

“Upheaval, Resurrection, and a True Constant”
Hebrews 12:1-2, 13:8, 13:20-21
April 20, 2025 (Easter Sunday)
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We have heard, this morning, about the risen Lord’s work in Jonathan Anderson’s life.

Now we’ll consider what the Scriptures have to say about what Christ’s resurrection means for each one of us.

With that in mind, we’ll hear now from portions of chapters 12 and 13 of the Letter to the Hebrews.

As we do, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Beginning in chapter 12:

^{12:1} Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Then in chapter 13:

^{13:8} Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

And finally, in verse 20:

^{13:20} Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, as we come to your Word this morning.
Give us eyes to see it and ears to hear it,
minds to understand it and hearts to accept it.
Do this, we ask, for your glory and for our good.
We pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Introduction

It's Easter Sunday, and today we remember, and celebrate, and reflect on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus, at the height of his ministry, led his followers to Jerusalem. There, as he predicted, he was arrested, he was given a false and phony trial, and then he was sentenced to death by crucifixion. He was nailed to a cross and hung there until he died – the Roman soldiers confirming his death by piercing his side with a spear.

After his death, he was buried. And his followers were full of sorrow.

But then, on the third day, something shocking happened. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Not as a spirit, not as a ghost, but his physical body was raised from the tomb. And he didn't merely recover, but he rose with a renewed, glorified body that would never die again. For forty days he appeared to his followers – at one time to more than 500 of them.

And then, he ascended to heaven, body and soul, to reign at the right hand of God, until the day when he would come back and make all things new, and reign on earth forever.

This is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

And key to understanding Easter is recognizing that no one expected this to happen. No one anticipated these events. They disrupted everything, first in the lives of Jesus's followers, and then around the world.

Now ... this is a historical reality we sometimes get wrong. We can assume, often, that people in the ancient world were ready to believe anything fantastical or miraculous. And while it's true that most people in the ancient world had a less disenchanted view of life, and a stronger belief in spiritual reality than many modern, Western, secular people do today – their beliefs were not general and arbitrary or childishly naive, but specific and within a certain worldview. And none of them anticipated Jesus rising bodily from the dead.

For one thing, ancient people knew that dead people stayed dead. The average ancient person had far more direct contact with death than most of us in our culture do today. They were familiar with it. And they knew its reality and its permanence.

Yes, they often believed in life after death. But those beliefs did not take the form of a single person, in the middle of history, rising from the dead, in a renewed body, never to die again.

As scholar NT Wright has demonstrated, in the non-Jewish Greco-Roman world, “the universal view of the people of that time was that a bodily resurrection was impossible.” One author summarizes it like this: “In Greco-Roman thinking, the soul or spirit was good and the physical and material world was weak, corrupt, and defiling. To them the physical, by definition, was always falling apart and therefore salvation was conceived as *liberation* from the body. In this worldview resurrection was not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul, having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back. Even those who believed in reincarnation understood that the return to embodied life meant that the soul was not yet out of its prison. The goal was to get free of the body forever. Once the soul is free of its body, a return to re-embodied life was

outlandish, unthinkable, and impossible.” [Keller, *Reason*, 206-207 (citing Wright)] This was how the first-century Graeco-Roman world viewed the idea of resurrection.

Now, the worldview of the first-century Jewish world was different. They believed that the physical world was good. And they hoped for a resurrection from the dead, with a renewed body that would never die again ... but for them, that hope was something they looked forward to at the end of time, for all the righteous at once, when God would make all things new. Resurrection was not something that could happen in the middle of time, to a single individual. As one scholar puts it: “The idea of an individual being resurrected, in the middle of history, while the rest of the world continued on burdened by sickness, decay, and death, was inconceivable. If someone had said to any first-century Jew, ‘So-and-so has been resurrected from the dead!’ the response would be, ‘Are you crazy? How could that be? Has disease and death ended? Is true justice established in the world? Has the wolf lain down with the lamb? Ridiculous!’ The very idea of an individual resurrection would have been as impossible to imagine to a Jew as to a Greek.” [Keller, 207]

No one expected the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is one of the reasons why it’s so difficult to explain the early accounts of Jesus’s resurrection in any other way than that it actually happened.

There were many messianic movements in first-century Judaism. And many of those would-be messiahs were executed. But, as N.T. Wright explains: “In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. [...] Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. [...] Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.” [Wright, 63]

No one expected the resurrection of Jesus. It was a shock to everyone – including his disciples.

And with that shock, Jesus’s resurrection upended everything. But even as it did ... it also provided a new foundation on which to live and to hope.

Because in the midst of upheaval, Jesus’s resurrection provides us with the only true constant. That’s what our passages from Hebrews remind us of this morning – that in the midst of upheaval, Jesus’s resurrection provides us with the only true constant.

Let’s break down what that means a little bit.

Upheaval

First, in this life, we all face major upheavals, which bring change and instability to our lives.

For the early followers of Jesus, one of those upheavals was the resurrection of Jesus itself.

The resurrection of Jesus changed everything for early Christians. It upended their worldview. It changed their moral orientation. It modified how they viewed and understood God.

But the disruption wasn’t just mental or internal. The resurrection of Jesus called early Christians into a new community in the Church ... while also often leading to their being rejected by their old social circles.

For early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was no small or sentimental thing. It was, for them, a major disruption in their lives – it challenged their old ways of viewing the world, and upset their relationships and social networks.

And so, the early Christians knew what upheaval and instability in life felt like. They experienced it in dramatic ways.

But in our own lives, such upheavals need not be as dramatic or historically monumental for them to still be real.

Our lives are often filled with much more ordinary upheavals, which can bring change and instability to our lives.

Sometimes these upheavals come in the form of a personal crisis. We heard a few minutes ago of how a head injury caused just such a great upheaval in Jonathan’s life.

And those kinds of disruptions can take place in our lives in many different forms.

Sometimes it’s a health crisis. Other times it’s the death of a loved one. Still other times it’s a loss: of a close relationship, or of a hoped-for career path, or of a dream we had been pursuing. In a range of ways our personal lives can be suddenly and unexpectedly upended, and we can find ourselves feeling like we don’t have an anchor – like nothing is stable – and like we are desperately in need of a constant: something truly reliable, and truly foundational.

Other times the crisis that leads to that feeling is not personal, but cultural. A culture or a society or a country can go through a time of upheaval that can leave us grasping at something solid in life.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has recently evoked the old saying of unknown origins: “May you live in interesting times.” Though it sounds like a blessing, Douthat explains that it’s meant to be a curse. When we look back at history, “interesting times” are often periods of upheaval – of change and confusion. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/07/opinion/interesting-times-ross-douthat-podcast.html>]

And as you look at our culture, you might be distressed by what you see ... or you might be excited by what you see, but one common thing among us all is that none of us really knows what’s going to happen next. To many, the future right now seems more open and uncertain than it has in decades. And in such situations we look for something constant ... but struggle to find it in the world around us.

But ... of course ... we don’t even need to live in especially “interesting times” to experience the upheaval of time and the impermanence of the world around us.

A few minutes ago, Jonathan Anderson read to us from T.S. Eliot’s poem “East Coker,” part of *The Four Quartets*. And in that poem, Eliot wrestles with that question of where we are to look when life seems so impermanent – so inconstant.

Reflecting on such changes in the town where his family had come from, he writes this:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.
[Eliot, East Coker, I.1-13]

What Eliot's pointing out is that all around us ... as the years go on ... the world changes. We see this in the physical realities of the world around us, but it's true in so many ways: buildings, institutions, cultural movements ... they come and go. Some are replaced by something new ... some by nothing at all. Things in the world we thought were constant – we thought were reliable ... fade away and change. Disruption and decay seem to be the norm in the world – rather than the constancy we expect or long for.

And that's true not just of the objective changes we see in the world around us – but of our very selves: our being, our thinking, our subjective experience of the world.

Our bodies grow older. Our hopes change. Our hearts change. When we step back and think about it, we soon realize that we ourselves are not the same person we were a decade ago or maybe even a year ago ... and we'll probably be someone else again a decade or even a year from now. We may be perplexed not just by others, but by ourselves as time goes on.

As Eliot puts it:

As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated.
[Eliot, East Coker, V.190-191]

In moments of crisis, or in moments of natural change ... in our own internal world and in the world around us, we observe, more and more, if we have eyes to see it, that neither we, nor the world around us, are as stable as we'd like to believe. Everywhere is change. Everywhere is upheaval. None of it is truly constant.

How do you experience this in your own life?

Where have you experienced crisis – whether personal or cultural?

Or where have you experienced the more slow and ordinary change and upheaval of life?

And in those moments when you feel the instability of it all ... how do you respond? Where do you look for something solid to hold on to?

Do you deny the change? Deny the upheaval? Deny the instability of this life?

Or do you grasp at something – a goal, an institution, another person, a personal possession – do you grasp at something and tell yourself that it’s solid ... when deep down ... you know that it too could vanish away ... it too could change ... it too could become something different?

The first followers of Jesus, after his resurrection from the dead, experienced a great upheaval in their lives. But that fact alone did not make them unique. We all experience upheavals in life. Many of us, at some point, experience moments of crisis and abrupt change. And if not that, then we all experience the change and instability that comes with the slow march of time, and the instability of all things.

A True Constant

All this the early Christians knew.

But that’s not all that they knew.

Because in the midst of all of that upheaval, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminded them that they did, in fact, have an anchor – they did, in fact, have a constant – there was, in fact, something stable in their lives in this ever-changing world.

In the midst of all that change, he wrote to them this – he reminded them: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” [Hebrews 13:8]

Jesus Christ is a true constant, which God offers to us. Because he is the same from the beginning, to today, to the very end. While we may change, he remains stable. While the world may change, he remains constant. He is constant in his being. He is constant in his character. He is constant in his power. And he is constant in his love. And in a world and a life where so much changes – like waves upon the ocean and tides upon the sea – he is an anchor we can cling to, like nothing else.

He is the same yesterday and today and forever.

First, he’s the same yesterday – in days past – because, the Bible tells us, he has always been.

The Apostle John, referring to Jesus as “the Word” writes this – he says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” [1:1-4]

From the beginning, Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son of God, has existed. He has been a constant of reality from before the world was even made: perfect in power, and perfect in love.

And as history commenced, his love and power led him to action.

When we had made a mess of this world, when we had filled it with sin and brokenness, in the fullness of time, Jesus drew close to us. He came to earth in human form. And he gave himself for us: living the life we should have lived, and then dying the death that we deserved to die – all so that we might be saved.

This, as Hebrews 12:2 reminds us, is what makes Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith. Because he endured the cross ... for us.

His constant love, and his stable power stretches back to eternity and is made visible in history.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday.

But he's also the same today. And that's because he has risen.

This is one reason among many why the resurrection is so important. Because it means that as Christians, we don't follow an old, wise, inspiring teacher, who died long ago ... but we follow a living Lord, who is active in the world today.

A dead teacher is, by definition, subject to the forces of change and decay in this world. He can't help us overcome the instability of this life, because he himself could not overcome it – in the end the frailty and instability of this life overcame him, resulting in his death and his decay.

But the resurrection tells us that even death could not overcome Jesus. By the power of God, he overcame death – he triumphed over death – he proved that he was more powerful than the most permanent change we see in this life. Even when confronted with death, Jesus remained the same: He rose on the third day. And then he ascended to heaven, where he is now “seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” [Hebrews 12:2]

And from there, he continues in his power and love. He remains for us, even now, as we read in verse 20, “the great shepherd of the sheep,” working in the lives of his people, to equip us “with everything good” so that we “may do his will” as he works “in us that which is pleasing in his sight.” [Hebrews 13:20-21]

Jesus is with us even now, in the present.

When we find ourselves without earthly hope, and without earthly thought, and without earthly love – even then, the darkness we wait in can be the darkness of God – the darkness that is light – because Jesus is there with us ... he is present with us ... and he is the same as he has always been.

Because of the resurrection, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today.

But it goes beyond that too. Because he is also the same going forward – he is also the same “forever.”

The Bible tells us that on the last day, Jesus will return to earth, in power and love. And on that day, he will raise from the dead all who have trusted in him. And he will dwell with them forever – in a new heaven and a new earth.

This is the promise for all who cling to Jesus: not only is he an anchor and a solid rock for us in this life, but he will be an anchor and a rock, and a fountain of life and joy for us in the life that is to come.

And he can be trusted to do this because he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Conclusion

History is full of upheaval and change.

Our lives, so often, are filled with upheaval and change.

And the future too – so unknown to us in its shape and direction – is full of upheaval and change.

But in the midst of all the instability, in the midst of all those things that come and go ... Jesus Christ is risen.

He has risen from the dead – he has overcome death – and so he has proven to us, that while everything around us is subject to change – while we ourselves are subject to change – nonetheless, he, risen from the dead, having overcome the frailties of this world – he, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And so, friends, let us not stay back from him. But let us draw close to him in faith ... and place our trust in him.

For as we do, he makes us his own treasured possession, yesterday, today, and forever.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964.
Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*. Translated by John Owen. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker. Printed 2005.
Eliot, T.S. *The Four Quartets*. “East Coker.” New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1943.
Guthrie, Donald. *Hebrews*. TNTC. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983.
Heen, Erik M & Philip D.W. Krey, Editors. *Hebrews*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. 10. Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Hebrews: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2008.
Rayburn, Robert S. “Hebrews” in *The Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989.
Wright, N. T. *Who Was Jesus?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.