inside me, like I actually live in a better place called the kingdom of God, like I can be a disciple to learn how to be a healthy human in this world." I actually don't want

to do a church service. Come on, man, what other church do you go to where they say, "We don't want to do church services?" What other church do you go to where they're going to give you the same Easter message two Easters in a row? You're like, "I knew there was something about this church." I know, because it illustrates my point. It's so easy to hear. But my prayer for you is that you have more than ears to hear. You have a message to live. You are loved. Are you ready to live like it? That's my parting Easter question for you. You are loved. Based on all those Scriptures we just walked through, you can't deny that. The only question is: are you ready to live like it? Because, how different would your life be? In Jesus' name, when you get up from this chair and you walk out of this place, living like you're loved.

So, Jesus, thank You. Thank You for the cross. Thank You for Your life. Thank You for Your death, Your burial, and Your resurrection. Thank You that You put into the very DNA of our soul this desire to come back year after year and sit in this chair because we want to know if we are worthy of love. Thank You that the beauty of the horror of the cross declares once and for all that we are loved. Jesus, I hear You knocking at the door of our heart right now. I hear You knocking at the door of our life, and You're not going to knock it down, and You're not mad and You're not angry, and You don't want to take anything away, and You don't want to make us religious. You just want to come in and have a meal with us – communion, friendship, relationship with the One who made our soul. So, Jesus, I open up the door of my life and I say, "You are welcome in." Maybe in your own way, if you want to do that, you can say, "Jesus, I open up the door and I'll let you in." Jesus, I open up my heart and I receive Your love. I see that cross in Your name and I don't even know that I always believe it, Jesus, but I receive that I am worthy and deserving of that kind of love. And that love changes me and frees me and forgives me and heals me. And so, may the love of Jesus transform you from the inside out. May this be the last Easter that you ever sit in any church service that you don't leave and go live loved. May this be like the moment in your life that you always look back on and say, "That crazy church did a crazy thing on that Easter, but it changed my life because no longer did I want to hear about it, I wanted to live it." Blessed are those who hear God's voice and make God's message their way of life. You are loved. May you live like it. In Jesus' name, amen.