

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! As I noted at the Sunrise Service, the hymns on Easter morning just stir my soul. Do you feel the same excitement, the wonder, the joy and the assurance when we sing those old familiar hymns – *Up from the Grave He Arose, He Lives* and *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*? Because that's what it is all about; that's why we are Christians. On Easter morning Jesus rose from the grave conquering death forever and opening the way to eternal life for all who will believe in Him. While Christmas is the most celebrated Christian holiday, in my opinion Easter is by far the most important; because it defines who we are, what we believe, and what is promised to us. While we should celebrate Easter every day, today especially we remember and worship the Risen Lord.

Today is also the end of our annual pilgrimage through Lent; over the past forty days, hopefully we each have given serious consideration to the question that Jesus asked in Matthew 16:15 – “Who do you say that I am?” Each Sunday during Lent we have focused on the questions – who is Jesus Christ? What does He mean to me and my life? What is my personal relationship with Him? To help us answer these questions and to gain additional insight into who Jesus is, we have been discussing the seven “I Am” sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John.

In these seven self-descriptions, Jesus identifies Himself with symbols of everyday life that His audience could easily relate with. Through these common symbols, Jesus gives us insight into who He really is. By studying these, hopefully, we have each discovered something new about our Lord and Savior and have grown in our personal relationship with Him. Over the past six Sundays, we have heard Jesus describe Himself as the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Gate for the Sheep, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, and last Sunday as the Way, the Truth and the Life. But we have saved the best for last. While the text for this morning is not taken from one of the traditional Gospel stories of the Resurrection, I believe that this “I Am” saying will give us additional insight into the Resurrection.

Before we read this text, let me first give you some background into what is happening. Jesus has received word that one of His best friends, Lazarus, was dying. Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary sent Him this message: “Lord, the one you love is sick.” While they did not ask that Jesus come immediately, you can sense that they expected Him to come right away to heal their brother. However, even though Jesus had visited their home many times and loved this family very much, He delayed going because the death of Lazarus was part of God's plan to bring salvation to the world. This is one of those events that you don't understand while it is happening, but in hindsight the purpose becomes clear. Now let's see how this particular event fits into the Resurrection story. I will be reading from the eleventh chapter of John, verses 17 through 27.

Read John 11:17-27

As you look at this story, you may wonder why did Jesus, who had healed so many people during His ministry, delay in responding to Martha and Mary's cry for help. Why didn't He come right away; couldn't He have healed Lazarus from a distance like He did the centurion's son? These were His best friends. You can sense Martha's disappointment, and a little anger, when she meets Jesus. Her emotions spill out in her greeting: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, what kept you? Where have you been; we sent for you four days ago? But as soon as she spoke Martha realized that she had let her emotions get the best of her, and she followed up with her statement of faith: "Even now, I know that whatever You ask God will give You."

However, the question still remains – why did Jesus wait four days? Well, the answer may lie in the Jewish belief that the spirit of the departed hovered around his tomb for four days, seeking entrance back into the body. But after four days the spirit finally left because the body had begun to decay. Thus, by waiting the four days, Jesus was able to demonstrate without any doubt that He had power over death, not only His own, but others also. Do you see the significance in this? If Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead which He does in the following verses, then He can also raise us; thus, there is truly life after death!

After Martha states her faith in Jesus's ability to ask God for whatever He wants, Jesus replies: "Your brother will rise again." Martha acknowledges that she believes in a general resurrection on the last day based on the teachings and concepts from the Old Testament; but the text indicates that Martha does not fully understand what Jesus is talking about. So Jesus gave new meaning to this belief when He stated in verse 25: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" This question – do you believe – is not only directed to Martha in our text, but also to you and me on this Easter morning? Do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Resurrection?

As Christians who worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, the question for each of us is – what is the Resurrection and do we truly believe in it? So how would you define Resurrection? The word "resurrection" comes from the Latin word meaning rising from the dead or returning to life. 1 Corinthians 15 indicates that it is the future rising from the dead of all those who believe in Jesus Christ. It means that the grave is not our final resting place. It means that death was defeated once and for all by Jesus when the stone was rolled away and He walked out of that dark, cold tomb on Easter Morning. As the Apostle Paul states at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians – "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Then he makes that famous statement – "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

So, the question for us this morning is do you truly believe that Jesus rose from the grave? Have you ever stopped and given this basic belief of the Christian faith any serious thought, or do you just recite the line in the Apostles' Creed – "On the third day He rose from the dead" without even thinking about what it means? But don't feel bad, if you have ever had any doubt or have any doubt now, you are not alone. Take the disciples for example. Over and over, Jesus told the disciples that the Son of Man would suffer, die and be raised up from the grave on the third day.

In third chapter of John, Jesus in His late-night conversation with Nicodemus stated that just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the desert to heal the Israelites, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him would be healed of their sins and have eternal life. Later in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus tells His disciples that when He is lifted up from the earth He will draw all people unto Himself.

In addition, the charge that the Jewish religious leaders brought against Jesus when they had Him tried and crucified was that Jesus had previously stated that He would destroy the Temple and raise it up again in three days. They thought that He was talking about the actual temple building when in reality Jesus was referring to His own physical body. In Matthew 12:40, Jesus says that just like Jonah was three days in the belly of the great fish, so He will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth – the tomb.

Over and over again, Jesus told the disciples that He would rise from the grave. One of the last things He said to them on the night that He was arrested, as they made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, was: "After I am risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." But there is not one solitary passage in the New Testament that indicates that the disciples had any idea what He was talking about. As a matter of fact, it appears that the only ones who might have understood what He was talking about were the Jewish authorities who had him crucified. Because once Jesus' body was placed in the tomb, the religious leaders went to Pontus Pilate and asked him to seal the tomb and place guards around it.

For some reason the disciples just did not understand or believe right away. Look what happened on Easter morning. At daybreak, did they run to the tomb expecting to find it empty? No way, they were at home sleeping like most people on Sunday morning. In fact, the only ones who went to the tomb that morning were the women, and the only reason they went was to anoint Jesus' body for final burial preparations. They had no hope or anticipation of meeting the Risen Lord. And then when the women went back and told the disciples that the tomb was empty, the disciples didn't believe them. So Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Luke tells us that Peter went in, saw that the tomb was empty, and went away wondering to himself what had happened.

Are you still wondering? Well, I know one thing for sure; if you seek Jesus, don't go to the cemetery; He's not there. Isn't it interesting that after Easter morning, we have no record of the disciples or women ever going back to the tomb? Why should they? The tomb was empty; it was only a temporary resting place for Jesus.

However, just for a moment, let's explore what would happen if there was no resurrection. If tomorrow someone would find a 2000-year-old tomb in Jerusalem with the body of Jesus in it. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:14 that if this was true, then our faith in Jesus Christ would be in vain and we would still be under the curse of sin and death. Have you ever thought what the world would be like if there was no resurrection?

As Christians we would have nothing to believe in; our individual faith would be empty; we would still have to face the consequences of our sins; our God would be a god of judgment and punishment and not of love, grace and forgiveness; death would be final; there would be no hope beyond the grave, no hope of ever seeing our loved ones again; there would be no hope for eternal life and salvation; there would basically be no love in life; the evil forces would be in control of the world and the devil would have won. But don't fret, there is no body. The skeptics will never find it, because unlike the founders of other religions and so-called faiths, there is no body; the tomb is empty! He is risen!

Someone has said that perhaps the greatest evidence of the Resurrection is the transformation of Jesus' disciples. It was the Resurrection which transformed Peter's fear into courage and Thomas' doubt into faith. It was the Resurrection which changed the Jewish Sabbath into the Christian Sunday, and a small group of Jewish believers into the Christian Church. It was the Resurrection which changed Saul the Pharisee who initially persecuted the Church into Paul one of its greatest Apostles.

And this transformation is not restricted to the original disciples or the Bible. Throughout history, men and women have tried to prove that Jesus did not rise from the grave and that this basic belief of Christianity is false. But guess what, many of these same individuals after examining the evidence and interviewing Christians in the end have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. One of these skeptics was Lee Strobel, an investigative reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. In his book *The Case for Christ* which we will start studying on Wednesday night, Lee asked tough questions of leading scholars and experts to disprove the Resurrection. However, in the end, he concluded that it actually requires more faith for an atheist to maintain their unbelief than it would to trust in Jesus Christ. Lee, once an atheist, is now one of Jesus' best preachers.

So what do you believe? It's a personal decision for each one of us; one that we each must make for ourselves because no one else can make it for us. As for me, I believe; I believe in the

Resurrection; I believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried in a borrowed tomb; I believe that on the third day, He rose from the grave, conquering death forever. I believe that the tomb was empty on Easter morning and because of that I, as a believer, have been freed through God's amazing grace from the grip of sin in my life, have the opportunity to have a personal relationship with my Lord and Savior, and to live an abundant life. I have no fear of the grave because it is not my final resting place because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb; I will spend eternity with God and my loved ones. What about you, do you believe this with all your heart? I hope and pray that you feel the same way. Hear the Good News: He is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God. Amen