

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! As I noted at the Sunrise Service, the music on Easter morning just stirs my soul. Do you feel the same excitement, the wonder, the joy, and the assurance this morning as we sing those old familiar hymns – *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today, Up from the Grave He Arose, and His Lives?* On Easter morning Jesus walked out of the tomb defeating death and sin forever more, and opening the way for the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life for all who will accept Him as their Lord and Savior.

While Christmas is the most celebrated Christian holiday, I truly believe that Easter is by far the most important; because it defines who we are as Christians; what we believe; and what is promised to us. Without Easter, Christmas is just another day on the calendar. While we should celebrate Easter every day, today especially we remember and worship the Risen Lord. Because the Resurrection is at the heart of our faith. It is so important that it is recorded in all four gospels. This morning, let's look at the account recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John, the first eighteen verses.

Read John 20:1-18

Isn't it interesting that this year Easter comes on the day before April 1, April Fools' Day? Have you ever played an April Fools' prank on anyone? This is a day when people try to play practical jokes on each other. Now some people enjoy pulling pranks on other people; sometimes it's fun; however, at other times it can be downright annoying depending on the person and the joke. Now one of the best pranks occurred on April 1, 1957, when the British Broadcasting Company showed Swiss farmers picking freshly grown spaghetti from a bush. Within hours, they received hundreds of requests on where to purchase these spaghetti plants. Then in 1998, after Burger King advertised a "Left-Handed Whopper," scores of clueless customers requested the fake sandwich. And in 2015, Cottonelle tweeted that it was introducing left-handed toilet paper for those southpaws out there.

Do you think that God has ever pulled an April Fools' joke on anybody? Over the years I have come to the conclusion that God also has a sense of humor. If you doubt that God has a sense of humor, then look at the person on either side of you this morning.

In a way, April Fools' Day is doing the unexpected, and as you read and study the Bible, you soon discovered that God is always doing the unexpected. At Christmas we celebrated the Son of God coming to live among us. You would have thought that because of who He was, He would be born in a palace, and His birth announced worldwide. But that was not God's way; Jesus was born to a poor peasant family in a stable and the announcement of His birth was made to lowly shepherds working the night shift. Throughout His ministry, Jesus did the unexpected associating with sinners and the outcasts of society, healing the sick, challenging

the religious authorities and raising the dead. The Jewish people thought the Messiah would drive out the hated Romans and reestablish Israel to the glory days of King David. But God had another plan. His Son would die the death of a common criminal on a cross and then defy logic and rise from the grave on the third day fulfilling the words of John 3:17 – “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

When you look closely at the events during Holy Week as recorded in the four Gospels, you see the unexpected happening. For example, did the people shouting “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” on Palm Sunday have any idea what surprises God had in store for them in the coming week? Or who would have expected that the Lord Jesus, who was always helping those in need and showing kindness to all, would enter the Temple courtyard and start over-turning the tables of the moneylenders and driving the vendors from the Temple in anger, objecting to them turning His Father’s house into a marketplace, and putting the pursuit of money and material possessions ahead of their desire to know God better?

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, Luke tells us that He wept, probably because He knew the destruction that this city would face in a few years because of its rejection of God and His Son. But I also think that Jesus could have been thinking about what lay ahead for Him; that He would be abandoned by His friends and even betrayed by one of them. He had personally chosen these twelve men and had shared fellowship with them over the past three years. Can you imagine the disciples’ reaction when Jesus announced at supper on Thursday night that one of them would betray Him? It never crossed their minds, but Jesus knew it; it was part of God’s unexpected plan.

And do you remember what happened that night before supper? In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told that as the evening meal was being served, Jesus got up from the table, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of His disciples. Here’s the master, the teacher, the Son of God, the One who at the end of time will rule the world with His Father, humbly bending down and doing the work of a servant. This act of kindness astonished the disciples and caught them off guard. By His example, Jesus demonstrated servant leadership, a trait that was as uncommon back then as it is now. Jesus said that He came to serve, not be served. Now this was definitely contrary to the leadership style of most so-called political and religious leaders back then and certainly today.

In addition to this unusual and unexpected concept of servant leadership, Jesus also shocked His disciples and us today by telling us that we should love one another. In other words, we are to show agape love to all, seeking the best for others no matter what they have said or done to us. Here is another concept that is foreign to the human race, putting the interests of others

before our own. In this me-first world, Jesus calls us to do the unexpected, to put others before ourselves.

As the meal was ending and after Jesus had informed the disciples that one of them would betray Him, Jesus tells the disciples that they will all desert Him before the night is over. This is when Peter makes his bold statement that even though the rest of the disciples may abandon Jesus, he will always be there for Jesus. Then Jesus informs Peter that before the night is over, he will deny knowing Jesus not once, but three times.

Peter, of course, doesn't believe this; after all he is the unofficial leader of this band of twelve, the rock, the strongest and bravest one. But we all know what happened next; Peter as predicted denied knowing Jesus three times. Luke in his gospel records one of the most dramatic scenes during this Passion Week. After Peter's third denial, Luke states that Jesus turned and looked Peter straight in the eye, and then Peter remembered what Jesus had said. So, Peter ran into the night and wept bitterly. Oh, who would have thought that the man's man, the John Wayne of his day, Peter would break down and cry like a baby. But God had to break Peter's pride before he could become the great Apostle and leader of the church as part of God's unexpected plan.

In addition, as you read the accounts of the crucifixion, you find many more unexpected events such as the absence of most of the disciples at the cross with only the women and the Apostle John present; the thief receiving forgiveness on the cross; the veil in the Temple being torn in half opening access to God for all people; darkness covering the earth during the three hours that Jesus was on the cross; a massive earthquake that opens up the tombs; the testimony of the centurion that Jesus was truly the Son of God; and the burial of Jesus by two of the Jewish religious leaders and not His disciples or family.

Following His resurrection, Jesus appears to His disciples twice in the Upper Room. Thomas is absent the first time and the others tell him later that they have seen the Lord and that He is alive. It must have been April 1<sup>st</sup> because Thomas appears to think that they are trying to pull a fast one on him. He says that unless he sees the holes in Jesus' hands from the nails of the cross and the wound in Jesus' side from the Centurion's spear, he will not believe. Later Jesus appears again in the Upper Room and Thomas is present. April Fools'; He is alive. Jesus tells Thomas and all of us today: "Because you have seen you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Do you believe, even though you have not seen the Risen Christ with the holes in His hands and the wound in His side? Since that day, the devil has continually tried to pull a fast one on the human race with such lies, misconceptions, and April Fools' jokes such as God is dead; there is no God; Jesus Christ was not human; Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a family; and

unconfirmed reports of people finding the tomb of Jesus and His family. Then there are the three classic lies of the devil: there's no hell; there's plenty of time to get right with God; and Jesus did not rise from the grave, thus there is no eternal life and the grave is our final destination.

In a way, the devil may have invented April Fools' Day, but he won't get the last laugh. Do you know what the ultimate April Fools' joke was? I heard a song once, but I can't remember the title. But in it the devil is dancing and rejoicing outside the tomb of Jesus, thinking that he had finally won, defeated God, and put an end to His plan of salvation. He's dancing around, laughing, and having a good ole time on Easter morning around daybreak when he suddenly hears the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb start moving and Jesus walks out in all His glory. You can almost hear God saying: "April Fools'" and the angels laughing!

Don't let the devil fool or deceive you. I know that things may seem bad at times and we can all get discouraged, but because of the empty tomb and what Jesus Christ has done for us there is hope in this world; hope for each one of us; there is also love in this world for each one of us; there is joy and peace for all. Just like the people and the disciples back then had no idea what was going to happen during Holy Week, so we don't know what is going to happen today, tomorrow, or this coming week. But we can be sure of one thing and that is that God is in control, and He has promised through His Son Jesus Christ an abundant life to all who will give their life to Him and follow Him. Never, never underestimate God; He is the Master of the unexpected and with Him nothing is impossible! Let Him surprise you. He has a plan and we are called to walk in faith trusting in His abiding presence and grace. One last thought, God loves you and that's no joke! Hear the Good News. He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Amen