



Easter at Woodland Hills Deciding on the Resurrection Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today we're talking about *Deciding on the Resurrection*. If you have your Bibles or you want to open the Bible app, you can go to Biblegateway.com and turn to Matthew 28. We're actually going to go through the entire chapter today as we look at the Resurrection and the decisions that we need to make of it.

We've all made a lot of important decisions in life. How many would say the day you got married was an important decision? How many deciding to get married thought that was an important decision. How many deciding to have children thought that was an important decision? Some of you are like, "We have a lot of them, but I don't know how much of a decision it felt like." For how many of you, taking a job was a big decision for you? How many of you, coming back today to Woodland Hills was a big decision for you? We know that for a lot of people, this is their first time back in a year.

Today we're looking at four decisions that we see people make. Many of them we are going to encourage you to make as the resurrection is proclaimed today. By the way, the resurrected Jesus has already been proclaimed in worship clearly today as we have been singing and worshiping together.

My son drove me here today. He is 15; he gets his license in a couple of months. He's a permit driver. I made him listen to *He's Alive* by Gaither Vocal Band four and a half times. That's how many times you can listen to that song from our house to the church. It's our Easter tradition. Every Easter Sunday, I wake up and I put that on and Amy joins me. Nobody sings it like David Phelps. I know some of you think Dolly Parton is way better, but I think David Phelps beats out Dolly Parton with *He's Alive*.

I told my son I love starting Easter with this. I told him on the way in and I'll tell you. This is the day we celebrate the resurrection. The Pentecostals are still shouting about it. The charismatics are still dancing about it. The Baptists are still amending it. The Presbyterians are still studying it. And the Episcopalians are still toasting it. Can I get an amen on that one? I always love to get a Baptist to amen that one. But we're non-denominational, which means we do a little bit of all of the above. So, we're glad that you are here.

Today, the very first decision almost every single person, on campus and those who are tuning in... You've already made this first decision on the resurrection and it's the decision of **Come and See**. I've heard from people all week that have been inviting friends and family. A buddy told me yesterday, "I ran into a guy at Lowes, and I was wearing something that had Woodland Hills on it. He asked me if I go to Woodland Hills. I told him yeah and invited him." I hope he's here today.

Some of you have been inviting guests to our town, others have been inviting waiters and waitresses. You invited the neighbors that you've been talking to and investing in and sharing with for a while, and we're glad that you're here.

Today, we come and see the empty tomb, the resurrected Jesus. He is alive. In Matthew 28, Verses 1-6 is where we get this first decision. **After the Sabbath** (Saturday), **at dawn on the first day of the week** (Sunday Morning), **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.** Now, keep track of all these details because in just a moment, we're going to see the guards are going to share everything that had happened, and we need to remember these details to pick up in that piece of the narrative.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. They passed out from this.

5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified." Here is the message of Easter: **6 "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."** And all the Pentecostals said... All the Pentecostals cheered. All the Baptists said... Amen. "Just as he said." This is the message of Easter. **Come and see the place where he lay.**

It very important to understand that the stone was rolled away, not so Jesus could escape. The stone wasn't rolled away so that Jesus could get out. The stone was rolled away so that you and I could go in and see, that others could go in and see that the tomb is empty. It was rolled away so that we could come in a see that that is empty. That's the first person today that's here. You've come to see, and you would be a seeker. You have questions. You have a lot that you want answered and you want to know what it means to follow Jesus, what the resurrected Jesus does for you. What am I supposed to do with him?

Today, as the gospel is proclaimed to you, we just want you to know that we are opening the baptism at the last service we did that we look forward to it in this service as well. For those who make decisions today, if you've never been baptized, you can follow me down right after this service and meet me at the water and we will take you down into the water. This is the picture of going from death to life. We'll send you home with a dry shirt and a towel so you can keep your car dry as well. We want to encourage you. If you are seeking today – you've come, you're here, a friend or a family member has invited you, a neighbor has invited you – you've already made a decision about the resurrection and you're seeking and questioning.

Paul talks about his in 1 Corinthians 15 as he talks about the resurrected Jesus and his appearances to people and the evidence we have that Jesus is alive. **4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep** (they have died) **7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one**

abnormally born. Meaning Paul met the resurrected Jesus, but not at the same time that the disciples did.

So, you have come, you are checking it out, you are seeking. It's this second decision of the resurrection that we encourage, that we preach, that we teach, that we sing about, and that you now have seen the resurrected Jesus, that the tomb is empty. He died for your sins that you would move to the second decision, which is **Believe and Worship**. We continue in Matthew 28 - **7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you.**"

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. And that has been our prayer for weeks and months leading up to today, that many of you would meet Jesus for the very first time. That you would suddenly meet Jesus and that you would meet us at the water. Baptism does not save you. Faith alone in Christ alone saves you. When you step into the water, that step of obedience is pointing people to Jesus. It's saying, "I've made the decision." This is an outward expression of an inward decision, but "I am pointing people to Jesus, letting people know that I am going from death to life."

"Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell... Keep that for the very last decision that we're going to make today about the resurrection. ...my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

There is another person here. I actually met a friend at Tractor Supply a couple of weeks ago. I love Tractor Supply. I don't know if you love Tractor Supply, but I so badly want to be a farmer. You have absolutely no idea how badly I want to be a farmer. I don't feel they have fully accepted me at Tractor Supply. I've tried to fit in, I try to play the part, I wear leather gloves out of the back pocket when I go in. I try to have my boots and my pants not all perfectly put together. I have 12 chickens so they're like, "You're not a farmer, you're a hobby person. But I try to play the part."

I ran into my friend. He said, "I'm inviting a family member who I know made a decision for Christ years ago but, Ted, this family member has drifted. This family member is not following the Lord, he's not pursuing the Lord. He's not and his family is not. Ted, just pray with me that this family member will come to church."

That's a lot of folks that are here today, not just the seeker, but there are many of you in here who you decided to follow Jesus years ago. You decided to follow Jesus years ago, but now you're drifting. Today, Easter Sunday, is the day that Jesus suddenly meets you again, that you would cling to him, that you would clasp to him and that you would worship.

That's the thing about drift. Drift is just the lack of decision. No one decides to drift, you just stop deciding. We're not talking here about your salvation. I believe if you've placed in Jesus and you became a Christian... I'm not talking about your salvation, but you know as well as I do, whether it's the crowd you got into, a job that you took. Maybe it was relocation for some of you coming to Branson and

you disconnected from your church in another state and you've never really plugged in. It's time to end the drift and begin deciding again, choosing.

But there's a third decision, and many will make this decision after coming today and seeing the empty tomb. The third decision we see in the scripture today is that many **deny and dismiss**. That's their response, that's their decision to the empty tomb. We pick this up in Verse 11.

11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. This really jumped out at me over the last couple of weeks. I've read Matthew 28 before over and over again and I tend to go to the front part and the last part, and I go past this part of the guards' interaction with the chief priests. But they reported everything that had happened.

Remember I told you to hold onto those details. What did they report? There was an earth quake. I could just imagine them sharing this with the chief priests. "There was an earthquake, an angel appeared, rolled back the stone... I don't remember much after that because I was on the ground, passed out." And the chief priests say what? "Yeah, we ain't going with that story. That's not the story we're going with. You give us some time. We're going to meet with the elders and come up with a different story and we're going to bring it back to you. But definitely don't let the truth get out. Don't do that." "Everything that had happened." Circle that in your Bible, underline that in your Bible.

Watch this: **12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan...** Which is what some will do today if they deny or dismiss the resurrection. The truth has been spoken, it has been testified to. You will have to devise a play in order to deny the resurrection. You will have to go with a false narrative. So, they come up with a plan. I could just see the chief priests. "Okay, what's the story we're going with? His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." "The guards are never going to go with this. We're going to have to pay them, we're going to have to give him some money to distribute the lie." **...they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."** What would be the trouble a guard in this situation would find himself in? It's called the sentence of death. They would be put to death. "We think this is a story that works. It's such a good story, we have to bribe you to share it."

15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. I was thinking about it this week. Every single Christian I know believes in the resurrection. It's an essential of our faith. To be a member of our church, we prioritize it. We say it's the essentials that you have to believe in. The non-essentials we have a lot of liberty in, but the essentials and the resurrection are part of our essential beliefs.

Every believer I know believes in the resurrection, but many do not believe in the power of the resurrection. I talk to believers weekly, almost daily who deny the power of the resurrection. Especially in counseling. Believers are constantly denying the power of the resurrection, so that's my question for you. You're like, "I would never deny the resurrection," but are you denying the power of it in your life.

Do you deny the power of the resurrection over your alcoholic father? “There is no way my dad, there’s no way my mom, there’s no way my brother, there’s no way my sister could be saved.” Listen, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that raises your dead soul. It’s the same power that saves you. It’s the same that raised your marriage. I meet with spouses all the time who tell me, “Nothing will ever change him.” “Nothing will ever change her.” And that is you denying the power of the resurrection.

“I have an eating disorder, Ted. There is absolutely no way... I’ve tried everything.” Don’t deny the power of the resurrection. Whatever you’re dealing with in mental health... I know you’re visiting psychiatrists and psychologists and therapists. I’m not down on therapists at all, but don’t deny the power of the resurrection. And I would encourage you to flee from any professional who does. Because the power of the resurrection brings hope. It brings hope for your life. It brings hope for your marriage. It brings hope for your family.

Paul said it this way in Ephesians. **19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...** The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that saves you. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that saves your family and your dead marriage. Stop listening to the lies. Stop denying the power of the resurrection and lean into the resurrected Jesus.

Here is the bottom line: Satan is a liar. And he wants you to believe and he whispers these lies to you. In John 8, we read – “He is a liar and the father of lies.” And he shares these lies... Not only do you believe them, but you repeat them to yourself over and over and over again to the point it’s destroying you. We read in 1 Peter 5, **8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.** And you’ve been believing the lies. You’ve been telling yourself these lies for years, denying the power of the resurrection.

What are some of the lies he wants you to believe? Some of you believe the lie that you’re worthless. And you’ve forgotten the truth that you’re created in the image of God. You’re an image bearer of almighty God which gives you automatic, intrinsic value. You have value. You have worth. Some would say, “I’m too far gone.” You listen to the lie every single day. “You can’t have this much addiction.” “You can’t be addicted for this long and ever be redeemed. It doesn’t happen.”

It’s a thing I hate about cancel culture. The thing I hate about cancel culture is there no redemption offered. You did something 30 years ago and you’re done. Guess what? The cross of Christ brings redemption. The resurrected Jesus brings redemption. If you’ve been listening to the lie that says you’re done, you’re too far gone, there is no hope for you, that is a lie. And there is no greater joy... If I can get my counseling friends in here, my coaching with small group leaders in here. Is there any greater joy than to sit in a small group and listen to someone talk about themselves and realize *wow this person is lying like crazy about themselves?* Is there any greater joy than to correct the lie that someone has believed their entire life? That is joy.

Some of you have fallen for the lie, “You're unlovable.” Because you had a parent, a mom or dad, or maybe a family member tell you that over and over and over again. And their love was based on what you did or did not do, so you believe you can't be loved. The Bible says for “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” You are one to be loved.

Some of you have gone even deeper into the lies: Your family and friends would be better off without you. You say this to yourself almost every day. “The people in my life would be better if I were just not here, if I was gone.”

Over the last 12 months, we know many have dealt with suicidal thoughts. Some of you have fallen for a lie. Please hear me. It is a lie! It's not worth living. People would be better without me around.” That is a lie. Believing these lies and living out these lies, you're denying the power of the resurrection in your life. And if I can quote an old hymn for those of you who are struggling with. “Does my life matter? Is it even worth me being around?” I love this hymn. “And life is worth the living just because He lives.” Stop believing the lies. You don't deny the resurrection, but you deny the power of the resurrection in your life, that today would be the day you cry out to Jesus. Some of you believing those lies for a long time, I just pray today is the day of your salvation. Or, if you are a believer, but you've been drifting, today would be the day you come back to your father.

And then the church... There's one more decision we make. We come and see, believe and worship, we even believe in the power of the resurrection. The scripture ends with the Great Commission – **Go and Tell**. The news we're sharing today is not just for today; it's supposed to be every day. We are called to share the good news. Often in church, and in this church, you have heard Matthew 28: 16-20 which says, repeat, repeat, repeat.

Here's what it says. **16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said...** I love this. Friday night, I went to Sight and Sound's show, *Jesus*. It's incredible. I got emotional several times. We're taught when you read scripture, you're supposed to put yourself into the story and that's what I love about that show. It puts me in the story. And it's the moments that they pick up on that I love.

My favorite scene in the show is when Jesus heals the leper. The leper shows up and he's in rags and he's a mess. The disciples freak out and they tell Jesus, “Whoa, Whoa, keep away. Don't go near him. You can't touch him.” Jesus runs to him and embraces him. The disciples are freaking out. It's a subtle part of the show, but it's the parts I live for in shows like this. Jesus comes back full of joy. Obviously, the leper has been healed and Jesus touches each of the disciples. It's a great scene. Because Jesus comes near them and they're like, *Hey, you just touched a leper, stay away from me, man*. And then he goes up to John and that was the best one. He was the last disciples he goes up to. Jesus plants both hands on his face. John is just freaking out. How many times.... And you pick it up in the scripture all the time. I love how they handle it in the show. Jesus is repeating, repeating, repeating. “How many times am I going to have to tell my disciples this?”

The message we're talking about today needs to be on repeat. When the staff will ask every year, "Hey, what are you going to cover this Easter?" I'm always like, "We're going to go with the resurrection one more time. We're going to do it again." We're going to say it again, because we believe in the resurrection and we believe in the power of the resurrection, the power of the resurrection that's available for every single person on campus today and every single person watching at home.

Jesus says, ***"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*** You now have a job to do. You have a decision to make with the decision you've made to follow Jesus. ***19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...*** And if today is the day you place faith in Jesus or you have place faith in Jesus in the last year or two or maybe years ago, but you've never been baptized, that today you would step into the water here in about five to ten minutes. We're ***...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."***

There was a moment... I've denied the power of the resurrection multiple times in the last year. I even put it online and I deleted it as soon as I put it out there going, *I can't believe I just said that.* It's sad for me because I've already seen it happen through the pandemic and through the political season. Not every friendship has survived. Then it hits me. **I believe in the power of our resurrection even over our friendships and reconciliation.** We came through the pandemic and then we went into this political season and I've heard it I don't know how many times from believer is Christ Jesus and believers at our church, family members, people I love dearly saying, "Ted, are you super concerned about losing our freedoms to share the good news of Jesus?"

I've just got to tell you something. I'm not concerned at all. It doesn't mean we don't have people in office that we support and vote for and encourage. I'm not talking about that. But I'm not concerned. Here's why. If we spent more time sharing the good news, we wouldn't be so consumed with loosing our freedom to do so. I've asked people who are super concerned about losing this freedom, "When's the last time you actually shared the good news?" You're wanting to protect the freedom that you never use. Share the good news of Jesus.

People are like, "Ted, you could end up in prison." Well, I don't want to go to prison. Somebody said, "With all the stuff you say, you could go to jail." I'm like, "Well, I remember what a pastor in California said, "Prisoners need Jesus too." If that's where I end up preaching my final days, guess what? I just want you to know that a lot of your Bible comes from prison. It comes from jail. We have to remember the context in which we read. I'm not consumed. Why? Because nothing will ever stop the church from sharing the good news... nothing. No government, no authority, no big tech, nothing will ever keep the good news from going out. By the way, the disciples do this to their deaths. That's how far they went. The only thing that was going to shut them up was their death. Will you take up your cross and follow him? Have you decided to follow Jesus? Do you believe and do you worship? Will you go and tell?

I'm excited about 2021. I believe... I don't say stuff like this all the time, because you hear pastors say things like, "Next Sunday is going to be our best Sunday every." It probably won't be. But it's like you can't keep on-upping yourself. You rarely ever hear me say, "Get to church! It's going to be the best weekend we've ever had!" I don't say that, and I don't ever say, "This year is going to be the best year!"

We just came out of a difficult year. But the thing I believe about 2021, and I already see it happening, is the good news is going out. And the people serious about the good news see no hindrances to it. They actually see the potential threats or hinderances to it as even more opportunities to share it. Will you go and tell? It's not just a message for today; it's a message that we leave here with and we share.

I want to invite you back next Sunday as we're starting a series called *Into the Neighborhood*. In John 1: 14, the scripture says, "Jesus is the word and in the beginning was the word and the word became flesh." I love The Message paraphrase of that. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." is what the NIV says. The Message translation says, "The word became flesh and moved into the Neighborhood." We're going to talk about what it means to interact, what it means to engage, what it means to take the good news to our neighbors, what it means to take the good news as we talk about the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, Jesus and Nicodemus, which is great, great scene in the show *Jesus* here in town. Jesus and Bartimaeus. Jesus and the little boy's lunch. We're going to work through all of this in April and May, and I want to encourage you to be a part of it.

If you've made a decision for Christ or you want to make a decision for Christ today, I'm going to pray as I walk out and head to ward the water and I just encourage you that wherever you are on campus, just meet me at the water. I would love to talk to you.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for this morning, celebrating the resurrected Jesus. I just pray for the one right now who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day they confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead, that today they would be saved.

As we step to the water and people step into the water to go from death to life, paint that picture for us and point people to Jesus. Thank you for all you continue to do at this church. May the good news continue to go out.

It's in the name of Jesus that we pray it and every one agreed and said... Amen.