

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! As I stated 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 *He Lives*? Because that's what Easter is all about; that's why we are Christians. On Easter morning Jesus rose from the grave defeating death and sin forever more and opening the way to forgiveness and eternal life for all who believe. While Christmas is the most celebrated and commercialized 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. Without Easter, Christmas would be just another day on the calendar. While we should celebrate Easter every day, today especially we remember and worship the Risen Lord.

Isn't this a beautiful morning? On a morning like this centuries ago, a group of women went to the tomb early on Easter morning to anoint Jesus' body for the final preparations for burial. The Gospel of Mark says that it was just after sunrise, while Matthew says at dawn and John says while it was still dark, like when Judy and I left home this morning. They made this journey without any anticipation or hope of finding the tomb empty or meeting the Risen Lord. But the tomb was empty that morning and they hurried back to tell the disciples who at first didn't believe them. So, Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself. Luke tells us that Peter went in, saw that the tomb was empty, and then went away wondering to himself what had happened.

Peter went away wondering what had happened. Wondering, where is the body? Is Jesus really alive? Is this what Jesus meant when He said that He would rise from the grave after three days? This morning, over 2,000 years later, many people are still confused as the women were, still doubting like the disciples, and still wondering like Peter. They are still looking for Jesus among the dead. Some still have not found Him and established a personal relationship with Him. And unfortunately, some people don't even know that He exists and what He has done for all of us.

From the beginning of time, men and women have raised the age-old question articulated by Job in the Old Testament: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" Century after century everybody, the famous and the unknown, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the young and the old have all marched into the chambers of death. From the beginning of time, people have feared death and the grave. But in God's divine plan for salvation, His Son Jesus Christ answered Job's question on a cross at Calvary on Good Friday and in an empty tomb on Easter morning. As the Apostle Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 15: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Jesus Christ defeated death forever for all who will believe in Him.

The basic truth of Christianity is found in the announcement by the angel on Easter morning in the Gospel of Matthew: "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead." The message of Easter is not an argument, but a divine proclamation. The angel declared that Jesus Christ had conquered death and risen to life. The Bible records numerous appearances of the Risen Lord to the disciples and others, over 500 people, over a forty-day period. The empty tomb spoke volumes of halleluiahs declaring that Jesus Christ was no longer dead, but alive.

As a family watched the Easter story on TV, their young daughter was deeply moved. As Jesus was tortured and killed tears rolled down her cheeks. She sat in silence until after Jesus had been taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. Then suddenly she grinned and shouted: "Now comes the best part." During Lent, we have discussed and studied the suffering and death of Jesus but now comes the best part! The tomb is empty! Jesus has risen from the grave! He is alive!

As we celebrate Easter during these difficult times in our lives and the world, I hope that you will remember that the Resurrection gives us hope for living each day. And as one of our hymns says: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; because He lives, all fear is gone." Let me share a story that you may have heard before to illustrate this point. One Easter Sunday a preacher brought an old beat-up bird cage and sat it next to the pulpit. During the sermon, he held up the cage and said: "You might be wondering why I have this old bird cage up here, because we don't normally associate a bird cage with Easter."

But let me tell you the story of this cage. Several days ago, I noticed a little boy in tattered and torn blue jeans walking down an alley, swinging this bird cage. Clinging to the bottom of the cage were several small field sparrows that he had caught. So, I stopped him and asked: "Say, Sonny, what do you have there?" To which he replied: "Oh, I got some old birds." "Well, what are you going to do with them," I asked. "Oh, I'm going to mess around with them for a while; tease them, something like that." "Well," I asked, "when you get tired of messing with them, what are you gonna to do with them?" He thought for a moment and then said: "Well, I got a couple of cats at home and they really like birds. So, I think I'll just let them have the birds."

The preacher said that his heart went out for those little birds; so, he made the boy an offer. "How much do you want for those birds?" Surprised, the boy said: "Mister, these birds ain't no good." "Well," replied the preacher, "regardless, how much would you take for them?" The boy paused for a moment and said: "How about two dollars?" "Sold," said the preacher as he reached into his pocket for the two dollars. The little boy handed over the cage and walked away pleased with his stroke of luck.

After the boy left, the pastor lifted the cage door and shoved the birds out of the cage, and they flew away, free at last. The empty bird cage is a perfect illustration of how the devil has messed with the human race since the beginning of time keeping us trapped in sin and fear. But then out of love for us, God sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the price for our freedom on the cross, setting us free, free from the bondage of sin and the fear of death. And if that wasn't enough, then God opened the tomb door and raised Jesus from the dead offering the promise of eternal life to all who will believe in Him.

The tomb was empty that Easter morning and because of that we, as believers, have been freed from the grip of sin in our life through the amazing grace of God. In addition, we have the opportunity to have a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, and to live an abundant life. We should have no fear of the grave because it is not our final resting place because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb.

On that first Easter morning, Peter went away wondering, the women were confused and the disciples were doubting. They were looking for Jesus among the dead. Are you still looking for Jesus? You don't have to go to a cemetery, a mountain top or a sacred site to find Jesus; He's right here, right now. All you have to do is stop, turn around and accept Him into your heart. Because if the truth be known; He came looking for each one of us over 2000 years ago in a manger in Bethlehem and on a cross at Calvary. Don't let another day go by without turning around and responding to His loving voice calling you to come back home. Easter does not have to be restricted to one day a year. If we truly believe in Jesus, then Easter can and should be celebrated each and every day in your heart. Every day is Easter for those who follow the Risen Lord and Savior. With each dawn we rise and say with the psalmist: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Hear the Good News: He is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God. Amen