

# The Three R's

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*Various passages*

April 1, 2018

## Introduction:

One of the fundamental axioms of elementary education is that you need to teach kids what is referred to as the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Now that's not to say other subjects such as science and social studies and art aren't important; certainly they are. But the three R's are basic to everything else. You simply aren't going to get very far in your education if you don't know how to read, communicate through writing, and add and subtract. Knowing the three R's is essential to a child's education.

Much like there are three R's in education, there are also three R's to Christianity. There are many doctrines Christians believe just as there are many subjects at school you need to learn about, but some beliefs are absolutely essential to Christianity. They form the foundation that everything else is built upon. One of those beliefs concerns what we're celebrating together this morning. This is Easter Sunday and this morning we remember the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is one of the three R's of Christianity; as the apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, if you deny the resurrection, our faith is worthless. The resurrection is a basic, foundational element of our faith. To be a Christian is to believe that on Easter morning, Christ rose from the dead.

So this morning, seeing how it's Easter Sunday, I want to talk about the importance of the resurrection, but I also want to take some time to discuss the other two of the three R's of Christianity. So to do that, please open your Bibles with me to Matthew 27, which can be found on pg. 834 of the pew Bibles should you need to use one of those. The first of the three R's takes place just a few days before the resurrection and tells us why Jesus died in the first place. So the first R I want to discuss with you this morning concerns...

## 1. The rejection of Christ (Matt. 27:45-50)

Again we are in Matthew 27 and I'm going to focus on just v. 45-50. So if you would, please follow along as I read, starting with v. 45. **"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, 'This man is calling Elijah.' And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit."**

Before we can talk about the resurrection, we need to understand what caused Christ's death to begin with. The Bible tells us that Jesus was without sin. Rather than sinning in the ways we do, Scripture is full of accounts of the many good things Jesus did: he healed the sick, raised the dead, and taught about God's love,

to name just a few. Now you would think a man like that would be well-liked, that he would have no enemies, right? Sadly, that was not the case.

The Jewish religious leaders of the time didn't care an onion for what Jesus had to say. They thought he was a false and dangerous teacher because he didn't go along with their understanding of the Scripture. Even worse, they accused him of blasphemy because he claimed to be God. Eventually they plotted to kill him. They informed the Roman authorities that Jesus proclaimed to be King of the Jews. Since the Roman had a no-tolerance policy towards those who claimed to be king, Jesus soon found himself mounted on to a large wooden cross, which was the preferred method of capital punishment for those who dared to usurp Caesar's authority.

That's where Jesus finds himself in the passage we just read. But something more than just being caught in a sinister plot by the religious authorities is happening here. The Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that, *"For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* On the cross, though Jesus was not guilty of any sin of his own, God did something absolutely astonishing. He considered our sin to be Christ's sin, placing our guilt on Christ's shoulders. As a result, on the cross Christ became guilty of sin in the eyes of God. God's white hot wrath against sin was now in this moment focused solely upon Christ, his Son, whom God was now treating as if he were guilty of our sins.

So when Jesus cries out in v. 46, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** he's experiencing something unimaginable. God the Father is rejecting his Son. He's turning his back on him. The sinless Son of God is receiving the punishment that we deserve. Instead of God rejecting us for our sin, he's rejecting Christ. Sometimes this is called "the great exchange," or to use more theological terms, this is referred to as Christ's substitutionary atonement. Christ dies in our place; he's our substitute. God exchanges our sin for Christ's perfect righteousness, so that God considers Jesus to be guilty of our sin while the perfect, sinless life Christ lived is counted in God's sight as having been lived by us. As a result, Jesus dies in our place.

The fact that Christ died to suffer the punishment we deserve for our sin by being rejected by God is the first of the three R's we need to keep in mind. But unlike every other story that comes to its end after the main character dies, the story of Christ continues on. Death doesn't get the final say. So now that we've talked about the first R that leads up to Easter – God's rejection of Christ as he bore the sins of the world – we now need to turn our attention to the second R, which concerns...

## 2. The resurrection of Christ (Matt 28:1-10)

Please skip ahead in your Bible a few verses as I read Matthew 28. I'll be starting at v. 1 and reading through v. 10. **"Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went 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 and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of**

**him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.' So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.'"**

The second R of Christianity is the resurrection. Christ was rejected by God as he bore the guilt of our sins, but his rejection was not permanent. Once God's wrath against sin was satisfied, God vindicated Christ by raising him from the dead. The resurrection was God's way of saying, "Jesus is exactly who he claimed to be." He was not merely a great teacher or man of high moral principles, although he certainly was that. No, far more than that, Jesus was the very Son of the God, the second Person of the Trinity, made flesh, come to redeem men from their sins. He was raised from the dead to demonstrate that he's the promised Messiah sent to save sinners and give those who believe in him everlasting life."

Now there are some who deny this. They regard the resurrection as either a case of mistaken identity or a lie propagated by the disciples or just a fable. But the problem with any such view is that it doesn't adequately deal with the facts. To begin with, calling Jesus a myth or legend means one has to ignore vast amounts of evidence to the contrary. Beside the 27 New Testament books that were written by those who were eyewitnesses to Christ, there are many ancient Roman and Jewish historians who acknowledged the existence of Christ. You might as well try to say that George Washington never existed. Plus, the resurrection accounts about Christ were written within the lifetimes of those who listened to Jesus and witnessed his very public death by crucifixion. If these accounts were made up, it's difficult to imagine how they would have gained any traction by those who knew better. It would be like trying to deny that the attacks on Sept. 11 actually took place when there are thousands of people who were eyewitnesses to it firsthand.

Also, the account we just read of the two women visiting the tomb that first Easter morning gives us another strong clue of the veracity of the resurrection story. In the ancient world, women were not allowed to testify as witnesses in a court of law. Yet in every gospel account the report of the resurrection is made first to women. Now if the resurrection was a fabrication, then no one in their right mind would use women as their first witnesses. They'd be shooting themselves in the foot because right out of the gate they have dubious witnesses. So the fact that the gospel accounts have women as the first witness speak strongly to support the conclusion that it was reported this way because that's how it really happened. You don't make up stories you want others to believe and then immediately turn around and undermine it by including an element that everyone would reject. That's make no sense. The

gospels include women as the first witness because that's what actually happened, even if that meant some people would be skeptical of it as a result.

Another remarkable evidence for the resurrection comes from the moved stone. Matthew mentioned it in v. 2 saying, **“And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.”** The stone blocking the tomb wasn't going to be moved by a couple of women. It would take quite a bit of manpower to accomplish that. But on top of that Roman guards were placed there to guarantee nobody disturbed the body. Since they had strict orders to guard the tomb, with failure to do so resulting in death, they were extremely motivated to keep watch. Yet in spite of this when the women arrive on Easter morning, the Roman guards are gone, the stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty. It's not plausible that the women overpowered the guards, nor is it likely that the disciples who were cowering in fear would dare gather together, try to take out fully armed Roman guards, and then move a stone away... to what purpose? They all believed Jesus was dead. No other explanation makes sense other than that what Matthew and the other gospels report: the tomb was opened by God's power through an angel who rolled away the stone.

Finally, one of the strongest evidences of the resurrection is found in the lives of those who followed Jesus. They were willing to suffer and even die for their belief that Jesus rose from the dead. But this makes no sense if this was a lie. Let's say for the sake of argument that somehow the disciples overcame their fear, hatched a plan to overpower the Roman guards, managed to roll away the stone, and steal the body. Then knowing full well that Jesus was dead, went out and proclaimed that he was alive, and continued to do so even when imprisoned, beaten, persecuted, and even killed. Why would anyone do that? No one dies for something they know is a lie. Such a scenario stretches plausibility beyond anything even close to reasonable.

But let's say for a moment they didn't know if it was a lie. Let's say they mistakenly thought Jesus was raised from the dead but actually wasn't. Is that possible? Yes, except for the fact that the Jewish religious leaders and Roman governors then had a very simple trump card they could have played against them: all they needed was to parade Jesus' lifeless body through the streets. Jesus was a public figure, killed in a public manner, and laid in a tomb of a wealthy Pharisee. It would be quite easy to destroy Christianity by just publicly displaying the body out in the streets for everyone to see. It's hard to proclaim that someone has risen from the dead when their corpse is lying right in front of you. But the fact that the opponents didn't do any such thing is very compelling evidence that they didn't have a body to show. Since they didn't do that, it becomes clear they couldn't do that because there was no body to show off: Christ had indeed risen from the dead.

So the resurrection of Christ is the second of the three R's of Christianity. Christ was rejected, dying as an atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross; Christ was then resurrected after three days, which we celebrate this morning; and now we need to consider the third R of Christianity, which is...

### 3. The return of Christ (Acts 1:6-11)

To do that, I'll need you to turn a few pages ahead to the book of Acts. The book of Acts tells us about what took place following the resurrection and how the church subsequently grew from there. So let's look at Acts chapter 1, on pg. 909 of the pew Bibles. I'll be reading v. 6-11 which recounts the final conversation Jesus had with his disciples after his resurrection. Follow along as I read. **“So when they had come together , they asked him ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”**

The resurrection is the beginning of the end. Throughout the NT the biblical authors recognized that Christ's resurrection inaugurated the beginning of the end times. They describe Christ's resurrected body as the first fruits of what is promised to all who trust in Christ: just as death was not the end for Christ, so also will believers be raised from the dead and be given perfected resurrected bodies. But before that happens, something needs to take place. Jesus told the disciples in v. 8 of the passage we just read that they would be witnesses of him **“in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** Earlier Jesus had said in Matthew 24:14, *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”*

After that happens, Christ will return. Scripture talks about Christ's return in various places, including here in Acts 1 where the angel says that Jesus **“will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”** We're given a few more details of what that will be like in 1 Thess. 4:16-17, where it says, *“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”* The return of Christ is something all Christians look forward to, because then the reign of sin and death will finally come to an end and we'll be resurrected and will spend all eternity with the Lord.

### Conclusion

So those are the three Rs of Christianity: Christ was **rejected**, Christ was **resurrected**, and Christ will **return**. While Easter morning is primarily about celebrating Christ's resurrection, we must do so with an eye to remember both the rejection he experienced on the cross as he suffered for our sin as well look forward in eager anticipation for his

return. Jesus Christ is not some long-dead historical figure we only read about in history books: he's the resurrected Lord, who lives in heaven right now and will one day return, not to suffer and die once again but rather to reign as Lord and raise up those who love him to eternal life to be with him forever.

Perhaps there are some of you listening to this who only know of Jesus as a historical figure. Maybe to you he's a great teacher who told some wonderful stories and made a few pithy statements on moral living that you try to put into practice in your life. But if you only think of Jesus as a great moral teacher, then the resurrection we celebrate this morning has something to say to you. Jesus is alive. And like others who are living, you can know this Jesus. You can enter into a relationship with him. He is not interested in being a historical curiosity you read about in books; he wants to know you. He wants you to know how much God loves you. He wants to take your life and give it real meaning and purpose.

But before he can do that, he needs to save you. The Bible tells us we've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It says the wages of sin is death, eternal death in hell. Yet instead of allowing us to earn our just desserts, we're told that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, up for us on the cross. He rejected him instead of us. Christ suffered God's wrath in our place as God counted our sins as if Christ himself had done them. Then he raised Christ from the dead to show that he was indeed approved by God and promises that anyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life: instead of eternal death and punishment for sin, we will be resurrected at the return of Christ. Our sin will be atoned for; our debt paid, forgiveness gained, eternal joy freely given.

God's greatest gift to us is the gift of his Son, who died and rose again, so you could have eternal life. To have that, God calls you to turn away from sin and turn to Christ in faith. It means you recognize that living life on your own terms has led to nothing but pain and sorrow and that you desire to turn from your old life and live for him. It means you're willing to believe the three R's: that Jesus was rejected by God when he died for your sins on the cross, that he was resurrected from the dead on Easter morning, and that he will return to bring you to your heavenly home. It's also means more than simply saying, "I believe this to be true" intellectually; elsewhere in the Bible it says demons have that kind of so-called "faith" and shudder, because it does them no good. They refuse to trust Christ with their lives, to surrender to him in loving and joyful obedience. Only a faith that surrenders to Christ as Savior and as Lord is a saving faith. It's a faith that moves from knowing facts about God to knowing God, to loving God, to treasuring God above all other earthly treasures.

Perhaps God has been speaking to your heart this morning. I can't think of a better time to enter into the new life God has for you in Christ than on Easter morning. If you want to turn from sin and trust in Christ as your savior, believing all of your sins will be forgiven when you turn to Christ in faith, won't you pray with me right now? Let's pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.**