Mike VanMeter: Whenever the phone rings, you can get news that will change your life forever. Take Ryan here, for example. He’s just received one of those phone calls. He’s just been informed that his good friend, Tom, has been killed in a motorcycle accident. Only 25 years old and now he’s gone forever. But gone where? What happens after death? Ryan doesn’t think a lot about death. In fact, he tries to avoid thinking about it all together. But on some days, reality breaks in and it just can’t be ignored. Today is one of those days. His best friend is dead. It’s just so hard to believe. He just talked to him yesterday. It might seem strange to talk about death on Easter but Easter is the very best day to think about it. The Easter story is the story of Jesus’ death, and three days later, His resurrection. This is the day that reminds the whole world that Jesus defeated death for all who believe in Him. For the Christian, death is only a passage into a better life that we were all intended to live. That’s why this morning we’re celebrating. Still, though, there’s a lot of people who are afraid of death. It’s the fear of not existing or the fear of the unknown. Everyone has asked themselves at some point, “What happens when we die?” Almost everyone intuitively knows that death is not the end. In fact, every culture and religion that anthropologists have ever found believes that our life does not end with our death. That something else happens. The Bible is perfectly clear. After death there are only two possibilities: life with God or life without God. We call one heaven and we call the other hell. And our life here on earth determines our eternal destiny. A lot of people think that it’s easy for a man or a woman to go into hell. It’s not true. The truth is that it’s not easy to go into eternity without God at all. The Bible tells us that the Lord doesn’t want anyone to spend eternity without Him. Because He loves us, He’s placed barriers in our path, signs that point us to Him in order to keep us from going into eternity without God. This morning, we’re going to travel down the road to Ryan’s life. His is a road similar to what many are traveling on today seemingly oblivious to God. It’s a road paved with all the opportunities and pursuits of this life. It’s also on this road that we encounter the barriers they will have to get past to be lost.

The first barrier is the church. Most people in the United States are in reach of a church. There’s a church, it seems, on almost every street corner in America. We drive by them on our way to work and invitations come in our mail boxes. It’s hard to ignore. We see and hear their services broadcast on our radio and television and across social media. Hundreds of churches right here in our own city have labored and strategized and prayed to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who will listen. Every Bible believing church on every corner in America is a signpost on the road of life and a blockade to eternal death. Ryan, here, has been invited to church many times. He even attended church with his friend, Tom, several times before the tragic accident that took Tom’s life. The Bible says it would be better to have never heard the truth than to hear it and ignore it. If someone has their heart set on eternity without God, they must trample over every sermon they’ve ever heard. They must ignore the witness of every church in America. Ryan, like all of us, will have to trample over this barrier in order to go to hell.

Dave Hoffman: The next barrier is friends. It’s another barrier that God has put in our lives. Many people, some of you may be here this morning, have friends who are Christians. That’s why you’re here. It may surprise you but in all probability that friend of yours has been praying for you on a regular basis. Been praying for things that happen in your life; maybe a relationship, your marriage, your children. And why is that? It’s simply because he or she cares for you. And maybe even this friend has been telling you how being a Christian has so radically changed their life. And it’s not like they’re trying to get you to join a club or some organization. They simply understand what Jesus meant when He said, “I came to this world to give you life, and that you would live an abundant life.” You’ve probably observed that they’re trying to live life differently. They’re not perfect but how they handle their problems, their confidence in making decisions, and hopefully their marriage, is different. I believe God has placed this friend in your life to speak the truth to you. Therefore, your Christian friend at some point might question or challenge you on a certain aspect of your life. And before you get upset at them and think, “Who are you?”
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yourself the question, “Why are they doing this?” The answer is simply that they care about you and they know that Jesus has a plan for your life and they don’t want you to miss it. And they certainly do not want you to face death and eternity without receiving the gift of eternal life that Jesus won for us on Calvary. To go into eternity without God, people have to trample over and ignore the friends in their life.

Mike VanMeter: The Bible. It’s God’s blueprint for us. It’s the owner’s manual that God gives us for life. The Bible is a guide that is intended to put you on the path to eternal life and to help you experience the abundant life that God promises you here on earth. In John 5:24, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and he does not come into judgment but has passed out of death and into life.” The truth in the Bible can put you on the path of life today or it can condemn you tomorrow. The Bible points you to your Savior. Someday all of us are going to stand before Him. The apostle John had a vision in Revelation chapter 20 verse 11. It said the dead, both small and great, were standing before God. There are over 6 billion Bibles in circulation in almost 5,000 different languages. Almost every single house in America has at least one Bible but to know the truth, you have to read it. Ryan’s thought a lot about reading the Bible. He’s been convicted that he should many times but there’s always something that ends up distracting him. Ryan even has lots of opinions about the Bible but he’s never really read it for himself. God has given us His Word to show us the way to eternal life and to warn us not to ignore the promises that God has made us. If you’re ultimately to be lost, you’re going to have to run through the roadblock of the Word of God. How careless Ryan has been with this precious gift that God has given him.

Dave Hoffman: The next barrier that God puts in our way is our conscience. Each person is born with a conscience. Romans 1 tells us that God has placed the knowledge of Himself in every human being. If you study other cultures, it’s interesting to see how other cultures have a sense of God’s moral law. No one’s told them. How do they know what’s right and wrong? They have a whole series of things that are right and wrong and most of them many times line up with God’s Word. Your conscience is like a candle burning in the inner depth of your heart telling you the difference between right and wrong. Your conscience is described as a candle or lamp. Proverbs 20:27, “The spirit of man is a lamp of the Lord searching out all the inner depths of his heart.” This moral search light is given by God to every person on earth. Almost all societies have laws against killing and stealing. Where did they get these ideas from? Where did they come to understand that these things are wrong? It comes from the God-given conscience. The Bible also tells us that if a human being continually goes against the conscience, the conscience at some point will be ineffective in letting that person discern good from evil, right from wrong. 1 Peter 4:2 tells us that our conscience can be seared like a hot iron. In other words, our conscience can become callous. It can be hardened. And at that point it becomes very difficult for a person to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. There’s no greater preacher than God’s Spirit working through the conscience. Often people feel miserable, conflicted, when they resist God’s Spirit working through their conscience. God has given each of us His faithful witness inside of us. Many have ignored their family and friends but were unable to resist God’s Spirit tugging at them through their conscience. If you go into eternity without God, you are going to have to trample over the God-given conscience that is placed in all of us.

Mike VanMeter: The prayers of others. Many of the opportunities that you’ve had in your life to know and to see God have come because, whether you know it or not, someone who loves you was praying for you. The Bible says when a believing person prays, great things happen. Many relatives and friends pray fervently that their loved ones might accept Jesus Christ as Savior and not be lost. They pray that they will not miss the opportunities and blessings that God has for them in this life and the life to come. There is perhaps no more impassioned barrier in our lives than the prayers of our loved ones. Many times they are the only ones who continue to pray over those long years even when it seems like their prayers might not be answered. Ryan’s grandma has been praying for her grandson for many years. And his friends and his relatives have been praying that he would be saved. In fact, here in this very sanctuary every single week fervent prayers are made for children and co-workers and spouses and
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loved ones who are on the road to destruction. In order to enter into eternity without God, you’re going to have to completely ignore the prayers of the people who love you.

Dave Hoffman: The next barrier is the sorrows of life. All of us at one time or another are going to be faced with the sorrows of life. You may be involved in a breakup of some relationship; a marriage, divorce, maybe a relationship you thought was leading to marriage. Maybe you have recently received bad news concerning an illness that you have that’s going to affect your future. People you have relied on are going to fail you. Things that you trust in are going to fail. The loss of a loved one: husband, wife, father, mother. A well loved voice is now silent and the ramifications of that silence is beginning to sink in. There will be times in all of our lives where we will feel as if we were crawling in a valley floor. The burden, the sorrow, the loss, the loneliness, and the thoughts about the future press in on us. We don’t want to think about the future. Often at times like this, God’s Holy Spirit will try to speak to us. Remind us that Jesus came into the world to share in that situation with us to help us overcome it. The book of Psalms is really a collection of truths about God. Truths that King David who wrote most of the Psalms learned in many cases during the sorrows of life. King David learned that God speaks to us through His mercy, His compassion and His love during times of sorrow. In my own life He did that and many of us here today. The sorrows of life caused us to seek after God because the burden, the loss, was more than we thought we could handle. Because God loves us, each and every one of us, He is going to try to speak to us through the sorrows of life. His message of comfort, strength and peace is water to a thirsty and parched soul. The question for so many of us is, are we listening? If a man or woman is going to go into eternity without God, miss out on the abundant life that God has for them, they’ll have to trample over the many times that God is going to try to speak to all of us through the sorrows of life.

Mike VanMeter: This next barrier is the highest of all. It’s as high as a mountain. In fact, it is a mountain. It’s Calvary where Jesus was crucified on the cross. Three people died at Calvary that day. Two thieves and the Son of God. The Savior of men. The Sacrificial Lamb who died for our sins. A crown of thorns was pushed on His brow. A spear was shoved into His side until blood and water gushed forth. He truly did die for you and for me on that mountain outside of Jerusalem. Some years earlier, Tom had taken Ryan to see the movie The Passion of the Christ. Sitting through that movie was an overwhelming experience. Ryan had to admit he had never really thought much about Christ’s crucifixion but watching those graphic scenes depicted was disturbing. Once outside the theater, though, he tried to push those images out of his mind. Back at Ryan’s house, he and Tom sat talking for a long time. Whenever Ryan had a question, Tom had an answer from the Bible that he carried with him but Ryan was still skeptical. He just didn’t want to believe. When Tom left that night, Ryan was still unconvinced of the truth of who Jesus is and the reality of what He did on the cross. God has done everything that He could to save you. The next barrier God places on the way to hell is Calvary. And if you go to hell, you’ll first have to trample over the bruised body of Jesus of Nazareth.

Dave Hoffman: The final barrier is the empty tomb. Today we celebrate a fact of history: the empty tomb. A historical event which has more impact on your life than any decision you’ll ever make, anything that’ll happen to you. Nothing that has ever happened is more important in your life than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact of Jesus’ resurrection has already changed millions of lives in the first three months of this year, as it did mine. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead three days after He was crucified is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul tells us that our faith is worthless if Christ did not rise from the dead. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead then the Bible can’t be trusted. And who would want to base their life on a book that can’t be trusted? If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then we who are Christians are merely putting our faith in a myth, a fairy tale. You might be asking, “Well, how can you be so sure of Jesus’ resurrection? Of something that happened 2,000 years ago?” Well, in the case of Jesus, we can be really sure. Not only does the New Testament give us precise information about Jesus but many contemporary non-Christian historians wrote of Him. And I don’t want to bore you with their names. That Jesus was crucified, that His dead body was put into a tomb and three days later His body was missing from that heavily guarded tomb is a historical fact beyond dispute. There are more written documents
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giving us details of Jesus’ death (before, during and after) than any other person in all of the ancient world. Five hundred people saw Him over a period of 40 days after He had risen from the dead. The apostle Peter tells the Christians in Corinth—if you’re doubting that Jesus rose from the dead, go talk to the many who are still alive. Talk to them. They saw Him. There were far too many people in the city of Jerusalem who could have thoroughly contradicted and squelched what Jesus’ disciples were saying about Jesus, that He had risen from the dead. They couldn’t squelch it. They couldn’t keep it down because too many people had seen Him alive. We’re told in Matthew 28 (and I read it at the beginning of this service) that at dawn, the first day of the week, a severe earthquake occurred and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled away that large stone. His appearance was like lightening. His garments were white as snow and the guards in front of the tomb shook for fear of Him. In other words, they fell down as dead men as our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, walked out of that tomb. That’s what we celebrate today. If you’re a Christian, your life will never be the same because of the power of Christ that lives within you, the power that raised Jesus from the dead. The fact that Jesus walked out of that tomb substantiates everything Jesus said about life and death, about the promises of God. The Bible tells us that it’s God’s will that each of us experience first of all eternal life after death but also an abundant life here on earth. Being lost, missing eternal life, missing the abundant life that God has for us is not as easy as people think. It’s hard. It’s hard to crash through all these barriers that we’ve gone through this morning. That’s what this message is about. It takes a great deal of effort for someone to knock down these barriers that God puts in front of our lives. The most quoted verse in the Bible is John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” What happened on that first Easter Sunday continues to transform lives today. We see it on a regular basis. When the angel declared the good news at the empty tomb, “He is not here. He is risen!” he was declaring to each of us the possibility of a new life. So, the greatest final barrier is the empty tomb. Not a myth. Not a legend. A historical fact. The final barrier that separates us from God is the miracle of the empty tomb. The final barrier that God puts in front of us so that we don’t have to be separated from God is the empty tomb. For Ryan, for any of us, to miss out on the gift of eternal life, the gift of abundant life, we have to ignore the fact of the empty tomb. But fortunately, the barriers that God put in Ryan’s life we’ve gone through today had its effect. One evening alone thinking about eternity, thinking about his life, thinking about what his friends had been telling him, Ryan got on his knees and gave his life to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the moment he did that, the Holy Spirit came into his life, the power of the resurrected Christ came into his life and his life will never be the same. He will live it differently. He will experience it differently. And that’s what we celebrate today. Amen.