

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! 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 walked out of the tomb defeating death and sin forever more, and opening the way to the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life for all who believe.

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; what we believe; and what is promised to us. Without Easter, Christmas is just another day on the calendar. While we should celebrate it 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 found in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John, the first ten verses.

Read John 20:1-10

While each of the four Gospels records the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave, there are differences in each of the written accounts. For example, in our text for this morning, John says that only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on Easter morning. But the Gospel of Matthew indicates that another Mary went with her. Mark has Salome the mother of James and John joining them on this journey of love. And Luke adds Joanna and notes that there were other women present. Matthew tells us that a violent earthquake shook the area and that an angel of the Lord came down and rolled the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. The angel tells the women that Jesus is not there, but is risen. As they are leaving Jesus meets and greets them.

In Mark, the women are wondering as they walk to the tomb how they will move the heavy stone so that they can anoint the body of Jesus. In their grief, no one had thought to ask some of the men to accompany them to roll away the stone. When they get there, however, they find that the stone has already been rolled away, and a young man dressed in white tells them that Jesus is risen. In Luke, the women are greeted by two men dressed in bright clothes. When the women go back and tell the disciples what has happened, they don't believe them; however, in Luke, out of curiosity, Peter goes to the empty tomb. But our text from John this morning states that both Peter and John ran to the tomb to see what has happened.

Over the centuries, critics have tried to use these discrepancies among the gospel accounts to disprove that the Resurrection actually happened. So far they have been unsuccessful, but they continue to try. Yes, there are differences in the four accounts, but that is to be expected

since each writer is providing an account from either their own perspective as an eye witness, or from the testimony of other eye witnesses. We each can witness the same event and then recall it differently; that's just human nature. But even with these minor differences among the gospel accounts, the basic fact remains true; the tomb was empty that morning; Jesus rose from the grave!

As Christians, people who worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, the question for each of us this morning is: what is the Resurrection and do we truly believe in it? So, how would you define the Resurrection? Well, for a starter, our word resurrection comes from a Latin word meaning "rising from the dead or returning to life." In Acts 2:32, it is defined as God raising Jesus from the dead. 1 Corinthians 15 indicates that it is the future rising from the dead of all those who will believe in Jesus Christ. In other words, it means that the grave is not our final resting place; there is a life hereafter. It means that death was defeated by Jesus when He came out of that cold, dark tomb on Easter morning. As the Apostle Paul states at the end of the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Then Paul makes that famous statement: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

But do you believe that Jesus rose from the grave? Have you ever given this essential belief of the Christian faith any serious thought? Now if you still have or have had any doubt about this, you are not alone. Take the disciples for example. Jesus told them over and over again that the Son of God would suffer, be crucified and be raised from the grave on the third day. In the third chapter of John, the 14th verse, in His conversation with Nicodemus Jesus stated that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert on a pole, so must the Son of God be lifted up, in order that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. Later in the 12th chapter of John Jesus tells His disciples that when He is lifted up from the earth, He will draw all people to Himself.

In addition, one of the charges that the Jewish religious leaders brought against Jesus when they had Him crucified was that Jesus had stated that He would destroy the Temple and raise it up again in three days. They thought Jesus was talking about the temple building itself, when actually Jesus was referring to His body. In Matthew 12:40, Jesus says that just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the whale, so He will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth.

As you can see, over and over again Jesus told His disciples that He would rise from the grave. One of the last things that He told them on the night that He was arrested was "after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." But there is not one single passage in the Bible that tells us that the disciples or other followers had any anticipation of His resurrection. However, in an ironic twist, it appears that the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus had more faith than the disciples. When Jesus' body was laid to rest in the tomb, the Gospel of Matthew tells

us that the Jewish leaders went to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate and asked him to seal the tomb and place guards around it because they remembered Jesus saying that He would rise again in three days.

Now the disciples heard this and much more, but it just didn't sink in; at least right away. Look what happened on Easter morning. Did they run to the tomb at daybreak expecting to find it empty and Jesus alive? No way, they were at home sound asleep like a lot of people on Sunday morning. The only ones who made the early pilgrimage to the tomb that morning were the women, and the only reason for their trip was to complete anointing Jesus' body for burial. We have no indication that they went with any hope or anticipation of seeing the Risen Lord.

When they do find the tomb empty, their first thought is that someone had stolen Jesus' body. However, after the angels tell them that Jesus had risen, the women rush back and tell the disciples. Of course, they don't initially believe the women, but out of curiosity Peter and John run to the tomb. Luke tells us that Peter went in first, saw the strips of burial cloths lying by themselves, and went away wondering what had happened. Our text this morning tells us that John saw and believed. We don't know the reactions of the other disciples, except doubting Thomas who had to see to believe. But when the Risen Lord appeared to all of them later, the disciples believed.

If you seek Jesus, do not go to the tomb or cemetery; you will not find Him there. Isn't it interesting that after the disciples had seen the Risen Lord that they never visited the tomb again? At least there is no record of it in the Bible. Why should they? It was only a temporary resting place for the Lord. They did not make pilgrimages to it. No, after that first Sunday evening, the disciples were done with the tomb. Why should they give their time to the worship of places when they had the living Savior with them? The Resurrection is not only Good News; it's the best news imaginable.

Now let's pause for a moment and consider, what would happen if the Resurrection was not true? What happens if tomorrow someone finds a 2000 year old tomb with the body of Jesus in it? The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:14 that if that is true, our faith in Jesus Christ is worthless and we are still under the curse of sin and death. Have you ever given serious thought to what it would mean 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 without the hope of forgiveness; our God would be a god of judgment and punishment, and not of love and mercy; death would be final; there would be no hope of eternal life and salvation; the grave would be the end; there would be no hope of ever seeing our loved ones again; there would basically be no love in life; the forces of evil would have more control over this world than they do now; and the devil would be stronger than ever. In other words, there would be no hope. But don't fret; don't worry, there is no body. The

skeptics will never find it; unlike the founders of other religions and so-called faiths, there is no body because the tomb is empty, and He is risen!

Someone has said that perhaps the greatest evidence of all for the Resurrection is the transformation of Jesus' disciples. It was the Resurrection that transformed Peter's fear into courage at Pentecost and Thomas' doubt into faith. It was the Resurrection that changed the Jewish Sabbath into Sunday, and a small group of Jewish followers into the Christian Church. It was the Resurrection which changed Saul the Pharisee into Paul the apostle and turned him from persecuting Christ's church into becoming one of its greatest missionaries.

And this transformation is not restricted to the original disciples. Throughout the centuries, men and women have tried in vain to prove that Jesus did not rise from the grave and that this essential belief of Christianity is false. But guess what; many of these very same individuals after examining all the evidence and interviewing Christians in the end accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. One of these skeptics was Lee Strobel, an investigative journalist with a legal background who worked for the *Chicago Tribune*. In his book *The Case for Christ*, Lee asks tough questions of thirteen leading scholars and experts about the Resurrection. Lee concludes that it would actually require much more faith for an atheist to maintain their non-belief than it would be to trust in Jesus Christ. Lee who started out as an atheist is now one of the leading preachers for Jesus Christ in our country.

A little boy was staring at a picture of the crucifixion in a store window when a man came up and stood beside him. The boy looked at the man and said: "That's Jesus." The man made no reply, and the boy continued: "Them's Roman soldiers." And after a moment, he added: "They killed Him." "Where did you learn that?" the man asked. "In the Mission Sunday School," replied the boy. The man turned to walk away. He had not gone far when he heard the boy calling out: "Hey, mister," as the boy caught up with him. "Hey, mister," the boy repeated, "I forgot to tell you that He rose again!"

A famous British Methodist minister named William Sangster began to lose his voice and mobility due to a life-threatening illness. His disease progressed until he eventually lost the ability to speak. On Easter morning just three weeks before his death, he wrote his daughter and said: "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout: 'He is risen!' But it would be far worse to have a voice and not want to shout!"

So what do you believe? Are you willing to shout "He is risen?" It's a personal decision; one that we each must make for ourselves; no one else can make it for us. As for me, I believe; I believe in the Resurrection. I believe that Jesus was crucified, died, was buried in a borrowed tomb, and arose from the grave on the third day just as He said He would. I believe in the Risen

Lord and I try to serve Him each and every day to the best of my ability. And I hope and pray that you feel the same way. He is risen; He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God! Amen