

Intro.: Last year, an Illinois man was released from prison after serving nearly 30 years for murder. When put on trial everyone ruled against him. A fresh examination of DNA evidence, however, proved he wasn't the killer. After it was all said and done, he said, "I feel *vindicated*." To be vindicated is to be cleared of guilt or to be proven right.

Throughout our season of preparation we have seen how our God was put on trial through His Son and how He continues to be put on trial, by an unbelieving world. Today, we rejoice that God and we His people have been vindicated, cleared of guilt and proven right.

I. It Appears That The Trial Has Been Lost And Jesus Was Wrong.

A. After what took place on Good Friday, it sure looked like Jesus was wrong. He had been put on trial by the Jewish leaders and declared guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death. Pontius Pilate handed down the sentence: death by crucifixion. This was not only one of the most painful ways to die, but it was also one of the most shameful and disgraceful forms of execution, usually reserved for the worst of criminals.

As Jesus hung between two criminals, bleeding and dying, he looked so weak and powerless. If he were as good as he claimed to be, wouldn't God rescue him? If he were God as he claimed to be, couldn't he escape? But nothing happened. The women who had followed him watched as he breathed his last, just like every other person who had ever hung on a cross. When it was all over, they watched as he was taken down and his lifeless body laid in a tomb. The trial seemed to be over, and the verdict was dreadful.

B. As the sun was setting that night, it must have been impossible for Jesus followers to process everything. So much had happened so quickly. And things didn't look good. As darkness settled over the land the women were left alone with their thoughts. There's no way of knowing exactly what was going through the minds of Jesus' followers in those hours, but it must have been a bitter mix of sadness, confusion, doubt, and fear.

Maybe you can relate. Someone you loved deeply has died. The funeral is over, and your friends and family have left. As darkness settles, it's too quiet, and you feel very alone and confused.

It's not just the death of a loved one that can leave us feeling this way. Thoughts of our own death are always lurking in the background. Whether or not we're conscious of it, there's this sense that time is running out. Even for the young, there is anxiety about making the right choices, and the guilt over all the wrong choices that have been made. Oh, how we have let down our Savior! Jesus wasn't guilty, but we sure are.

II. Easter Is God's Vindication.

A. We might not know exactly what the women were *thinking* on Easter morning, but Mark tells us what they were *doing*. At break of dawn, they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body—one final act of love for their teacher. But when they got there, they saw the stone rolled away and a young man in a white robe. He said, "***'Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.'***"

Even though Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection on several occasions, it was too much for them to process. Obviously, the women did not expect Jesus to be alive, or they wouldn't have gone to his tomb to anoint his body! "***Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.***" But soon it would sink in. Later that day, Jesus would appear to them, to Peter, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and to those gathered behind locked doors. Later he would appear to over five hundred believers at once. The early reports were confirmed again and again. The good news was true: "Victory And Vindication!" was the headline, because Christ, is Risen! He is risen, indeed, Alleluia!

B. Paul spells it out in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. If Jesus had not risen, we would have no reason to believe that he was anything more than a fraud, another criminal executed. We would have no reason to think his words of forgiveness carried any weight. And we surely wouldn't expect to have any better fate after death. "***If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead***" (1 Corinthians 15:19,20).

But Easter is God's vindication. It proves that Jesus was right and all of His promises are true. It is true: Jesus didn't come down from the cross to prove that he was the Son of God. Yet, it wasn't that He couldn't because he was powerless to do so. He could, but He chose not to because he loved us too much. He wouldn't come down because his work was not complete. He did not come down from the cross to prove himself the Son of God. Instead, he did something even better: He rose from the dead! On Easter, Jesus was proved right: he is the God-man, the very Messiah that he claimed to be.

Easter is God's vindication. Yes, Jesus did look guilty on the cross. It wasn't just the charge nailed above his head, the criminals on either side, or the taunts of the crowds that gave that impression. It was also his cry from the depths of punishment: ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)***. Indeed, Jesus did have guilt on that cross, but it wasn't his own – it was ours. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all, and made him who had no sin to be sin for us. God punished all our sins in Jesus. Then, by raising his Son from the dead, the Father put the exclamation point on Jesus' own words from the cross: ***"It is finished."*** Vindication! All those sins are paid for—yours and mine.

III. Easter Is Our Vindication.

A. Easter is vindication also for us, and for all who place their hope in Jesus—like Job of long ago who declared, ***"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth . . . yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25,26)***. Jesus' resurrection is proof that Job was right. It's proof for us too. If Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, we do have hope beyond this life. Paul calls Jesus ***the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20)***. The firstfruits were a symbol, a promise, of the whole harvest to come. So Jesus' resurrection is the promise of the resurrection for all his people: ***"Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him" (1 Corinthians 15:23)***. That day will be the day of our ultimate vindication.

B. But even now, Easter is vindication for us as we live as people put on trial and judged by this world. There is clear evidence that there is a serious decline in Christianity in the United States. Fewer people in this country follow Jesus, church attendance is down, and its citizens are becoming more secular. Even Christians may say, "The church is dying." Is that really possible, though? How can the church be dying when it is the body of the risen Christ? Congregations may die and Christians may fall away, but as long as Jesus lives, so does his church, and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. We are proven right. We are vindicated!

C. For us, this is the feast of victory for our God—not just this day but this entire post-resurrection era. We may be afflicted by temptation and trouble and harassed by a hostile world that constantly puts us and our God on trial. But as is so often the case with God, things are not as they appear. We are actually on our triumphal march to glory. Along the way, our lives are given eternal significance as we love God, serve others, and testify to the truth. Our march goes on in simple, humble, almost imperceptible ways, yet we know with all our hearts where it is taking us. The day is coming when we will finally sing the victory song with saints and angels in heaven.

Concl.: Sin is forgiven. Death is defeated. Jesus is Lord. Christ and his people have been put on trial, and Easter brings the victorious verdict: Vindication, because Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen.