

## Victory of the Lamb – Easter 2018 – Pastor Bill Limmer

### Acts 26 selected verses – The First Day of the Rest of Your Life

Was your home a little extra crazy this morning? Not mine – April fools. My house was extra crazy this morning because of what happened last night. As most of you know that the Mega Millions lottery this past week was worth over a half billion dollars. So, I bought a ticket. And I won. I didn't win the big prize, I won one of the lesser prizes which is still a lot of money. As soon as I sign the back of the lottery ticket, I will be one of America's newest millionaires. And the timing is perfect because like three months ago at Christmas time I was cruising through the channels and I ran across an HGTV show called Buy Your Lottery Dream Home. And so, I kinda know what I want from high ceilings, to open concept, to large yard for Jacky to mow, ok just kidding a pool for Jacky to be by. And I can go out and by my lottery dream home because today is the first day of the rest of my life. April fools. I think we can all agree if we actually won a half billion dollars our lives would be different going forward, maybe to the good or maybe to the bad. But today I want you to consider that if Jesus is alive, it is a truth that will make this truly the first day of the rest of your life.

We live in a day where religion and religious belief is looked upon as a matter of preference, taste, opinion. Today people say things like: all religions are fundamentally the same. They are just superficially different so choose the one that suits you, that works for you. The question of truth is avoided and ignored. But belief is empty if it is disconnected from the truth makes us an April fool. Today so many people just know the truth is based on what you feel. That's what we say. But when we dig down we know that's not good. Let's say you have 5K in your bank account. You go to the bank with a 2K check and you want to keep \$100 out for yourself. If the bank teller says to you, "I am not going to give you any money because I don't feel you have money in your account." You would say, "I don't care what you feel, I know I have money in my account and I want some of it now." Or something like that, right. This is one example of hundreds if not thousands that we can come up with on the importance of basing our lives on the truth. So why in the world, when it comes to the most important thing in our life, grand eternal questions, would we throw truth out of the window and make this a matter of preference, like whether a hollow chocolate Easter bunny, or a sold chocolate Easter bunny, or a marshmallow chocolate Easter bunny is best. The core of belief is truth.

So here is a question for you: Did Jesus rise from the dead? This is not a matter of opinion, or preference. It is either the truth or a lie. The answer to the question has huge ramifications for everyone inside and outside of this ministry center. All that being said, some today and some 2K years ago doubted. Here is one. His name was Saul. And it turns out he is going to be one of the most influential people in the history of the world. He was the primary catalyst in the spread of Christianity. But he wasn't always a Christian. He was first a skeptic, even worse a persecutor of Christianity. As we pick up his words, he is before a Roman ruler and a Jewish King, both at best doubters of Jesus resurrection. Acts 26:9 <sup>9</sup>**"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup>And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup>Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.** Understand that humanly speaking Saul was not a fool. He was a brilliant scholar. He was a religious leader who was also considered to be a very good and righteous man. He was very well respected, a man of position and power. Saul didn't believe that Jesus rose from the dead. So sure that Jesus was

dead that he went out of his way, traveling to many different cities to have people arrested. He cast his vote to have followers of Jesus killed. He was going to stamp out the Christian movement. Saul thought that the only good Christian was a dead Christian.

And it was on one these terrorizing expeditions, that something happened that began the first day of the rest of his life. **“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup> About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. <sup>14</sup> We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, <sup>15</sup> ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ <sup>15</sup> “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.** Yikes. Saul just knew he was right about Jesus, but he was wrong. Have you considered the evidence for Jesus resurrection inside and outside of Scripture? Luke 24:5-7 **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup> ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ”** That is what Scripture says. And here is what we know. Most secular of critics would say that something happened almost two thousand years ago, that started a movement, a change in life. History records that there was in fact a real Jesus and that it is indisputable that this Jesus of Nazareth was dead on the cross. The Journal of the American Medical Association based on the historical and medical evidence says that Jesus was clearly dead before the wound to his side was inflicted. The historical evidence also points to the fact that Jesus’ resurrection is not a legend. There was an empty tomb. Nine ancient sources inside and outside of Scripture that testify that the disciples encountered the living Jesus. Seven ancient sources mostly outside of Scripture that tell us that the disciples lived lives of depravation and suffering as a result of their proclamation of the resurrected Jesus. Why were they willing to do it? Because they heard a rumor that he was alive. No, because they were there. They touched him, ate with him, spoke with him. They knew the truth. It was because of this truth they were willing to proclaim it despite the suffering they endured. In the early to mid 60’s AD, the very date will tell you a movement started, that Nero killed people who believed that Jesus rose from the dead. People were not dying for a legend, a myth, they were dying for the truth. Faith in Jesus makes more sense than you might think because the events didn’t happen in a corner but in history and it happened so that you could have the hope of a new day, a new day that begins the first day of the rest of your life.

Saul knew Jesus was dead. But he was wrong. Was there ever a time when you knew you were right, but you were wrong? Happens all the time in marriage. Raise your hands if you are married. Married men keep your hands up, everybody else hands down. So just think of any argument between a husband and wife. The guy knows he is right but . . . he is wrong. Just ask. The righter she wounds the louder you get. For those of you, who liked me, picked Virginia to beat UMBC, you knew you were right. This was a no brainer. You didn’t even worry about this game. And your bracket was broken. Saul, felt he was right but he was wrong. He was sincere, but he was wrong. Neither sincerity, preference or opinion is the key. The truth that is key.

So, there is Saul, on his way to arrest and persecute followers of Jesus. And he meets Jesus. He is busted. His hand is in the cookie jar of sin. Check it out, Saul wasn’t allegedly guilty, he was guilty. The point is Saul/Paul has a past. He was a persecutor of God and his children. His heart was filled with hate. He was an accomplice to murder. How do you overcome that? Is there any hope? Or is life over?

But first let me ask you, do you have a past? What’s in your past? A broken friendship because of that thing you did or didn’t do, a marriage that ended in divorce, for some of you it was a divorce and while it

takes two to tango, it was your fault, an addiction, a shady business deal, telling your parents only part of the story because you know the other part wasn't go to end well for you, maybe you struggle with competition and you become jealous of others success, and so you are at work and you are talking with the boss and you say of a fellow co-worker, "he is a really good guy but . . ." you think you have to say this so you can keep your status. Maybe it is envy where your mind repeated over and over, why can't I be like that? Does your past include a critical spirit, lies, or how about a secret habit. Maybe what makes you get stuck is the approval of others – if you have it, you are flying high, and if you don't have it, you live a shattered life. Know anyone like that. Have you ever said something you wish you hadn't? Or said something, and because you know that the saying sticks and stone may break my bones but words will never me, is a lie, you let your words fly and it cut the intended person deeply. When you were dating are there things you did that there is no way you are telling your kids about? Have you ever done anything that you wish you hadn't and now that you have, the guilt is so heavy, and the shame is on you like white on rice. What emotions are holding you captive? Is there regret and you can't forgive yourself for what you have done? Is there resentment for what has been done to you? Maybe you can come up with an excuse to worry 😞 . And maybe for some of us here today, some of these things are not in our past, they are in our present. Well, like Saul, what do we do with that? Is there is any hope?

A relationship is not going to be restored until there is forgiveness. God is absolutely serious about having a relationship with you and offering you hope. God has a message about restoring relationships. The message is not make up, try harder, obey better, follow the rules, the message is, "I forgive you." That is what Jesus did on the cross, he subbed for you and me, so God can forgive. If I dent your car, someone will pay for it. Either I do, or you forgive me, and you have to pay for it. Jesus forgives us our sins and paid the price.

Jesus walked out of the tomb on Easter Sunday to give you and me hope. It is the one thing we can't live without. The deepest part of our souls cry for it. Hope that it will all be ok. Hope that someone is standing in our corner for us, with us. Hope is here. Not a false hope that makes untrue promises, not a guarantee invented by any man or woman, not a fantasy or an illusion or a make believe occurrence, but a real lasting hope, hope that death is not the final word, hope that God is still holding it all together, hope that God has not turned his face away from any face or any past, hope that mercy overcomes our past our overwhelms our fears, hope that is more intimately involved in our lives than we can ever know. Hope is here. Hope that you are being offered in this very moment is from God who is madly in love with you he was willing to die for you and come back from death to live with you and meet you where you are at not with judgment but with mercy and grace. Your past may be filled with shame, guilt, and regret. No matter where you have been, no matter what you have done your future is better than you know because you have hope. And hope has a name. His name is Jesus. John 3:16 **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** These words are said by Jesus, the guy who got out of the grave. And since Jesus conquered death, he can conquer anything going on in your life or mine.

The Easter story didn't end at the cross. And it did not end at the empty tomb either. The empty tomb sets his Christianity apart from every other religion in the world. Now you can continue in the same old rut, to live your life as if Jesus dead with all the guilt and garbage of the past, all the pressure of trying to provide for your family, all the pressure of trying to make everything perfect, all the rule following, all the trying harder or you can find your hope in the living Lord Jesus. If you have a past, I want to welcome you to Victory, so you can see that you have a future greater than you ever imagined. I want to welcome you, through Jesus, to the first day of the rest of your life! Amen.

