

## Questions That Matter

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April 4, 2010  
Easter  
John 21

If you hang around bookstores like I do, you will see a growing trend toward the publishing of books that is merely a collection of useless information. In fact, there are several dozen books now that have “Useless Information” in the title, like these: *The Big Book of Useless Information*, *More Useless Information*, *Useless Information About Celebrity Deaths*.

If you crack open one of these books like I have, you will find the answers to really important questions such as:

Why does Pluto live in a doghouse and eat dog food, but Goofy, who is also a dog, live in a condo and drive a car?

In distinguishing them, Pluto walks on four legs and Goofy, of course, walks on two legs and wears a jacket and hat.

Here are some other deep questions that people have posed. Perhaps you have the answers to them.

- Why is there a disclaimer on the Allstate Auto Insurance commercials that says, “Not available in all states”?
- If “pro” and “con” are opposites, wouldn’t the opposite of “progress” be “congress”?
- When does it stop being “partly cloudy” and start being “partly sunny”?
- Since bread is square, why is sandwich meat round?
- Do the English people eat English muffins, or are they just called muffins?
- Why do superheroes wear underwear on the outside of their clothes?
- Why do people constantly return to the refrigerator with the hope that something new to eat will have materialized?

Here are some funny questions that children have asked of God:

- Did Noah have woodpeckers on the Ark? If he did, where did he keep them?
- Dear God, I read the Bible. What does the word “beget” mean? Nobody will tell me.
- Dear God, is it true my father won’t get into heaven if he uses his golf words in the house?
- Dear God, do you draw lines around the countries? If you don’t, who does?

On Easter, the Christian church across the world – representing hundreds of nationalities and thousands of different languages and ethnicities, and tens of thousands of different traditions – come together to celebrate the most fundamental Christian belief, that Jesus is risen from the dead! And today, we’re going to look at a story from the Gospel of John concerning the risen Christ’s encounter with his disciples. What we’re going to discover is the resurrection of Jesus Christ answers many of the most basic and fundamental questions that we human beings ask about life. I’ve called today’s talk, “Questions that Matter.” Let’s pray.

### **John 21:1-3**

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 3 “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and he had shown himself to his disciples including Doubting Thomas, proving to them that he was alive. But then he disappeared. And Peter said in verse 3:

### **John 21:3**

“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Now in this little statement, “I’m going out to fish,” we find the question of significance and the point we discover in the story is that

Because Christ is risen you matter

Here’s the idea. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then does it really make a difference whether you decide on a Sunday morning to go to church, or instead, to go fishing, or to sleep in, or to feed a hungry person?

Here is the logic. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then his message about how we ought to do life is irrelevant. He is not the Savior of the world. There is no salvation through Jesus. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then the dead stay dead and God did not intervene in history, at least not there in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The cross is just one more death of one more unfortunate person.

So when we are making decisions about what we ought to do or not do we don’t really have to pay any more attention to what Jesus said than we would pay attention to what Plato or Socrates or Shakespeare or any other bright person in history said. We can take Jesus’ words or leave them, if he didn’t rise from the dead.

And if he did rise from the dead, but then disappears from the scene as it seemed to be the case with Peter – yes, he proved himself to be alive, but now he is gone, so that Jesus may have risen 2000 years ago, but he is no longer relevant, if he rose from the dead, but we can't communicate with him, he might as well be on Mars, then, again, what difference does it make what you choose to do? For Peter, the choice was a stark one either to continue in the ministry that Christ had called him to, the ministry of preaching and healing, or to just go back to his old profession – “I'm going back to fishing.”

What we do with our choices really deals with the question that all of us have to wrestle with – that is, the question of our own significance. Why do you count? Why do you matter?

Annie Dillard, who is a Pulitzer Prize winning author, probably best known for her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, wrote an article over a decade ago in *Harper's Magazine* called “The Wreck of Time.” In this article she asked the question, “What were you doing on April 30, 1991 when a series of waves drowned 138,000 people? Where were you when you first heard that astounding, heart-breaking news? Who told you? What were your sensations? Who did you tell? Did you weep? Did your anguish last days or weeks?”

Annie Dillard's point is that these people were just like you and me. Yet, when we hear news about tragedies overseas, we may be sad for a few seconds, or a minute or two, or we may shrug our shoulders and say, “Gosh, that's too bad.” Her point is why do you think you matter more than the 138,000 who died mattered?

When Ted Bundy, the rapist and serial killer, was arrested and there was a media frenzy around his arrest and trial, he could not fathom all the fuss. Ted Bundy said, “What's the big deal? I mean, there are so many people. Why do a few dead matter to anybody?”

One demographer said that the dead outnumber the living in a ratio that could be as high as 20:1. The estimates of the number of people who have ever lived on the earth ranged from 70 billion to as high as 120 billion. That averages to about 95 billion. If we have 6 billion on the earth, the ratio is about 16:1. The dead will always outnumber the living.

And who really cares at all about the mass of humanity which is now dead? Have you ever sat down and really thought about your own death? Some of you have been forced to do that as a result of a doctor's diagnosis. Some of you have voluntarily chosen to think about your death as you have prepared a will or as you have aged. But have you ever contemplated your own death long enough to wonder what makes you significant at all? I'm one of the 70, 80, 90, or 120 billion people who will live a certain amount of time and then my candle will also be blown out.

How many people remember your great-grandfather? A few dozen? How about your great-great-grandmother, who died back in the 1800's? Almost nobody. Apart from one person sitting here, who may become a governor or senator, in 150 years no one alive will have heard of any of us either. So why do we matter? What difference does it make if we decide, like Peter, to go fishing on Sunday morning? Or we decide, instead, to go to church?

Vaclav Havel, who was one of Europe's premier playwrights in Prague, in what used to be known as Czechoslovakia, was a dissident living under Communist oppression. He was constantly followed around by the Secret Police. In 1979 Havel, along with more than a dozen dissidents, were sent to prison and charged with attempting to subvert the Communist Regime. He stayed in prison for 5 years. During that imprisonment, he had an opportunity to reflect on his life and on his own significance. He was allowed once a week to write to his wife, Olga. He used the occasion of writing to his wife, Olga, to express his thoughts about life and about modern society. He said, "I would rather be reading great philosophers, but because I don't have any books in prison, I am forced to philosophize myself."

Havel's writings were later published and became the bestselling *Letters to Olga*. One of the statements Havel made was this:

The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.

We don't care! In 1982, Havel wrote an important letter to Olga. He said:

Dear Olga, for many years now, whenever I have thought about responsibility or discussed it with someone, a trivial illustration has come to mind: At night, I board the rear car of a tram to go one stop. The car is empty, and so the fare is paid by dropping a coin into a box, not even a conductor is present...so I have the option of throwing the fare into the box or not. If I don't no one will see me, or ever find out; no witnesses will ever be able to testify to my misdemeanor. So I am faced with a great dilemma, regardless of how much money I happen to have with me: to pay or not to pay. Here's the question: When no one sees, to pay or not to pay? I face no consequences from anyone, if I don't pay. I don't lose a thing and I get to keep my money, so why should I pay?

And yet Havel said:

I feel bad not paying. I have a voice inside of me that tells me that I should pay. I feel like I'm in dialogue with someone about paying. Who am I talking to? Who is my conversation partner?

Havel said:

Some people might say that it's your conscience. It is just your own inner voice.

But sitting in prison, he realized that this voice, this person that he is dialoguing with, is someone who knows everything about everyone all the time and Havel named that person, God.

Why do my little choices matter? Throw a coin into a box to pay my fare when no one's looking? Throw a coin into a Salvation Army kettle when I'm on my way into a store? Why did Peter's choice matter about whether he was going to go fishing, or stay in ministry? Your choice to sleep in on a Sunday, or go to church to worship, or clean the house? And why ultimately do you and I matter? Why does the fact that we will all be swept away in the great sleep of death along with the 70, 80, or 100 billion other people who have ever lived? It is not because we will be remembered by our descendents; it is not because we've made such a great mark on this world by our activity; it is because we've lived our lives in the presence of God. God sees us. God knows us. God holds us in his memory and in his heart.

And the resurrection of Jesus Christ communicates to us that we are in dialogue with a real person all the time as we wrestle with our responsibilities and with our choices. We are not just wrestling internally. We're in dialogue with the risen Christ.

#### **John 21:4-14**

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. 5 He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. 6 He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

In this text we read in verse 4:

#### **John 21:4**

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

This raises for us the question of who Jesus is.

## Because Christ is risen Jesus matters

Ninety-four percent of Americans claim to believe in God, or in some higher power. I don't know about you, but when I look out at the United States right now and the way we Americans live, it doesn't seem that anywhere near 94% of us actually know Christ. The disciples initially were around Jesus, but they didn't know it was him. They didn't know him. Some of us know Christ in our memories. We can think back to childhood or teenage years, some time in the past, where we knew God's goodness and mercy in our life. We were friends back then. Some of you may be in that situation this Easter. Sort of like friends I had in college. I have warm memories of them 35 years ago, but we haven't been in touch and I can't really say that I know them today. Many people have a relationship with the God of their memories.

Or they have a relationship with the second-hand God. They know about God through what someone else says about him. That may be your experience this Easter. You know about God because you've heard about him through your parents, or your girlfriend or boyfriend, sister or brother, priest or pastor. But you don't really know him for yourself. America is filled with cultural Christians, people who go to church on Christmas or Easter and really no other time of year.

The question that arises is, "Isn't it enough to just believe in God? Isn't that all that God wants of us, that we believe in him?"

The disciples were fishing. If you asked them while they were in the boat, "Do you believe in God?" They'd say, "Of course we do." If you asked them, "Do you believe that Christ is raised from the dead?" They'd say, "Yes, we can check that box." And if you asked them, "Do you know him, the one who is calling you from the shore?" They'd say, "No."

God wants more from you than simply that you believe that he exists along with 94% of other Americans. And he wants more from you than you simply checking a box that says Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter. God wants you to know him, to know him intimately.

You can tell if people know God by listening to what people call God

Whenever I have to make a call to one of those giant call centers to report on some questionable activity on my VISA card, or a problem with my cable TV, the operator will ask me my name. I will say, "My name is Rich Nathan."

And invariably, I get the response, "That's Rich Mason?"

So I will say, "No. Rich Nathan. N-A-T-H-A-N."

"Okay, Mr. Mason, we'll look you up."

For some reason, people cannot hear the word “Nathan.” I know that the person who calls me “Mr. Mason” doesn’t know me at all.

And when we get the call during dinner asking to talk to “Mr. Richard Nathan” about lawn service, I know that that person doesn’t know me either. When people come up and they say, “Pastor, we appreciate your church,” I know that they know my role, but that still doesn’t mean that they know me. People who know me, especially my friends, call me, “Rich.” There are several very small people who call me, “Grandpa.” And there is one person, who knows me best, my wife, who calls me, “Richie.”

You can tell how well somebody knows God by listening to what they call God. What do you call God? “The Man Upstairs,” “The Big Guy in the Sky,” “My Higher Power,” or like Will Farrell in *Talladega Nights*, “Dear Baby Jesus; Dear tiny baby Jesus; Dear 8 lbs. 6 oz. infant Jesus.” What do you call him?

So many folks believe in God, but don’t know him! Do you know God? Do you know Jesus Christ? Do you know him intimately? Or do you just believe that he exists somewhere. Maybe like the disciples you think, “Yes, I believe he’s risen, but I certainly don’t anticipate much contact with him.”

It is often said that becoming a Christian is not adopting a religion; it is entering a personal relationship with Jesus.

Friends, this Easter let me ask you a question, “Would you say that you have a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus? I am not asking if you believe in God. I’m not asking whether you remember Christ in your memory that you used to 10, 20 years ago have experienced a warm relationship with Christ. I am asking you today, do you presently have an intimate relationship with Jesus?”

I will tell you another way that you can tell the difference between someone who believes in God has a little bit of religious training and someone who knows Christ in an intimate way. Listen to them pray.

You can tell if people know God by listening to them pray

When you simply believe that God exists, or you’ve checked the box that says Christ was raised from the dead, you have a little bit of religion, you will become aware of a great lack of intimacy with Christ in your life when you pray with someone who actually has a personal relationship with Christ. I don’t mean when you pray a blessing over your Easter dinner. What I mean is go to a hospital with a sibling or a friend who is the real deal Christian, and listen to them pray for a person who is laid up in the hospital bed. I will tell you that you will be unsettled; you will feel uncomfortable if all you have is a little bit of religion. Because you will quickly realize that this real-deal Christian has an intimate relationship with Christ that you know nothing about. You will hear from a real Christian, who knows Christ, an intimacy in prayer. You will hear someone speaking

directly and personally to Christ as if Christ were sitting right next to him or her as a close friend, sitting right next to him or her as a close family member.

Believing in God, checking a box next to the resurrection of Jesus, having a little religion in your life will produce stiff, formal prayers. If you listen to a real-deal Christian pray, you will quickly realize that they have something that you don't have.

You can tell whether people know God by whether they realize God is generous

What would it mean for you to know Jesus Christ personally and intimately? You would know when you pray, when you have needs, that he is generous. In this story, we read this in verses 8-12:

### **John 21:8-12**

The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.

I want you to notice something here. Jesus doesn't wait for the disciples to bring their fish on to the shore in order to offer them some cooked fish. He's already cooking. Christ doesn't need our fish or our big sacrifice to him. He is capable of looking after himself and he is capable of looking after us. Christ is not sitting in heaven wringing his hands until we get to work fixing the world. He is already busy and he is generous.

Do you know that Jesus Christ is generous when you pray? When you have a need? When a loved one has a need? When you go to Jesus, do you know him to be generous, open-handed, willing to give? If you don't know Jesus as generous, then you don't know him. You don't know him intimately.

I read a story once about Alexander the Great. Apparently, a general came to him and said, "I must marry my daughter off and I need money to throw her a big wedding."

Alexander asked the general, "How much do you need?"

And the man asked for a ridiculously large sum of money. People were watching Alexander the Great. They thought his face would darken and that he would get angry by such an extravagant request. Instead, Alexander smiled and said, "Of course, go to my treasurer and he will give you that amount."

Some of Alexander's soldiers came to him and said, "Why did you give him so much money?"

Alexander replied and said, “That man gave me two great honors. First, he believed that I was fabulously wealthy, as I am. And second, he believed that I was incredibly generous.”

When you go to Christ believe that he is fabulously wealthy and also that he is incredibly generous.

You can tell if people know God by whether they know that they can change

I talk with so many people who say to me, “Rich, I’m just stuck. This is just the way I am. Nothing works for me. I’ve tried everything possible and I can’t change. I would like to get past this habit. I realize I have a problem. I know I’m hurting someone by my behavior. I know that I’ve been in denial. I am secretly hiding an issue in my life. But you have to understand, Rich, I just can’t change. This is just the way I am.”

Do you know that because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we Christians who know Christ intimately have this great confidence that if God could defeat death, he can change anything in our lives? Because of the resurrection, we know that God is bigger than our problems, bigger than our addictions, bigger than any therapy, bigger than all the things we’re tried and have had failed for us.

Friend, if you knew Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection you would never say about yourself, “This is the way I am. I can’t change.”

Well, the story is a story of restoration. We read in verses 15-17 these words:

#### **John 21:15-17**

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” 16 Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” 17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter – after claiming that even if all the other disciples would forsake Jesus, he would always be faithful, he would never forsake his Lord – under pressure and because of fear of the crowds, his survival mechanism kicked in and he denied knowing Jesus three times. And the third time he denied knowing Jesus, Jesus looked right at him. Peter felt so ashamed that he just went off and wept. And in this section, we deal with the question of what the cross has accomplished. We discover that:

Because Christ is risen the cross matters

Have you ever done something, or experienced something that even years later causes you shame? Maybe you wet your pants in kindergarten or elementary school long after you should have been able to control yourself. And the memory of that still causes you to blush. Maybe you were caught doing something you should not have been doing. And you were suspended or expelled from school for cheating. Maybe you were caught cheating in your marriage.

I read a story not too long ago from the Christian magazine, *Christianity Today*, written by a young man who had been sexually molested when he was a little boy. He told some friends about it and it got around his high school. There was a much bigger boy, a bully, who decided that it was his job to teach this young man, this victim of molestation, a lesson. So one day after school, he grabbed the boy, put him in a headlock, pushed his face into the ground, and made him say, "I am a faggot," before he would be let go. So, as this boy had his face smashed into the ground, he had to scream out, "I am a faggot!"

Has something ever happen to you that caused you great shame?

I remember in middle school being punched in the chest by a boy who was not much bigger than me. I wanted to punch him back in the face. But this boy had some really tough friends and I was afraid of his friends. So I just sort of took it and walked away. He laughed at me in front of this girl. He said, "What's the matter? Are you afraid to hit me?" I seethed inside and experienced shame for not hitting him back.

I talked with a member of this church a few years ago. He told me that when he was a teenager he got into a horrible fight with his parents and told his father that he hated him and wished he was dead. By the most tragic happenstance, his father, that night, was in a car accident and was killed. Shame.

Shame even shows up in children's movies. I think I've watched the *Lion King* with my granddaughter about 3 dozen times. There is a scene in the *Lion King* where the little lion, Simba, believes that he is responsible for his father's death. His father was actually pushed off a cliff by Simba's uncle, Scar. He was then trampled by a stampede of animals. Simba goes over to his dad's body and says, "Dad, Dad, come on...you've got to get up. Dad, we've got to go home." He tugs at his father's ear. Simba runs off a little bit and then he screams, "Help! Somebody, anybody, help!" He goes up to his dad's dead body and snuggles under his dad's limp paw.

And then the wicked uncle Scar, played by Jeremy Irons, with that horrible deep voice says, "Simba, what have you done?"

Simba says, "There were wildebeests, and he tried to save me. It was an accident. I...didn't mean for it to happen."

Scar says, "Of course, of course you didn't. No one ever means for these things to happen...but the king IS dead. And if it weren't for you, he would still be alive."

Simba is crushed believing that he is responsible. And then Scar says, “Oh! What will your mother think?”

Simba says, “What am I going to do?”

Scar says, “Run away, Simba. Run, runaway and never return.”

What a picture of shame. “What will your mother think?” “What will you look like in the eyes of someone else?” “Runaway and never return!” I wonder how many of you, because of failure or shame, ran away from God and never returned?

That’s what Peter was doing. “I guess I will just go fishing. I’m perfectly useless to Christ right now.” But Jesus is someone who heals our shame. He doesn’t allow us to run or hide forever. Through the miraculous catch of fish, Jesus is recreating the scene of his first calling of Peter a couple of years earlier. They are standing on the same shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. It is the same situation, the same circumstance. And Jesus issues that same command as three years before, “Put out the nets.” He directs them to where the fish are. It is like Christ is saying, “Peter, let’s go back in time. Let’s go back to where our relationship began. Let me remind you that I never called you to be a flawless person. I never asked you to be a great person and to carry the world on your shoulders. I never asked you to be more loyal than the other disciples. Or to be hyper-responsible. All I ever asked of you is that you follow me.”

That’s all that Jesus ever asked of any of us. “Will you just follow me? Will you give your life to me?” He doesn’t ask us to go beyond our abilities to fix the whole world, to be responsible for every problem of everyone around us, to be the greatest, most successful, the biggest. He says, “Will you follow me?”

And then he makes a fire and, of course, Peter is reminded of the night he denied Jesus. There was a charcoal fire burning then when he denied the Lord. And Jesus’ three questions, “Do you love me?” remind Peter of his three denials of Christ. Jesus is not rubbing Peter’s face in his failure. He wants to bring Peter’s shame to the surface. He wants Peter, like Simba and the rest of us, to stop running, to tell him what we are ashamed of, the horrible memory of being hurt, of being traumatized, of hurting someone we love.

See, because of the resurrection, the cross matters. The cross is not just a place that a good man died. The cross is also the place that you and I can bring our shame, anything you are ashamed of.

### **Psalm 25:1-3**

...In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. 2 I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. 3 No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame...

**Isaiah 54:4**

“Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth...

When our flaws, our mistakes, our past weaknesses are thrown in our face, we can go to the cross and sing that great line from the hymn, “Before the Throne of God Above”:

When Satan tempts me to despair  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look and see Him there,  
Who made an end to all my sin.

Because the sinless Savior died,  
My sinful soul is counted free,  
For God the Just is satisfied,  
To look on Him and pardon me.

Jesus bore our shame on the cross and we know that his cross was effective because he was raised from the dead. That’s why we can sing:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude  
In my place condemned he stood;  
Sealed my pardon with his blood;  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

We talked about the question of significance, the question of who Christ is, the question of what Christ has done for us and the meaning of the cross, and finally, the question of eternity.

Because Christ has risen eternity matters

Jesus in John 21 turns to Peter and in verse 15 says:

**John 21:15**

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

The commentators have had a field day trying to explain what the “these” are that Jesus is talking about. I believe the most likely interpretation is Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you love me more than these other disciples do as you claimed on the night that I was betrayed? Do you love me more than these others?” Or perhaps, “Do you love me more than you love fishing? Do you love me more than you love these other activities? Do you love me more than these other pursuits?”

I think that John 21:15 is, under the inspiration of God, wonderfully ambiguous. Jesus is asking Peter, and he is asking us, “Do you love me more than *whatever?*” This is the eternal question that Jesus is asking, the question that determines salvation, “Do you love me more than whatever else you love?”

Let me close with this. C.S. Lewis was an English professor at Oxford and Cambridge in England from the 1930's to 1963 when he died. He is also the author of *The Narnia Chronicles*, the bestselling children's books. He also happens to be my favorite Christian author. He wrote a wonderful fantasy years ago called, *The Great Divorce*. In the book, Lewis develops this story about a group of people from hell who take a bus ride to heaven and are given the option of staying in heaven, if they wish. In fact, they are encouraged at every conceivable way to stay in heaven. And the inhabitants of heaven make these incredibly articulate, winsome, and persuasive cases to the inhabitants of hell imploring them to stay. Now, the immediate reaction of someone who's not read the book would be to think that all the inhabitants of hell would say, “Of course, heaven is so much more preferable to hell, of course, I want to stay.” But the stunning thing about C.S. Lewis' book is that most of the characters opt for returning to hell. What is so chilling is that Lewis presents these characters in a way that is absolutely, psychologically and personally, plausible to all of us.

You see, in almost every case, there was something that this resident of hell wanted more than they wanted Jesus. One of the characters wanted her bitterness towards God for taking her son from her. Her son died as a teenager and she had a death grip on bitterness towards God and would not give it up in order to have Jesus. “No,” she said. “You are not going to mock me as a mother. I deserve to be bitter. And I would rather go to hell with my grief, my anger.” She finally blurts out, “I hate your God. I want nothing to do with him.”

And through the story, person after person won't let go of something in order to have Jesus. In one of the saddest scenes an inhabitant of heaven says to a person who is insisting on their rights, “Listen, all you need to do is just laugh at yourself and all the pain will go away. Just don't take yourself so seriously. All you need to do is laugh at yourself and you will be saved. You will get God.”

And the inhabitant of hell says, “No! I would rather reject God, turn my back on eternal life, than ever have a good laugh at myself.”

Friend, the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that you matter to God. You are significant. You count. Your whole life is lived in the presence of Christ. The resurrection of Jesus means that Jesus matters. You can come to know Jesus Christ intimately, not just believe in God, or have some kind of religion. You can know him. The resurrection of Jesus means the cross matters. And every painful memory, every shameful thing can be brought to the cross and left there. Because of the cross, there is no reason to despair about the past. And the resurrection of Jesus means that the kingdom of God has opened up to you and to me. We can be forgiven. We can have eternal life so long as we're willing to open our hands, and not have a death grip on

anything, but rather to simply say, “Jesus, I’m willing to put you first in my life.” We can be saved. Let’s pray.

## Questions That Matter

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Rich Nathan  
April 4, 2010  
Easter  
John 21

- I. **Because Christ is risen you matter**
  
- II. **Because Christ is risen Jesus matters**
  - A. You can tell if people know God by listening to what they call God
  - B. You can tell if people know God by listening to them pray
  - C. You can tell if people know God by whether they realize God is generous
  - D. You can tell if people know God by whether they know that they can change
  
- III. **Because Christ is risen the cross matters**
  
- IV. **Because Christ is risen eternity matters**