

Don't you love underdog stories? What's your favorite underdog movie?

One of mine is *Cinderella Man* (**picture**)? During the Great Depression, Jim Braddock (**picture**), an aging Irish-American boxer, is forced to give up boxing after breaking his hand in the ring. After his hand heals and thanks to a last-minute cancellation by another boxer, Braddock's longtime manager and friend offers him a chance to fill in for just one night and make a little money. He wins and with a shot at the heavyweight championship held by Max Baer (**picture**) a possibility, Braddock continues to win. When his rags to riches story gets out, one sportswriter dubs him *The Cinderella Man*. Very quickly Jim Braddock comes to represent the hopes and aspirations of the American public struggling with the difficulties of the Great Depression.

When the title fight against Max Baer finally comes his way. Braddock is a 10-to-1 underdog. Braddock's wife, Mae is terrified, because Max Baer, the champ, is a vicious man who has already killed at least two men in the ring.

But on June 13, 1935, in one of the greatest upsets in boxing history (**picture**), Braddock defeats the seemingly invincible Baer to become the heavyweight champion of the world.

Don't you love an underdog? Why do our hearts soar when we watch a movie like that? Why do we cheer for the underdog and even get teary when they win? Why do we always root for the underdog?

I think it's because we all instinctively know that as fallen beings, we're underdogs in a race against a seemingly unbeatable foe, an enemy named Death. We know that on our own there's no way we can beat him. Like a cruel Max Baer, Death is just too big, too powerful. No strategy has ever worked against him. Vitamins, diet, exercise routines—nothing works. Death beats everyone who takes him on. The odds are stacked against us. *"The statistics on death are quite grim. One out of one people die."*

It's the root cause for what we could call *"the Great Depression of the soul."* We live our lives with a cloud hanging over us; we know it's hopeless because death will always get us in the end. Sure, when we're young we can put this terrifying thought out of our minds. In the early years of our lives, we can convince ourselves that death is something that happens to others, not to us. As we grow older, we finally see the folly of that thinking. We look back and see that death is gaining on us and will beat us in the end.

Maybe that's why we root for the underdogs in life. As "little guys" ourselves, we always cheer for the underdog. We love those stories where against overwhelming odds, the little guy wins.

I'm bringing all this up because today we celebrate the fact that Someone did beat Death in this race we all run and His name is Jesus! **What Does the Easter Account Really Mean?** Jesus defeated Death! At first though, to even His closest followers, it looked like Jesus was the defeated underdog. It looked like death had won another one. Remember?

That first Good Friday Jesus was cruelly beaten within an inch of his life. Then, He was nailed to a cross where He died a horrible death. For three days His body lay in a borrowed tomb. We say *"borrowed"* because on that Easter Sunday morning Jesus rose—bodily—victoriously and gave that tomb back to it's owner! That glorious morning our Lord knocked out Death. He defeated our enemy. He did what no one else had ever done before or since.

And because He did, ever since that first Easter Sunday, humanity has crowded churches like ours, much like people crowded Madison Square Garden to see Jim Braddock fight Max Baer. As underdogs, we come together to praise God for Jesus, Who defeated this huge enemy we all face.

Jesus' resurrection was the message of the early church. They told that story every chance they got. In the book of Acts, Luke describes the entire ministry of Peter and John in these five words: *"preaching Jesus and the Resurrection."* That's pretty much all they did! It was the same with the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul summarized the "sermon" he'd been preaching all over the world by saying, *"I passed on to you as the first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, that on the third day He rose again, and that He was seen."*

Jesus' resurrection is what makes the gospel good news! So this morning I want us to remind ourselves why this part of the story is so precious to us by reviewing the significance of what happened that first Easter morning.

1. The resurrection of Jesus is vital because it assures us that our past can be forgiven. Our hopelessness in the face of death is rooted in the fact that we all know we are sinners. As Mark Twain (**picture**) put it, *"Man is the only animal that blushes, and the only animal that needs to."* Twain was right. We're all guilty of sin.

And if that weren't bad enough, we know our sin separates us from our Creator. It's why there's a "God-shaped" hole in the hearts of all people who don't know Jesus. We were designed to walk in fellowship with God, but our sin makes that impossible. However, when Jesus came, He proclaimed the message we all long to hear. He said our sins could actually be forgiven.

If you've read the Gospel accounts you know that during His public ministry, there are four words that Jesus said over and over again: *"Your sins are forgiven."* (Matt. 9:2). On that night in the upper room, just a few hours before His arrest, He referred to the Communion cup as, *"His blood which was shed for the forgiveness of sins"* (Matt. 26:28).

Jesus linked our forgiveness with His death. He taught that He was going to die in our place, that the innocent would die for the guilty. He'd pay the price for our sins on the cross, making our forgiveness—our pardon—possible.

That raises a vital question: *How can we know whether Jesus could really do that?* Sure, He said He was going to die for our sins and forgiveness **but** was He able to do that? How can we know whether He achieved by His death what He said He was going to? How can we know that God accepted His death as a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world? How can we know if those four words Jesus said are true?

Well, if Jesus had remained dead, if His bones were still in the tomb, we'd have to conclude that His sacrifice on the Cross was a failure. If death beat Jesus like it beats everyone else, we'd have to assume that He was no more sinless than you or me. Therefore, He wasn't qualified to die in our place or suitable to secure our forgiveness.

Paul was very clear about this point, *"If Christ was not raised, from the dead, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins—WE ARE UNFORGIVEN—and those who have died have perished...but Christ was raised from the dead"* (1 Cor. 15:17). Jesus beat death! God raised Him on the third day and this proves that He approved of what Jesus had done for us on the cross. The resurrection shows that Jesus did not die in vain. We can be forgiven! His atoning sacrifice is the basis on which God is able to forgive all our sins and give us a new life. The resurrection of Jesus validates the death of Jesus.

Maybe today you're paralyzed by guilt or some secret sin haunts you. Maybe you feel like you can't get on with the present or future, because you're stuck in the past with some guilt or regret tying you down. You feel like you'll just have to live with it for the rest of your life. You're unhappy—you feel hopeless and alone. Your sin is killing your joy.

If that describes your situation, here's good news. Colossians 2:14: *"Jesus has forgiven all our sins and canceled every debt we owe. Christ has done away with it by nailing it to the cross."* Jesus made it possible for your sin to be forgiven and washed away like sidewalk chalk in a thunderstorm! Jesus nailed your sin to the cross, all of it! He paid for your guilt and my guilt.

Rick Warren (**picture**) puts it this way: *"Jesus was hung for my hang-ups. He was nailed to the cross, so I can quit nailing myself to the cross. He wants to forgive your past. He wants to cancel every debt you owe—emotional debts, relational debts, sins. All canceled."* Because of the resurrection, we can be forgiven, debt free! We can come to know God. We can start over again, this time with Him walking at our side!

Pastor Philip Griffin (**picture**) shares a powerful story about the forgiveness Jesus' resurrection has made possible. He writes: *"During the early days of our church plant in Texas we were baptizing lots of people so we brought in a small indoor swimming pool. There were about 30 people who were planning to be baptized the following Sunday. But the day before the service I realized that we didn't have a hose to fill the pool. I asked around and none of our staff members had one so I decided to go out and buy one. As I was leaving to get the hose, a guy named John stopped me in the parking lot and said, 'I'm glad I caught you, pastor. I need to talk to you.' I tried to have a conversation with him as I walked toward my car—after all I had to get that hose—but he said, 'Can we sit down somewhere? I really need to talk in private.' I took him back to my office and when we sat down, he said, 'I want to know if you're for real."*

I heard your sermon the other day when you talked about how God says to each and every one of us that there is nothing we can do or say to make Him not love us. You said God doesn't always love our behavior, but He loves us and sent His Son to make it possible for us to be forgiven. Is that true? Is it for real?' I told John, 'Absolutely, it's for real.' He said, 'Well, I'm struggling with homosexual desires and behavior. I'm in and out of gay relationships. I understand what the Bible says, and I want to do what God wants me to do—but I'm losing this battle. Several months ago, I tried to go to another church, but when I came clean with my struggles, they told me never to come back again.' We stayed and talked, and I connected him with a ministry that helps people battling same-sex attraction. I also connected him with one of our church's small groups, which ended up embracing him. Before he left my office, he said, 'Now I want to tell you one more thing.' At this point I was thinking, 'I'm not going to have time to get that hose.'

John said, 'When I pulled into the parking lot today, I wasn't aiming my car in this direction. I was going to kill myself.' When I asked John if he had a plan for ending his life, he said, 'Yes, I did. It was already in motion. I went to the hardware store and bought a garden hose earlier today, and I bought some duct tape. My plan was to drive down this little rural road and tape the hose to my muffler and feed it into my car window.'

I said, 'John, are you for real? You actually bought a hose?' He said he had and we continued to talk and before he left, I got a glimpse of redemption that day. I saw John cross the line of faith and let Christ put his feet on a different path. And more than that I saw God take something that was intended for death—that hose—and use it to fill up something that means life—our baptismal pool. From then on we told that story every time we did baptisms in that church."

What a powerful reminder that no matter what our sin, we can be forgiven. If we repent, He's faithful and just to do that. Jesus' resurrection proves this is possible! Jesus took that Roman cross, something intended for death, and through His resurrection, made it into a universal symbol for life...abundant new life that's possible for anyone who comes to God and confesses his/her sin, and in that step of faith experiences forgiveness and cleansing. God can put us on the right path. All we have to do is ask. This leads me to mention a second reason the resurrection of Jesus is so significant...

2. The resurrection of Jesus is vital because it assures us that our present can be empowered. I don't know about you but I need more than forgiveness for the past. I need power in the present. I need the power to do the things I know I should do and the willpower not to do the things I know that I shouldn't do.

Do you feel that way? Do you ever feel like your life is out of control? Do you ever feel powerless to defeat some temptation or save a relationship, or just live the way you know God wants you to live? If you do, it's because you weren't meant to live this life on your own power. You and I were meant to get the power to live right from our righteous God. But the question is: *Can God give us that kind of power?* Can selfish people really be made unselfish? Is it possible for immoral people to be given self-control? Is it possible for mean people to be made kind? Sour, bitter ones to be sweetened?

On this Resurrection Day I want to tell you that it's possible. God has power to change human nature and to change human beings. He has power to transform you and me into the image of His Son, to make us like Jesus. The Resurrection made that kind of power accessible.

That's what Paul says, *"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms"* (Ephesians 1:18-20)

Paul is saying that the same resurrection power that brought Jesus back from the dead is available to you and me. God is able to raise us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. The resurrection proves God can change us in any way we need changing.

I know people that before they came to Christ, they arrogant or narcissists, or greedy, or materialistic or addicts...or just mean and selfish. But when they met Jesus all things became new! Some of you are here this morning; that was you. That's normal Christianity. 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*

It's the power of the resurrection that does that! It puts you on the right path, a new path and God provides the grace that you need to stay on it. Jesus' power to change lives like this is one of the greatest proofs for the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

Here's another. British skeptic and author A. N. Wilson (**picture**), who a few years ago was known for his scathing attacks on Christianity yet celebrated Easter at a church with a group of other church members, proclaiming that the story of the Jesus of the Gospels is the only story that makes sense out of life and its challenges. A. N. Wilson said, *"My own return to faith has surprised none more than myself...My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known—not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in light of the resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die."*

Easter is good news because it assures us that we can be empowered to change, to be emboldened to share our faith even in nations where it's illegal to do so, empowered to do the good works we long to do—good works that draw even hardened skeptics toward God. **The resurrection of Jesus is vital because it assures us that our past can be forgiven, our present can be empowered, finally...**

3. The resurrection of Jesus is vital because it assures us that our future is secure. We all fear death because it steals our future. Death will end our lives, end our friendships, end our families. Death will end everything we love and cherish. No matter how hard we fight, we all know death will beat each of us sooner or later. That reminds me of *The Message's* paraphrase of Job 21:23-26 where it says, *"Some people die in the prime of life, with everything going for them—fat and sassy. Others die bitter and bereft, never getting a taste of happiness. But they're both laid out side by side in the cemetery, where the worms can't tell one from the other."* With that kind of end staring us in the face, it's no wonder we fear death.

This is why we rejoice as Christ-followers, especially on Easter Sunday. Remember Paul's words: *"If Christ has not been raised...then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But—Christ HAS indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a Man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive"* (1 Cor. 15:12-22). Hebrews 2:14-16: *"Since the children have flesh*

and blood (that's you and me) He (that's Jesus)—He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

As followers of the Risen Christ, we know that death is not the end—we know that it's just a doorway that leads us into an eternity of life and joy. We know that Christ-following loved ones and friends who died before us are not lost. We'll all be together again some day. We greet each other on Easter Sunday with, *“He is Risen!”* and reply, *“He is risen indeed.”*

Conclusion: Easter reminds us Death has been knocked out and conquered. Jesus knocked it out once for all for you, but only if He's your Savior.

Are you ready for Death? Statisticians tell us that 60 million people die every year. That's 150,000 people entering eternity every day, 100 every minute. Since this service began some 6,000 people have discovered what happens when we die. I wonder how many of them were ready for death?

Are you ready for death? Dr. L. Nelson Bell (**picture**) once said, *“Only those who are prepared to die are really prepared to live.”*

The glorious news of Easter is this, if you're not ready—if you're not prepared for death, you can be! And more than anything God wants you to be ready. He loves you so much that He doesn't want you to experience the Hell of eternal separation from Him. What happened on Good Friday proves that God would literally rather die than live throughout eternity apart from you.

All you have to do is put your trust in Jesus, the Savior that God provided. Admit your sin to Him, ask for His forgiveness and give Him your life.

The Bible says that we're all sinners. *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23). The Bible says sin leads to death. *“The wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23a). But the Bible has great news for you. Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive you and me of all your sins. *“God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:8). The Bible says that *“the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Rom. 6:23b).

If you want to go to heaven, there's one thing you must do. You must call upon the Lord Jesus for salvation. *“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Romans 10:9).

That's the message of the cross. That's the message of Easter. It means there is hope for everyone. I've got good news and better news. The good news is: You can be saved—no matter how bad you've been. That's what it means to be a Christian. It means trusting in Jesus so much you risk your eternity on what the Bible says and what He did for you on the cross.

Are you willing to do that? Are you a Christian? First, you must admit that you're not a good person and come to Jesus, run to the cross and ask Him to be your Lord and Savior. Will you do that? Will you do that right now?

Death has been defeated. It's a conquered Enemy but only for those who have trusted in the Risen Christ. **That, my friend, is what the Easter Story really means.**