



Awake (Easter 2017)

Pastor Jerry Gillis – April 16, 2017

Wow, singing about the resurrection will wake you up on a Sunday morning, won't it? Yeah. You can't sleepwalk through an Easter service, it's just not really possible. Now, speaking of sleepwalking, I want a show of hands, alright, on all of our campuses, this campus, you know, our Lockport Campus, Cheektowaga Campus, online campus, watching us by satellite, and NASA, whatever, right? Which actually I had a guy come up to me last service and say, "Oh, by the way," because he flies for a living, he said, "I have actually watched you on satellite from NASA". And I was like, I thought I was making that up, but apparently it's true. So to all of our Martian friends, we say hello.

Show of hands, how many of you, whether you were a child or a teenager or an adult, how many of you have ever slept-walked before? Put your hand up in the air. Alright, nice, nice. Don't put it down, put it up, like be proud. You're a sleepwalker! Now leave it up for just a second, my hands up, leave it up for a second, on all of our campuses. I have a theory about you. Here's my theory. I think you pray more than anyone else before you go to bed at night. That's what I think. Put your hand down.

Let me tell you why. Because sleepwalking is dangerous. Does anyone know that to be true? I hope that you haven't been terribly injured when you've been sleepwalking, but I was reading all of these stories of people who've been really seriously injured when they were sleepwalking and I was like man, this is not good. Like this is not good at all.

There was this one fifteen-year old young man who ended up, his parents finally decided they needed to take him to the sleep clinic at Stanford University because he kept injuring himself and the last time that happened what precipitated them saying we've got to take him somewhere, is he actually, middle of the night, sleepwalking unlatches his window in his bedroom, opens it, tries to walk out of it like it's a door and falls face first one story onto the concrete, breaks out four of his teeth, destroys his braces and breaks his jaw. It's terrible, isn't it? Another reason we should say our prayers before we go to bed. Because sleepwalking is dangerous.

Now, when I was a little kid, I don't remember doing it, but my parents have told me that I would sleepwalk from time to time. They would, you know, wake up and they would hear me or whatever and I would wake up in some other part of the house, and I don't know how I got there and all of that. Maybe that's happened to you.

But I would also pray before I went to bed. As a little kid my parents would have me pray bedtime prayers. Now I know why. Because I was sleepwalking. And I would pray that prayer that was kind of the traditional prayer that little kids pray before they go to bed. "Now I lay me down" do

you know this one? "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Now, notwithstanding that that is an extraordinarily terrifying prayer for a small child to pray, right? If I should die before...what? Wait a minute. Right? So I don't know what my parents were doing making me pray that, but maybe it was because I was sleepwalking a lot, I'm not sure.

I read this story though recently about a child who was praying that same traditional prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep prayer" right? But they could not quite get it right and so, instead of me repeating it to you, I figured I'd show you a visual of what happened with that child. Take a look.

Video: Alright, bud. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should wake before I die. I don't think you got it right. If I should wake before I die. Uh, you might want to try that again, bud. What do you mean? Try it again. I don't get it!

Pastor Jerry: As cute and as silly as that is, I was watching it and that was the story that I read. We obviously just reenacted it so you would see it. But I was reading a story and the little child, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should wake before I die", and then they couldn't figure out how to rhyme it, right? The longer that I pause there to read that, I started thinking to myself maybe, maybe this child is actually more profound than they knew. Maybe they have backed their way into an idea that is important for us to actually think about. If I should wake before I die. If I should wake before I die.

You see, I think that theme is really, really good at Easter, because at Easter what we do is we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus, a real historical person who lived a real life in a real place, who really did die and who on the third day after His death really did get up from the grave. This is an extraordinary historical significance. Now what we do when we talk about, most of the time when we talk about Jesus' Resurrection is that we focus our thoughts on the future of what that Resurrection actually means for us in the future. That because Jesus has risen from the dead that means that one day when we die, we will be able to live beyond the grave and He will be able to get us up with Him because of His Resurrection we too can be resurrected.

Now I have had, it's certainly an honor to stand with a family during a time of grieving, but in my twenty-five years plus of full time vocational ministry, I know, I started when I was four, I've had to do way too many funerals. And at those funerals I'm glad that I could hold out the hope of the future. That because of the Resurrection of Jesus, that those of us who have put our faith in Him can actually be transformed and that one day we will have the opportunity to rise with Him. What a beautiful truth that is, but I need you to understand something. We can't lose what happens to us in the now just by concentrating on what happens in the future. As glorious and as great as that truth is, we have to still understand that the Resurrection has an implication for our life now. Here's why. Because Jesus wants to wake us before we die so that He can wake us after we do.

You see, this is kind of the heartbeat of the Gospel. And we get a story that Jesus is involved in in the Scripture that helps us to see it. Jesus actually

teaches us a little bit about His own Resurrection and the power of His Resurrection before He's actually resurrected. And it's a story about one of Jesus' friends. His name is Lazarus. Now Jesus is friends with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. He's really good friends with them. This isn't just an acquaintance type of thing, Jesus used to stay with them whenever He was traveling through their area, they lived in a town called Bethany, which was right outside of Jerusalem. Jesus would stay there with them. I mean He was close friends. This wasn't the kind where you know, it's an acquaintance where you have them over for dinner and you put all your best stuff out and you know, you seat them in the dining room. These are the people that can come over and they can sit with you at your kitchen table and they can actually, you know, take their shoes off even if their feet stink and they can go in your refrigerator if, you know, if need be. They can do all of those things, right? These are people that are close.

So Jesus finds out that Lazarus is really, really sick. Here's the bottom line. He wasn't anywhere near the town of Bethany, and so Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus through someone else that their brother Lazarus was gravely ill. And Jesus got the news where He was with His disciples and when He got the news guess what He did. Nothing! Nothing! He got the news and He did not rush to his side.

In fact, let me pick it up for you in John chapter 11 it says this: "After said this He went on to tell His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." The disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get better." "But Jesus had been speaking of his death, but His disciples thought He meant natural sleep. So then He told them plainly,

"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Now I know this seems kind of odd, or maybe awkward or you're thinking what kind of friend is Jesus, I mean He gets word that His friend is really, really sick, like potentially going to die, and Jesus says to His disciples "Hey, let's just stay here for a couple of more days." What?

You see, if you look at it that way you think okay, what kind of friend is Jesus? He should have rushed to be at his side. But when you get to know Jesus, you realize He's always got something going on. There's a reason for what He's doing. And in fact, the reason for what He was doing is because He wanted to demonstrate the glory of God and He wanted to demonstrate His resurrection power in that moment. It's really an incredible thing that He would wait, and so He does. And while He waits Lazarus dies. And then He tells His disciples "Lazarus is asleep and I'm going to go there and wake him up". They think He's talking about natural sleep, like Lazarus took too many Ambien, you know and he's just like crashing and oh, he'll get to feeling better, this'll be great. And then He has to explain to them "No guys", because they're kind of, if you read about the disciples, they're kind of hard-headed and I'm kind of glad, because you know, I'm not. I am, and I'm really glad that I can see myself in them sometimes. So they were kind of hard-headed, and so Jesus had to finally just look at them and say "Lazarus is dead, but don't worry. We're going to go. And so that's what they do. Well, you can imagine when He arrives who's going to be there to greet Him. Well, Lazarus' sisters, right? Martha and Mary and they're probably going to have a thing or two to say. Well, they do.

Notice how the story continues. "On Jesus' arrival, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. But when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." And Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." And Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Isn't it interesting that Martha's response to Jesus when she comes up to Him, she says that if you had been here my brother wouldn't have died. Now that even shows a bit of faith on Martha's behalf because she believed that Jesus would have had the power to keep her brother alive had He been there.

Now if she had a bigger faith, she would realize that Jesus didn't have to be there to do anything. He could do what He wanted to do because He's Jesus, right? But she had some faith. If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died and Jesus says "He's going to rise again". And she says, "I know he will at the Resurrection at the last day.

See here's what Martha's doing. Martha's thinking about the future. And rightly so, by the way. When we lose somebody that's kind of what we think about, isn't it? When we have somebody that we love that we've lost, we begin to think about the idea of the future and she's saying I've got this fuzzy idea in my mind about the end of time when God kind of sorts everything out after everything's all said and done, and I know that my

brother is going to rise at the last day because of his faith in God. I know that that's going to occur. But Jesus surprises her with the way He responds. He won't let her stay thinking just about thinking about the future way far away, He actually pulls her from that and pulls her right into the present. Listen to what He says: "Jesus said to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

You see, here's what Jesus did all in one statement. He said to Martha, "Martha, I affirm your trust in me and your trust in God for what will happen in Lazarus' future. I affirm that." Because Jesus says: "I'm the Resurrection and the Life and if anyone believes in me they'll live even though they die." So Martha, your hope for the future, it's secure, but let me remind you of something else. Whoever lives by believing in me will never die. I want to remind you about a life that you can experience now. You see, Jesus was saying "I am the Resurrection myself and I myself am the Life that everyone is looking for." And so Jesus kind of put that before her and then He said that startling question, "Do you believe this?"

But Jesus didn't just talk, he actually demonstrated what He was coming to do. It wasn't just some ethereal conversation, "Hey, Martha, you know theoretically this is what could happen." Jesus stops talking with Martha after He teaches her this and then He makes His way over to the tomb where her brother has been buried for four days. Notice what the Scripture says: "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," Jesus said. "But,

Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." She's just keeping it real, right? She's like "I don't think it's a very good idea to move the stone. He's been dead for four days. That is not going to smell good at all. And I mean, she's grieving and still keeping it real. "When He had said this Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out, his hands and his feet were wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth was around his face. And Jesus said to everyone, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Whew.

Now, that's a real event, not a parable, this isn't story time with Uncle Jerry. This is something that actually occurred and it's startling when we begin to think about it. Jesus has said to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and I am the Life and whoever believes in me, even though they die they will live. And if you live believing in me you will never die. And then He walks over to the tomb and He says "Roll away the stone" and she's putting up a fight--"Oh Lord, you don't want to do that, he's been in there for four days, that's not going to be good!" And He says "Lazarus, come out!" Now I'm glad He used Lazarus' name because had He not maybe every dead person everywhere in the history of the universe may have come out because He has that kind of power because He Himself is the Resurrection and He Himself is the Life and so He calls him by his name and says "Lazarus, come out!". And he does. He wakes Lazarus up from the dead.

You know what's interesting about Lazarus' life when we look at it here. What could be said about Lazarus is this. He died before he woke. And he woke before he died. That's something that could be said about Lazarus.

That's why I'm continually coming back to this reminder that what Jesus wants for us is He wants us to wake up before we die so that we can wake up after we do. This is an important piece of the reality of the Good News of Jesus Christ. But He made this call personal. You know, when He talked to Martha He made this really personal. Remember what I just read to you a moment ago? Look at it again. That "Jesus said to her, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" This is what He says to Martha. Do you actually believe this?

I think that's a great question for us today. Do you believe this? That Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life and that He's the only One that can wake you up before you die so that you will then be able to wake up after you die. Do you believe this? You see, too often in our lives what happens to us is that we find ourselves sleep-walking through life. And sleep-walking is dangerous. We need to wake up before we get hurt, before we get injured. We are, in effect, we are dead people walking.

Or maybe I could say it this way. We are all Lazarus. Every single one of us. What do I mean by that? Everyone of us the Bible says is dead in our sins and our transgressions and that we are incapable of actually bringing ourselves out of that sin-filled grave spiritually. We cannot do it. You don't find dead people getting themselves, rolling away their own stones and leaving their graves. You don't find dead people doing that. We are spiritually speaking, incapable of bringing ourselves back to life, of waking ourselves up.

But here's the really good news. This story shows us that Jesus is the One who pursues us and who brings us out! He's the One who comes up and rolls away the stone so that He can breathe life where there was death. Where spiritually speaking we could not help ourselves, we could not save ourselves, we were dead in our sins and our trespasses but Jesus will walk up, move a stone, call our name and say "Come on out!" That is an incredible reminder about the power of Resurrection. You see, He's the One who comes for us.

That's the great hope that we have, ladies and gentlemen and I'll be honest with you. Today you may have come to this place and you maybe thinking to yourself here's why I came or here's why I came or here's why I came. I'm not sure why you came, but here's what I do know. That Jesus has come for you. He's come for you. You may not even know that yet. You're sitting here just going "I had no idea. So He's like sneaking up on me". Oh, no, He's not sneaking up, because if you'll listen close enough outside of the grave that you're living in in sin, you're going to hear Him call your name. He's going to call you by your name because He knows who you are and He wants to change you. You see, you've got to wake up before you die, if you want to wake up after you do. This isn't just about what happens in the future. This is about right now. And I can tell you this, Jesus was helping Martha and Mary and Lazarus learn that lesson two thousand years ago. And He's helping all kinds of people learn that lesson now. Including a guy who learned this just a few years ago. His name's Fred. I want to introduce you to his story. Take a look.

Fred: I decided to join the army. And I came home in 2002. So I applied for a position at a local collection agency. The collection agency was kind of shell shock to me, because all of my employment up to that time, all the time in the military I was combat arms, and I never worked with women. It was different for me because there was a lot of temptations. There were times I was asked to go out after work. One day out of the week, turned into two days out of the week, turned into five days out of the week. Any reason to drink I was drinking. 2006, I crossed a very large line. I entered a relationship with another woman.

My father, he would ask me on a continuous basis to come to church. He told me a lot of times that he's praying for me. And I really didn't understand why. And I remember one time I got in an argument with my father. And I said, why are you doing this? Why do you keep asking me to come to church? There's no need for God, dad. I don't need it. And he says, you know I just think that you need some faith in your life. You're not with your family. You're not with your children much.

Within that entire year, I probably saw my children probably four times in that year I was with that other woman. I was blinded or sleeping, but God was shaking me.

Valentine's Day. I was out with this woman that I was in this relationship with. And there was a woman with two children. And I could not stop thinking of, this is what it looks like with a woman with children and not a husband, and a father involved. That was just another instance of God

shaking me and trying to wake me up. I just said, you know, I am going back to my family.

Easter Sunday of 2013 was a milestone in my life. I remember waking up. I walked up to my wife, and it was probably about 8:45, and I said you know, I want to go to church. You know, I think I need to be in church this morning. And like, the look on her face, the astonishment. I think she asked me if I was joking. She said, you know, I don't think that. She was making breakfast. The kids were still messing around with their Easter baskets, things like that. And she goes, maybe next week.

So I sat down, and I had my laptop in front of me. I've heard of The Chapel before. I've went past it, but I never really gave it much thought. So I started typing in The Chapel, the screen came up, and says that a live sermon is going to be in a few minutes. So I launched it. The worship leader, he started singing a song, and the words to the song were speaking to shackles being shaken off, you're not the man you used to be. Stop fighting a fight that's already been won. You've been redeemed. I could not stop thinking about all of these times that my wife, my father, my stepmother, my mother just telling me that I just really wasn't the person I used to be. I think I watched that message, not even exaggerating, probably 10 to 15 times that day. I knew it was time to surrender.

Once I accepted Christ into my life, I think awakening is an understatement. The times that my father has asked me, I mean, 200 times, 300 times. My wife when I disrespected her, was having an affair with her friend, praying for me. I think that's where I really had my moment with

Christ. Ever since that Easter Sunday of 2013, I've gone back ever Sunday. And there's something about being here in person. And other people are going to come alongside you. And sometimes I don't feel like I deserve my family. But that's where the grace and mercy comes into. And I really feel like Christ gave me something I didn't deserve. I didn't deserve my family. My wife. I mean, the expression on her face when she saw me in church. Every Sunday that we leave church, I know it means a lot to her. If I didn't log on that Easter Sunday of 2013, where would my life be right now? I'd probably be divorced, probably wouldn't see my children, probably would be drunk somewhere. So it really did change my life. I witnessed my in-laws accepting Christ. Myself and my wife's vows were renewed under God. And I had the opportunity of being baptized alongside of my wife. I owe everything to him. I owe everything to Christ.

Pastor Jerry: Fred's life was transformed because Jesus stood outside of a spiritual grave and called his name in a unique way. Fred thought he was looking for Jesus. But Jesus had come for him.

You see, I don't know how you respond to that great question of Jesus that he asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" But that's the question that we have to address, because all of us are like Lazarus. All of us have an inability to save ourselves, and to wake ourselves up and rescue our own souls. Only Jesus can do that. The one who can raise our bodies is the one who can raise our souls. It is one in the same. He is the resurrection and the life.

You see, well we've tried to ignore that by just carrying on with our own lives, and we are basically just sleepwalking our way through life. We are dead people walking.

We think that maybe if we can just get that relationship with that guy or with that girl. Or maybe we're married and we think, I don't know, maybe I need somebody else. Or if I can just have that job, or if I can just get this amount of money. If I can just live in this home. If I can just have these dreams that I'm making for myself, then maybe this gap inside of my heart would be filled.

But it won't be, because you have a God-shaped void in your soul that only God can fill. You can keep pouring all of these things in there, and you might find some temporary distraction and some temporary relief, but you will not find that which satisfies your soul. Here's why. Because we are all dead in our sins and our trespasses, and we cannot raise our own lives from the grave.

Aren't you tired of walking around in grave clothes? That being wrapped by those same poor decisions that continue to hold their way over your life. Aren't you tired of that? Because Jesus says, I am the resurrection. I can bring you out of that. And I'm the life. I can take those grave clothes off, and teach you what it means to walk in freedom and forgiveness and love and be changed, so that you can wake before you die, so that after you die, you can know that you'll wake with him.

Today could be your day. Today could be the day that you are like Lazarus. The one where love comes and stands outside by your grave and calls your

name. But don't try and replace Jesus with something else, because your need is him.

For too long, I've wandered. For too long, I've roamed. I've looked for fulfillment, but found no home. My heart, my soul grieving. I've struggled with believing, buying into all of this deceiving. And the lies keep pouring in. They told me I'd be okay. If I made enough money at the end of the day. If I got that promotion. If I got that new car. If I got that house with that dog in the yard, I'd be fine. But they lied. Cause somewhere inside, I'm empty. I need more than what I have. And I'm even looking for material things. I've had enough of that. I need something deeper. Something real, or something more than what I'm feeling. Because right now, I'm lost. Honestly. I mean, I've heard that Jesus died for me, but what does that even mean? Doesn't everybody die? What makes this man so special? What makes him what I need? What makes his blood more powerful when He bleeds? I want to know. I want to understand. So I'm here on this day to find out. I mean, is it true? Did He really raise from the grave? Did He really heal the blind and the lame? Did He really make the world? Did He really calm the sea? If this is true, then He is what I need. So on this day, I choose to believe. Not in a fairytale. Not in a lie. But in hope. In hope that He really did rise. In faith, that He is who He says He is. In faith, that He rose. In faith, He ascended and is preparing us a home. If all this is true, then I want to know Him.

Do you believe this? That's the question that we're asking today. The same question that Jesus asked Martha. "Do you believe this?" Do you realize how incredible it is that all of us, the Bible says, have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We have all missed the mark. And as a result of

missing the mark, we now have no hope to be reconciled to God, unless God does it, because we are dead in our sins and our trespasses. We're just like Lazarus.

But do you know what it says about Jesus? For Love to stand outside of my grave and call my name? For Love to stand outside of your grave and call your name? That even though what we deserve, like Fred was talking about. "I didn't deserve any of that." That's what grace is! Grace is giving to us that which we do not deserve. And God has shown His grace to the world in giving His one and only Son, who came and lived a sinless life, and went to die on a cross. Because, you and I could never pay the debt that we owe to God by our sinfulness. We have sinned and offended a holy God. And Jesus, who was sinless, stood in our place. He became sin for us, but in Him we might become the righteousness of God. He took your place! He took your sin, your shame, your guilt. He died the death you should have died, so that you could live the life that He now lives. What an exchange love gives to us in Jesus Christ. Who would want to turn away from that and continue to be wrapped up in the grave clothes of trying to do our own thing?

I say this passionately to you today on Easter Sunday, because here's the deal. There will be people under the sound of my voice, in this room, in the East Worship Center, in our atrium, in the Andrews Chapel, there will be people under the sound of my voice at other campuses at Lockport and other places that will still ignore Jesus' transforming power in their lives. And will continue to sleepwalk through life. But sleepwalking's dangerous. Because Jesus wants to wake us up before we die, so that we can be woken

up when we die. This is serious. It has eternal consequences. And you and I. We can't save ourselves. Jesus said, not only am I the resurrection and the life, but then a few chapters later in John, he said, I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.

If you think that maybe by just doing a few good religious deeds, or showing up maybe once a year, or paying a little bit of money, or trying to do a few good works, or walking an elderly person across the street, or paying your taxes on time. If you think that that now secures a place for you eternally in God's heaven, think again. Because you would say at that point, you don't need Jesus, you can do this yourself.

But God sent His own Son, because we could never save ourselves. Were in a grave bound up by our sins, and we couldn't open the door, and we couldn't get out. But love showed up in Jesus, and stood outside and said, remove the stone and calls your name! If you, by faith, will put your trust in Him, your life can be different now, and your future can be different forever. What better day than today, what better time than now. Jesus calls you. Would you bow your heads with me for a moment.

With respect to people around you, if you don't have to move, I'd appreciate you not doing that. There are people all over the place under the sound of my voice who need to receive Jesus, who need to surrender their lives to Jesus. So that their lives can be changed in the now, and their lives can be changed for forever.

And so, I would ask you if that's you, and you know that you can't save yourself, and you need Jesus to do that in your life, and in your heart this

moment, then maybe right where you are with all the faith that you have, maybe pray something like this silently in your heart. Make it your own. It's not about my words. It's about you and your faith. If you hear Jesus' voice calling you, maybe you just pray something like this in your heart. Lord Jesus, just repeat this to him. Lord Jesus, I know that I can't wake my own soul up. I can't save my soul, either now, or forever. I realize that I'm helpless and dead without you. Because Jesus, I confess today that you are life, and you are Lord. I believe that you died for me. And I believe that you died because of my sin. But I believe that you rose from the dead, and that you have the power to raise my life up, to be a new creation. That not only changes my present, but changes my future. So I turn away from trying to run my own life anymore. And I surrender my life to you as my Savior and my Lord. Please forgive me of my sin that you died for, and come and live inside of me, and empower me to live for you.