John Donovan died on May 6, 2005, in a snowstorm on Southern California’s Mt. San Jacinto. He was fifty-nine-years-old.

He had spent a lot of time around here. He worked for a while at Central State Hospital in Fredericksburg. He loved Virginia’s portion of the Appalachian Trail. He lived for a while with a fellow hiker named Ken Baker in an old farmhouse near Richmond.

But he died lost and alone. Near, but not on, the Pacific Crest Trail. He was known as headstrong so his friends weren’t all that surprised that he was off the trail, making his own way.

John Donovan was a nice, compassionate guy. His demise was not the result of a bad character. His demise, like the demise of many hikers, was the result of not being on the trail.

His independent, stubborn willingness to ignore trails worked until May 6, 2005. That day his trail came to an end.

Jesus spoke of how critical it is to make sure you’re on the right path. It’s in our text for today:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

For weeks we’ve been talking about selected sayings from the Sermon on the Mount. Today marks the conclusion of that series. In today’s text, Jesus is rapidly headed toward the conclusion of his mountainside sermon. So he extends an invitation. Jesus had described a life worth living and now he is inviting people to it.

But he was realistic. He said, “I know not many of you will take me up on my offer. For this way is narrow and few there are who take it. Most will choose the broader, easier path.”

It’s worthy of note that there are not multiple right spiritual trails, or paths.

That’s not a common theme nowadays. We Americans like our choices.

I have, for example, an iPod. And with my iPod I get only the music I want. In the old days, I’d have to buy an entire 8-track tape, or later a cassette, with a dozen or so songs on it, some of which I didn’t like. With an iPod, I log onto iTunes and download only what I want, and I leave the rest.

I have a real smorgasbord of songs on there. I do have Christian music. I have Casting Crowns and Mercy Me and The Brethren, a group that has sung here many times.
I’ve also got the Coasters and the Cornelius Brothers, John Mayer and James Taylor, Rascal Flatts and Zach Brown.

I’ve got Paul Revere and the Raiders as well as Hootie and the Blowfish.

I confess I also have a few by Barry Manilow and even one by the Backstreet Boys. (My man-card is in jeopardy, I know. But let it be known that I do not have Bieber Fever.)

I have “Mama Told Me Not to Come,” and “Papa Was a Rolling stone.” I have Sweet Home Alabama and Georgia on My Mind. I’m so cool I even have It Started with a Whisper by The Neon Trees. (At least that was cool a year ago.)

Here’s my point. The iPod is a symbol of our consumeristic mentality. We want to pick and choose. We want what we want and only what we want.

And that’s not limited to our iPods. It affects our spirituality, too. Americans increasingly want to pick and choose from among the many spiritual ideas out there.

Just last Saturday a prominent story in USA Today was titled, Relationships are the new religion for many. It was about how many people now have given up on so-called organized religion and, to quote the article, “redefined their spirituality.”

One young lady was quoted, “Religion has evolved over the years. I feel like it's whatever you want it to be.”

So there you have it. “Religion as whatever you want it to be. Spirituality a la carte. “Have it your way” faith.

That’s our new culture.

Except it’s not a completely new culture.

Jesus lived in a pluralistic place, a land of many religions. There Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, and God’s human spokespersons such as Luke and the apostle Paul, addressed a society at least as religiously pluralistic as ours, and they did not hesitate to say there is one right path, one answer to humanity’s deepest need. And today we celebrate his resurrection.

Truth is not chosen like an entrée off a menu. Truth is recognized and followed.

Jesus was clear as crystal. There is not an infinite array of right choices.

I cannot say anything more important. There are only two possibilities. A right one and a wrong one.

The broad way is the wrong way and in many ways it’s easy.

The road is wide.

On this path you can be charmingly tolerant and wonderfully lenient. You won’t feel like your style is cramped or that anyone is offended.

It’s the path of least resistance.

And many are traveling it.
I read in a hiking magazine, by the way, that one of the main reasons people get lost is “hiking with a group.” Safety in numbers is an illusion. It gives you a false sense of security. You’re more likely not to be prepared (“Someone else will bring a map and a compass,” you think) and you figure that if you are with others you are fine.

In other words, “I’ll just follow the crowds” is not a good approach in the woods or in life.

But the wrong, broad path doesn’t end well.

“Its end is destruction,” said Jesus.

Reminds me of Proverbs 16:25, “There is a way that seems right to a man but its end is death.”

Death is often used in the Bible as a symbol of eternal separation from God and all that’s good in a place called Hell.

The road to hell is paved indeed with good intentions, they say. But it’s still the road to hell.

The narrow way—the right way—is hard.

Now this “narrow way” is not a “narrow minded” way. It’s not a stifling way, a prudish way, a pridefully pious way, or a stuffy way or a square way.

It is simply a narrow way. Meaning we enter empty-handed, humbly into it.

Have you been through Fat Man’s Squeeze at Ruby Falls or the narrow passageways up Old Rag? You go humbly through there and you don’t carry a lot of stuff.

And when we enter this right and narrow path of which Jesus spoke we come humbly and empty-handed. Here’s an example: One evening I was out in a Nigerian village with several students from the seminary where I taught. We held an evangelistic service and showed a movie with the title, "The Charm." The movie was about a man who tried juju, otherwise known as black magic. He bought a charm for good luck then saw the folly in that and, after a personal crisis, became a follower of Jesus. In the climactic scene he threw his “charm” into a bonfire at an outdoor Christian service as the crowd sang, “I have decided to follow Jesus.” For the rural African setting it was a powerful film.

Well, the service ended and we began to pack up the screen and projector and such. We had just gotten everything loaded when a young man walked up to us carrying a large duffel bag full of “charms”—items used in black magic. During the service he had been convinced of his destructive lifestyle. He had decided to give his life to Jesus. He said to us, “Here, you can burn these if you want to. You can throw them away if you want to. I don't want them anymore.” I later looked through that bag of stuff like bones and blood-stained rags and was amazed at the life which this young man had left in order to follow Jesus.

Now, we might not have bones and blood-stained rags, but for anyone, entering this narrow way means leaving our stuff—good, bad and ugly, and entering humbly and empty-handedly into this narrow way. We bring our lives and lay them down at the foot of the cross and humbly begin to follow.

In the hymn, Rock of Ages, Augustus Toplady put it this way:
Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to the cross I cling.
Naked, come to you for dress; helpless, look to you for grace.

And once you’re in, it’s demanding. Some folks won’t like you and the Tempter will target you. Your desires become subject to God’s desires and humility is more important than popularity and, well, it’s hard.

Why follow the path?
Not because we who follow it follow it well.
The famous author, Leo Tolstoy once pleaded, “Don’t judge the path I recommend by the way I walk it…If I know the way home and I’m walking along the path drunk, is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side?”
I’m with Tolstoy: Please don’t judge the path I walk by the fact that I walk it so imperfectly. Consider the path itself.

Because Jesus said it results in life.
Life that is full. Life with deep purpose. Life that is headed somewhere. Life with a unique potential to drink in the splendor of creation. Not a problem-free, fairy tale life, but the best we can expect in an imperfect world, and then life beyond this in a place that is perfect—in the presence of God Himself.
I live that life. This stuff is not just something I read about and teach about; I live it.
Now, I don’t exactly glow, and my demeanor is not so glorious that I can imagine a lot of folks wanting to imitate me.
But I know that life of which Jesus speaks. A life that is deep and a life with eternal hope.

So how does one begin that journey down the good-but-narrow path? Well, it has a lot to do with Easter.
Romans 10:9 reads, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Let’s divide that verse.

First, if you confess that Jesus is Lord.
“Lordship” is not the kind of image that is common today. If the word “lord” is used the conversation is probably about something British or medieval. So let me tell you a story that might make the idea a little more accessible.
It’s really a confession. I was living in Venezuela right out of college working for two years alongside missionaries. Keri Williams and I had dated in college but had drifted apart after my move to Venezuela.
But one Sunday night she called me. (And I do love to remind her that she called me!) Then, she loves to remind me that during that phone conversation I asked the question: “How soon could we get married?”

We decided she’d come down to visit. But there was a problem. Another young lady was already planning a trip to come. So I called the other young lady and I said, “Look, Keri Williams is coming and I think we’re going to get engaged…But I still want you to come; I just need to make sure that you two don’t overlap!”

No! I didn’t do that! I had to call this really sweet young lady to tell her not to come. I had to be honest with her. I had to say, “I'm in love with Keri Williams.” It was an easy choice, but to turn my life to Keri I had to turn from someone else!

Remember: I’m talking about “Lordship.” I don’t mean to imply that being married to Keri is like having a boss! I’m trying to illustrate what it means to turn from things to Jesus. The biblical word “repent” carries the image of turning, and to enter the path to life we have to turn to Jesus and away from other things that would compete with him for priority in our lives. (The question is not “will you live perfectly?” But the question certainly is, “Will you allow Jesus to be ‘Lord’ to you? Will you let him be supreme to you? Will you center your life around Jesus?”)

…and believe that God raised Him from the dead

A friend who is not a follower of Jesus asked me if I believe it’s necessary believe that Jesus rose from the dead in order to follow Him. I answered with the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. There it says that, without the resurrection, our faith is futile.

Belief in the resurrection is at the heart of what it means to be a Christ-follower.

When we say we believe God raised Jesus from the dead we’re saying we believe death is not the end, God’s power is supreme, and Jesus is unique among all the religious of history.

So, yes, to be a full-fledged Jesus-follower belief in the resurrection of Jesus is a non-negotiable.

You have a decision to make.

The right road is a choice, not an accident. You don’t enter through that narrow gate by coming to a church or having Christian parents. It’s a conscious decision.

Let me ask you: Are you on the narrow, right path?

I’m not asking if you’ve had a feeling or seen a sign. I’m asking, Have you made that decision to say “Jesus is Lord” and have you believed? God has raised him from the dead with the kind of depth that it is transforming your life?

In the book of Isaiah God promised us the following about spiritual forks in the road, “You will hear a voice behind you saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21). Can’t you hear that voice?
A Venezuelan young man considering the direction his life would head once said to me his heart was going “poomp, poomp, poomp, poomp, poomp.” “What do you think that is?” I asked him. Jose Gregorio answered, “I think it’s Jesus.”

Some of you have heard the whisper of God’s Spirit. Some of you have sensed the racing of your heart as you consider a spiritual decision. Some are in the fork of the road—where you will decide whether you will follow Jesus or trust in your own goodness.

I invite you to the good and narrow way. I invite you to Jesus.