



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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The Passion of the Christ: The Verdict *By Matt Hook, based on thoughts by Rick Warren* Easter Sunday

• *"By being raised from the dead He proved He was the mighty Son of God, with the nature of God Himself." Rom. 1:4 (LB)*

• *"I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great His power is to help those who believe Him. It is that same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead." Eph. 1:19-20 (LB)*

Around 2000 few years ago, the top historians around the world gathered together and made a list of what they considered to be the 100 most significant events in the history of the world. There were things like the discovery of America, the invention of the airplane, the invention of the printing press and other things. Number four on the list of most important events was the life of Jesus Christ. When I saw that, I was not offended by that, that they hadn't put it number one. They had forgotten the most important part anyway. They had put the Life of Jesus Christ. If only Jesus had come and lived and then died like everybody else, that's probably about the best you could say about Him – number four. Because there have been other good teachers, there have been other moral philosophers, there have been other unselfish martyrs. But what makes Jesus different and even greater than that is He not only died a martyr's death on the cross but He came back to life. Nobody else has ever done that and that's what makes this the most significant event in history because it's never been done.

Newsweek, which is not necessarily known as a Christian magazine, says, "The risen Christ is the center of the Christian faith. The mystery without which there would be no church, no hope of eternal life, no living Christ to encounter today. No other historical figure has ever made the claim that He was raised from the dead. It was this appearance of the resurrected Christ that lit the flame of the Christian faith." It goes on to say "It wasn't the morality of the Sermon on the Mount, which enabled Christianity to conquer Roman paganism, but it was the belief that Jesus was alive. He'd been raised from the dead." This is the power of the Easter message today: If you need power for living greater than you have right now, your verdict of the resurrection can make all the difference. If you are facing uncertain days, if you are weak right now, if your life is empty, or out of control, the resurrection of Jesus Christ can provide the power of God to be brought to bear in your life. His resurrection power can become yours.

It's interesting that religious leaders felt a little frightened by all of this. So after Jesus died, they went back to Pilate and said, "Jesus claimed that He was going to raise Himself from the dead in three days. We know that's not going to happen. But, we would like for you to put an official Roman seal over that stone so it can't be moved and we want you to post guards around it." Even today, many tombs are guarded. But in the history of the world, Jesus' tomb is the only one where the guards were there to keep the dead person in. This is what the essence of Christianity is: The Resurrection. On Easter, too often we preachers talk more about nature stuff than Jesus' bodily resurrection, as if crocuses and tulips bursting from the ground has to do with Jesus bursting from the tomb. And I love crocuses and tulips...and butterflies, and cocoons. But come on.

Easter is not some memorial to a nice, good religious teacher who lived 2000 years ago. Jesus was greater than that. It's a celebration of the fact that He is alive today. I'm living proof and so are thousands of people sitting around you and approximately one billion Christians who will celebrate Easter this week end. *"I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great His power is to help those who believe Him. It is that same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead."* Eph. 1:19-20 (LB)

What does Easter mean to us in 2004 in Dexter, Michigan? The verdict is still out. In one sense Jesus Christ is still on trial. He's on trial in every heart and mind of every person who's not yet acknowledged Him for who He is and said, "You are the Son of God, the Savior of the world." He's on trial in your mind and heart if you've never done that.

Today, what I'm going to do is turn this entire sanctuary into a courthouse and I'm going to empanel every one of you as jurors. I want to call some witnesses about Jesus Christ, some eyewitnesses. Then we're going to take a verdict. Because you cannot face Jesus and just say, "I'm not going to decide." Let me call some witnesses. Fortunately we have historical records. Let me read a few of those that followed Him.

- Peter. Peter, you watched Jesus Christ do all kinds of miracles for a few years. Who do you say Jesus is? *"You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Matthew 16:16
- Martha. Martha, you watched Jesus raise your own brother, Lazarus, who'd been dead for a couple of days. Who do you say Jesus is? *"You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Matthew 16:16
- Thomas. Thomas, you were one of the followers, but after Jesus died on the cross, you doubted that He would be raised again. In fact, you even said, "I'm not going to believe. I don't believe He's come back to life. I don't believe in the resurrection until I can personally touch the nail prints in His hand and the feel the scar in His side." And Thomas, Jesus gave you that opportunity in front of a large group. Jesus showed up and said this, *"Put your finger here and see My hands. Read out your hand and put into My side. Stop doubting and believe."* Now, Thomas, what do you say? *"Then Thomas said to Him, 'My Lord, and my God.'"*

You say I'm only reading friendly witnesses. What about the enemies of Jesus? What about those who hate Him and what about the unbelievers? Good point. I call as my witness some unbelievers.

- Judas. Judas, you betrayed Jesus for a sack of coins. You planned His arrest. You watched Him for three years and then turned Him in. But after it was over, you regretted what you had done. You tried to give the money back then you committed suicide. What did you say before you committed suicide? *"Then Judas said, 'I have sinned for I have betrayed an innocent man.' 'That's your problem' the priest reported. Then he threw the money on the floor and went out and hung himself."*
- Pilate. Pilate, obviously you're not a Christian. You're a Roman pagan. You had nothing to do with Jesus and yet you tried Him twice. After trying Him twice, what do you have to say about Jesus Christ? *"Then Pilate announced his verdict. 'I've examined Him thoroughly and I find Him innocent. Herod came to the same conclusion and sent Him back to us. Nothing Jesus has done calls for the death penalty.'" Luke 20:3*
- The thief on the cross. He certainly wasn't any kind of religious person. He was dying for crimes he had committed. What did you say in front of all the people who were watching Jesus die on the cross, Mr. Thief? *"We deserve to die for our evil deeds. But this man hasn't done one thing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'"*
- Finally, I call the soldiers as witnesses. You were the executioners. You are not Christians. You are not followers of Jesus. You were the men who nailed His hands and His feet to the cross and after you saw

all that happened what do you say about Jesus? *“When the soldiers guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and everything else that happened, they were very frightened and they said, ‘He really was the Son of God.’” Mark 15:39*

But those are people in the past. Are there any current witnesses?

Look around you. There are hundreds sitting around your right now. There are nearly 2 billion celebrating Easter this year. Each Christian is a witness. If you are a Christian, you too can be called on to witness to Christ.

Now it's time to decide. What's your verdict? That's the most important question of life. What are you going to do with Jesus who is called the Christ? Today, you sit in judgment of Jesus to decide whether He was who He says He was or not. But one day Jesus Christ is going to sit in judgment of you and me. And God's going to say, "What did you do with My Son Jesus, whom I sent to earth to die for you and love you this much?" Would you say, "I don't care... It doesn't matter...I'm going to live my own life... I'm going to ignore Him... I'm going to try to work my way to Heaven instead of trusting in Christ." Jesus will either be your Savior or He will be your Judge.

This winter, a headline on the front page of *The Register* newspaper said, "Signing Up For Eternity." It was an article about people who were putting their signature on cards, sending them on a rocket to circle Saturn for the next 100 years. (Some people just have too much time and money on their hands). But the question is a good one: How do you sign up for eternity? How can you know for sure that you're going to go to heaven when you die? Take these steps. Today may be your day. It's time for a verdict. What are you going to do? How do you establish a spiritual base for your life? You do four things:

B – Believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for me and showed He was God by coming back to life. Eighty-six percent of all Americans say that they believe that one. That's what Easter is all about.

A – Accept God's free forgiveness for my sin. That's pretty easy, too, although it cost Jesus everything.

S – Switch to God's plan for my life. This one's tougher, but it's worth it. Part of the reason we gather together as Christians is to help each other hang on to God's plan.

E – Express my desire for Christ to be the director of my life. This one feels strange, but eventually it becomes easier, as you learn to share who He is, by your words, your deeds, and signs, any other means you have to make him famous.

Romans 1:4 *“By being raised from the dead, Jesus proved he was the mighty Son of God, with the nature of God Himself.”* When Jesus was hanging on the cross, the skeptics and the critics mocked Him and said, *“If You're the Son of God, why don't You just pull Yourself down from that cross. Why don't You just come down and show that You're really God?”* They wanted Jesus to prove he was who he said he was on that cross. But Jesus was going to do something *far greater* than just come down from the cross. He had something more spectacular planned. He said, *“I'm going to let you bury me for three days then I'll come back to life to prove that I am what I am.”* Can you imagine the joy that the disciples felt, the excitement that they felt when they realized that the man that had been crucified three days earlier was who He said He was? *“I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great His power is to help those who believe Him. It is that same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead.”* Eph. 1:19-20

How much greater can you get? BASE your verdict on something greater than you have right now. Remember the power of the Easter message for today: If you need power for living greater than you have right now, your verdict of the resurrection can make all the difference. Do you need greater love? Greater faith? Greater confidence? Greater mission in life? Greater strength to face your future? Greater joy? Greater power to live an abundant life? The resurrection of Jesus Christ can provide the power of God brought to bear in your life. His resurrection power can become yours. Listen to His greater promises:

- *“Greater love has no one than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)*
- *“God is able to do exceedingly abundantly greater than anything we could ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us...” (Ephesus 3:20)*
- *“We shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart...” (1 John 3:19-20).*
- *“You who believe in Me will do the works that I do, and greater works than these shall you do, because I go to the Father.” (John 14:12)*
- *You, dear children, are from God, and the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 1 John 4:4*
- *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. 2 Chr. 32:7*
- *“You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.” Ps. 4:7.*

So what's your verdict on Jesus Christ? Is he, or isn't he, the resurrected God of heaven, greater than all your fears, hurts, dreams, and hopes? Your verdict, and God's promises and power, the same mighty power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead can be yours. Face your future in that confidence: Jesus conquered the grave! Jesus is alive, and Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to us today, that you could experience his resurrection power right now. Hallelujah! Jesus is alive!