

April 20, 2014 - 11:00 a.m. Pastor Jonathan Falwell

Easter Sunday – The Shadow of the Cross

Scripture: Various

Summary: In this Easter message, Pastor Jonathan Falwell compares contemporary symbols of Easter with the true symbol of Easter—the Cross—and explains God’s plan of salvation throughout human history.

Death has died and love has won! Aren’t you glad that’s true today, that we serve a risen Savior? He’s in the world today. “You ask me how I know He lives. He lives within my heart.” That’s what Easter’s all about, the fact that Jesus came to this earth 2,000 years ago to provide us a way, to provide us a gift, to provide us the gift of salvation, and we are here today to celebrate that.

Easter is a celebration. It’s a celebration of what Christ has done for us. Now it’s being celebrated all over the world, in every country. In every church all across the face of the globe they’re talking about Easter. It’s celebrated in the hearts of billions of people around the world. It’s a celebration of life winning over death. It’s a celebration of Jesus doing for us what no one could have ever done, and that is to pay our sin debt in full, the price that we owed, what we should have paid.

Jesus paid it all, and through that incredible experience of what Christ did on the cross, what He did in the empty tomb, we have the gift of salvation. It is a miracle, it is a miraculous event, and as often we do, we in our human condition reduce the miraculous to the mundane. We take the miracle of what Christ did on the cross and we try to change it. And we come up with different symbols, different things to talk about Easter, to take it away from what it really is, to give it new meaning, different meaning, so no longer do we have to deal with the reality of what Jesus did on the cross.

You see, we take the miracle of redemption that comes from the cross and the empty tomb and we reduce it to the mundane things of life—symbols kind of like this: Easter baskets full of candy and Easter eggs that appear at our door each and every Easter Sunday. Now certainly it brings joy; it’s something that’s exciting, and we receive these and we get those gifts and we get those little plastic eggs that sometimes have candy in them, and if we really score, sometimes they have money in them. It’s an amazing thing.

This afternoon a lot of people will be going out and decorating Easter eggs, painting the eggs. Nothing wrong with that. It goes back to the 13th century. It’s always been a symbol of spring, of life over death, of what was dead now living. But it certainly is not the symbol of what Easter is really all about.

And of course when these show up at our doors on Easter Sunday, we have to figure out how they got there, how they actually arrived at our door on Easter Sunday, and the way it works is the Easter Bunny. The Easter Bunny shows up each and every year. And Easter Bunny showed up in America back in the 17th century with German immigrants who arrived and settled in Pennsylvania, and ever since it's been delivering Easter eggs to the doors of children, bringing smiles to the face of every kid—except for maybe this one. Bringing joy and chocolate and candies and incredible things and wonderful joy, but not at all what Easter is all about.

You see, Easter didn't show up in an Easter basket full of eggs. Easter didn't arrive by being brought by the Easter Bunny. No, you see Easter is because the cross was. It's all about the cross. It's all about the symbol of what Jesus did when He came to this earth 2,000 years ago and died on that cross for you and for me.

And so from that time, the cross has been a symbol of Easter. It's been a symbol of that amazing moment, that miraculous moment that Jesus paid it all for all of us. In fact, going back to the Council of Nicaea, the Emperor Constantine decided that forever the cross would symbolize that moment that Jesus paid it all.

You see, the cross is really what Easter is all about; the fact that Jesus died, that He rose again. And my friends, it's in the shadow of the cross that comes all the way up to Easter of 2014 that we find meaning, that we find hope, that we find a future.

But you know it's not just the shadow that leads us up to today, Easter 2014, because that shadow not only is cast forward, but that shadow is also cast backward, backward thousands of years earlier to a place where another father was willing to sacrifice His son. That father was Abraham.

Now we know the story. Abraham was promised by God to receive an amazing gift, a gift of a son, and it shocked him; it shocked Sarah. In fact, they laughed at the idea that they, at their advanced age, would be given a gift by God of a child. But yet God said, "No, no, no. I'm going to give you a child, and that child is going to be the beginning of something that will bless every nation, and the entire world will be blessed because of the offspring that I will give to you."

And so you can imagine how shocked Abraham was on that fateful day when God told Abraham, "I want you to take your son, your only son, that gift that I gave you, and I want you to walk that son up to Mount Moriah." In Genesis 22:2, God, speaking to Abraham, said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you."

So Abraham, while confused, Abraham, while concerned, Abraham, while brokenhearted, grabbed his son's hand and took that lonely march up Moriah. He walked to the top of that hill, and with Isaac's help, they built an altar. They built that place, Isaac all along saying, "But Dad, where is the lamb that will be sacrificed? Where is the animal that we need?" And Abraham said, "God will provide."

Then at the last moment, Abraham, with tears certainly in his eyes, picked up his son and placed him upon the altar. He lifted a knife into the air, and at the last moment, God reached down and grabbed the hand of Abraham and stopped him. After He'd seen the faithfulness, after He'd seen Abraham, regardless of how difficult it was, obeyed God, God said, "No, no, no. You're not going to have to sacrifice your son. There in the bushes is a ram. You can use that." Why? Because God has always provided salvation. That day, God saved Isaac, and God promised Abraham that from the offspring of Isaac the entire world will be blessed.

You can imagine that not too many years later that promise of God seemed a little bit empty when the offspring of Isaac had become slaves in Egypt. There the children of Israel, while they were under the oppression of Pharaoh, being made to build, being made to do, always being attacked by those soldiers there in the Egyptian army. But even still the Israelites continued to grow. They continued to multiply to the point where now Pharaoh was afraid of them.

Pharaoh was scared that they would grow too big, too strong, that they would overcome the people of Egypt. And so he sent out an edict and said all of the newborn males of the Israelites shall be killed. All except one. You know the story here, too. When Moses was born, his mom placed him in a basket and sent him down the Nile River. He floated down the Nile until Pharaoh's own daughter reached out and picked up that basket and saved the life of Moses.

Moses grew up in the household of Pharaoh. He grew up as a child of the king. But later, when he got older, he realized the oppression that the Israelites were under, and he saw one being beaten and he killed a soldier and then fled to Midian to save his own life. There, he met Jethro. There, he became a shepherd. There, he met his wife.

But there he also encountered a burning bush. And when he saw that bush, he heard from God and God said, "Moses, I'm going to send you to free my people. I'm going to send you to Pharaoh to let my people go," and Moses, fearful, said, "There's no way I can do that!" But God said, "I will be with you, and I will give you everything that you need."

Why? Because God has always had a plan of salvation. So Moses went to Pharaoh and told Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Pharaoh laughed. Plague after plague after plague, Pharaoh still didn't let them go. That is, until the tenth plague arrived. That's the plague where all of the firstborn males in all of the houses of the Egyptians died that night.

But God told Moses, "Tell all of the children of Israel to place above their doorpost the blood of a lamb, of a sacrificial lamb, and when I see that, I will pass over that house, and that child will be saved."

You see, God has always had a plan of salvation. That plan leads us right up to the city of Jerusalem. There, Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday. There, they threw down palm branches and cloaks onto the road as Jesus arrived and walked into the city. People rejoiced, singing, "Hosanna, Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Those cries quickly changed to, "Crucify Him!"

Jesus gathered His disciples together, and they went off to a private place. They went out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There, Jesus told them what was about to come. He told them what was going to happen to Him in just a few short hours. There, He was arrested. There, He was led before Pilate. He was taken and beaten, just as He said He would be; mocked, just as He said He would be; crucified on a very lonely cross, just as He said He would be.

Jesus died and the earth shook. People were scared. People thought it was over. People thought hope was gone. But in Matthew 28, beginning in verse 1 it says,

Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."

Jesus was crucified on a cross, but on the third day He rose again, just like He said He would, to bring redemption, to bring rescue, to bring hope. God has always had a plan of salvation.

And what started there in Jerusalem quickly spread around the world. In fact, it quickly spread to what was the center of civilization at that time: the city of Rome. There, Christianity began to grow, the church began to spread, and there, just like Egypt, the Roman emperors were fearful, afraid that these who were following Christ could become too powerful, that their message would spread too widely, and so persecution began.

The emperor sent out an edict that if you follow Christ then you must be persecuted. If you follow Christ, you might be killed. Starting with Stephen in the book of Acts, they began to be martyred. There in Rome stood the coliseum, a place where all of Rome would come for celebrations, all of Rome would come for events. It then became a place where people were killed for their faith.

In fact, later in the Renaissance, in medieval times, they erected crosses all over that coliseum because they thought that this place should be revered as holy because of the Christians who died here, men who died here because they believed in the risen Lord. And so they erected those crosses, and even today there is a cross that stands in the coliseum. In the place where the emperors sat to watch the Christians die, today there is a cross to say that God has always had a plan of salvation.

That plan of salvation continued to spread. It continued to grow. By the 1500s, the Spanish Empire had taken over from Rome, and they were leading the West. In the East, the Ottoman Empire began to take over. In 1453, they conquered Constantinople and Christians began to flee to the West and they arrived in a city, the city of flowers—we know it as the city of Florence. There became the center of inspiration. It became a Christian center of the arts and science and

of knowledge. It became a place where people gathered. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Botticelli all called it their home.

In 1508, the pope called Michelangelo to come and paint a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to tell the story of God's Word, to tell the story of the good news of the Bible. And so Michelangelo, while known as a sculptor, began to paint, and that message that he painted in 1508 still tells the message today.

And that message led into the Renaissance period, which then led to the Reformation. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He did so out of protest, protesting what the Church had become, because the Church had become a place where they talked about what you could do, talked about who you were and how you could earn your way into heaven.

Martin Luther was protesting the idea of indulgences, which was the idea that if you had enough money to give to the Church, you could buy your salvation, you could buy forgiveness of sins, and Martin Luther stood up and said, "No, it has nothing to do with works; it has nothing to do with money; it has nothing to do with how powerful you are."

"It is *solo fide*," he said, "in faith alone." Because Martin Luther knew that it was all about the cross and the empty tomb. He knew that only belief in Jesus Christ could change your life; only belief in what Christ did could bring salvation, and so Martin Luther proudly stood up and made these statements, "In *solo fide*, in faith alone," because Martin Luther knew that God has always had a plan of salvation.

What started there in that Reformation quickly spread all over the world. It spread through Germany, Europe, and finally right here to the good old USA. In 1753, preachers like Jonathan Edwards stood up in pulpits and began preaching messages like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," began preaching a message of the cross, of the empty tomb, of salvation through Christ and Christ alone, of John 14:6, that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and he made that statement and he preached that message and preachers everywhere began to share that it is only through Christ, in faith alone, that lives could be changed.

And so people gathered in churches to hear that message. They gathered in barns; they gathered in tents; wherever they could get together, wherever they can hear a message of hope, a message of life, a message that could save everything. It brought about the Great Awakening. It brought about a revival, because God has always had a plan of salvation.

And you see the shadow of the cross that leads all the way from Mount Moriah right up through the Great Awakening, even today it continues to change lives, because you see it's never been about the masses, it's never been about the thousands. The shadow of the cross has always been about the one. What started on Mount Moriah when a father was willing to relinquish his son soon led Moses to bring about rescue for God's people, that led to a moment in Jerusalem when Jesus laid down His life to give redemption, and because of that redemption, it led men to stand up in the face of persecution and they were resilient in their faith because they knew what Christ had done, because God has always had a plan of salvation.

From that moment when those who were martyred for their faith that quickly led to that Renaissance period, which led to the Reformation period, which soon led to the great revivals of the 1700s and 1800s, but it's never been about that. It has always been about a relationship.

You see, Jesus came to this earth for one reason and one reason only: that was to provide a way of salvation. Today I know there are people who are gathered in this room that have heard the message of God's redemption power maybe a thousand times. They've seen the symbol of the cross on churches all over the world. They've seen them hanging from necklaces around people's necks. They've seen them on the backs of cars. They've seen them on the walls of churches. They've heard the message, they've seen the message, but it's always been about, "Well, if I'm a good person and if I do the right thing and if I try to be nice to others, we're all working to the same place."

But you see Jesus didn't come so that we could all work our way to heaven. Jesus came because He knew that without Christ we had no hope. Jesus died on the cross because He knew that if He was not that sacrificial lamb that was posted over the doorposts of our lives, that for us, just like the Egyptians, there would be no life, there would be no hope, there would be no future. Jesus came so that we could have salvation. Jesus died a lonely death on that cross. He died in that place, and we read in scriptures in Matthew 27 of what that was all about, the pain that He endured.

Matthew 27, beginning in verse 45, says,

Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, "This Man is calling for Elijah!" Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. The rest said, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him."
And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

You see, they knew when they saw Jesus breathe His last that something was different. The people who had gathered in that place, those who had followed Christ, ran in fear. They were fearful for their own lives, afraid that the same thing might happen to them.

John 20:19 says, "Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews." Even the ones who had heard Jesus say, "I will rise the third day" locked themselves away behind doors, afraid for their very lives, because when Jesus took His last breath the earth shook and the veil was ripped in

two and they thought all hope was lost, that the future that they had been promised had just been ripped away from them, that there was nothing to look forward to, that there was nowhere to go, that all had been lost.

Oh, but my dear friends, don't miss what I'm about to say. Jesus told us that He would be crucified. He told us that He would be spat upon. He told us that He would be bruised. But He also told us, "But on the third day I will rise again," and He did exactly that. Jesus emerged from the tomb and all fears and all lack of hope and all fear of death and everything that we thought that would never, ever allow us to have hope again quickly rushed back in because God has always had a plan of salvation.

Matthew 28:7 says,

[The angel said] "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Yes, God has always had a plan of salvation. And on that day when Jesus rose again, when He appeared to the disciples and told them, "Go and tell everybody I will meet them there because I am alive, because I am risen, because I am no longer dead, life has won over death, grave has lost the battle. Today I live," and you can too.

I know there are people in this room who have never experienced the gift of salvation that Christ came to give. The Bible tells us in Romans 3 that we're all sinners, every single one of us, that we've all fallen short of the glory of God, and because of that sin, Romans 6 tells us we deserve death. We deserve to go through what Jesus went through. We deserve to be separated from God. We deserve punishment beyond anything that we in our human condition could ever experience or endure.

But you see God's always had a plan, and that plan is found in Romans 10, when it tells us that if we will just simply believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus died and He rose again, if we will believe that and if we will say that, if we will confess that, He will save us and He will change us and He will transform us just as He did with Moses back when He delivered the people of Israel from the Egyptians, just as He did saving Isaac from the knife that was about to be plunged into his body, just as Jesus did when He died on the cross and He came out of the tomb, just as He has done thousands and thousands and thousands of times through the years, my friends, today He will save you.

(Singing: "10,000 Reasons")

God bless you, and have an incredible Easter/Resurrection Day.

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