

Unfortunately, we were not able to celebrate Easter together in April due to the coronavirus. But in reality, every day should be Easter when we celebrate and remember the Resurrection. So I thought why not celebrate it on our first Sunday back together again in worship. Now we don't celebrate Easter to the extent that we do Christmas. And that's strange when you consider the fact that if there was no Easter, there would be no need to celebrate Christmas. If there was no resurrection, then Jesus Christ would have lived and died in vain. There would be no New Testament, no Christianity, no church, and unfortunately, no hope. Thus, while Christmas is the most celebrated Christian holiday, I believe that Easter is by far the most important; because on Easter, we celebrate the Risen Lord. The Resurrection is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is so important that it is recorded in all four Gospels. For our discussion this morning, let's see what the Gospel of Matthew has to tell us about the Resurrection as found in the twenty-eighth chapter, the first ten verses.

Read Matthew 28:1-10

Now some people don't like to go to cemeteries. However, I enjoy visiting the grave sites of my ancestors, in the daytime of course, not at night. Over the years I have visited the cemeteries around my hometown in South Carolina to look for the graves of my ancestors and to trace my family history. This has also been a time when I could share stories of our family with my sons since they never met many of the relatives buried there. I have also found that the inscriptions on some old tombstones to be very interesting. Here are a few:

She lived with her husband for 50 years and died in the hope of a better life.

Here lies a lawyer as usual; my son Ben does not like this one!

I expected this, but not just yet.

Beneath this stone lies Dr. John Bigelow, an atheist, all dressed up with no place to go.

On a waiter's tombstone: God finally got his attention.

William Jones, beloved husband of Elizabeth Jones, rest in peace until I come.

This one for a golfer: At last a hole in one.

And finally: I told you I was sick!

Like us, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the cemetery looking for the dead; to carry out the final burial preparations for Jesus. In the East, tombs were often caves carved in the rocks. The body was wrapped in long strips like bandages and laid on a shelf in the rock

tomb. The tomb was then closed by a large circular stone about three feet in diameter, like a cart-wheel which ran in a groove across the opening. Matthew tells us in his Gospel that the Chief Priest and the Pharisees asked Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, to seal the tomb and station soldiers to guard it so that Jesus' disciples could not steal the body during the night. The religious leaders of that time, and you can bet the devil, wanted to make sure that Jesus stayed in the tomb. But it didn't work!

When the women arrived at the tomb, they found that the stone had already been rolled away. When they went into the tomb, they saw that the body of the Lord Jesus was missing. It is not difficult to imagine their confusion. While they were still trying to figure out what had happened, an angel appeared and assured them that Jesus was alive, and that it was useless to look for Him among the dead. The seven words of the angel: "He is not here. He is risen," changed the course of history forever.

The women hurried back and told the disciples and others what they had seen and that Jesus was alive. The Gospel of Luke notes that at first the disciples did not believe the women. After all, it was too incredible to believe; there were a lot of "Doubting Thomases" in the room that morning. Then Peter, the disciple who had denied his relationship with Jesus three times, either out of curiosity, guilt or hope, ran to the tomb to see for himself. He looked into the tomb and saw the burial cloths lying by themselves but not the body of Jesus. Luke tells us that Peter went away wondering to himself as to what had happened; what did all this mean?

This morning, over 2,000 years later, many people are still confused as the women, 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. While others have not heard the Good News from the graveyard. Now a cemetery is the last place you would expect to find good news. Graveyards are always sad places because they are associated with grief and separation from our loves ones. However, the message of Christianity is actually good news from the graveyard.

A preacher began his sermon one morning by boldly stating: "Someday every member of this church will die!" The congregation was somewhat stunned by his words, all except a visitor who laughed and said: "I'm sure glad that I don't belong to this church." I guess he forgot that despite recent advances in medicine, the mortality rate is still 100 percent.

From the beginning of time, men and women have raised the question that was articulated by Job in the Old Testament: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" Century after century everybody including the great and the small, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the young and the old have 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 believe in Him.

The basic truth of Christianity is found in the announcement by the angel on Easter morning: "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come 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 had risen to life. The Bible records at least ten appearances of the living Christ to the disciples and others, over 500 people. It is a fact that the disciples saw Jesus crucified and then saw Him again as the Risen Lord. The empty tomb spoke volumes of halleluiahs declaring that Jesus Christ was no longer dead, but alive. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The strength of our faith is our personal testimony to the presence of the Living Lord in our lives.

As a family watched the Easter story on television, the 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 she suddenly grinned and shouted: "Now comes the good part." We first hear about the suffering and death of Jesus; now comes the good part! The tomb is empty! Jesus has risen from the grave!

In the 15th chapter of I Corinthians, Paul acknowledges that the Resurrection is at the very core of the Christian faith. He states: "If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile; we are still in our sins." But it is true and the Resurrection stands as proof of Jesus' triumph over sin and death. It is also the foreshadowing of the resurrection of those of us who believe in Him. It's the basis of our Christian hope.

A sealed vase was found in a mummy pit in Egypt. In it was discovered a few peas, old, wrinkled and hard as a rock. The peas were planted carefully under a glass, and at the end of 30 days, they sprang to life, after having lain sleeping in the dust of a tomb for nearly 3,000 years. This is an illustration of how our mortal bodies will put on immortality because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Jesus promised in John 14:19 - because He lives, we shall live also.

Theologian Gerald O'Collins puts it this way: "In a profound sense, Christianity without the Resurrection is simply Christianity without a final chapter. It is not Christianity at all." Congress once issued a special edition of the *The Jefferson Bible*. Thomas Jefferson in making his selections from the Bible restricted his Bible solely to the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, eliminating any references to miracles. Thus *The Jefferson Bible* ends with these words: "There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed." Now this is a version of the Bible that the devil would like for us to believe, but of course, it's not true; as the

late Paul Harvey would say - there's more to the story. If our Bible ended like that, it would mean that there is no hope of the resurrection and eternal life; the grave would be the end of all of us. But thanks be to God, Jefferson might have been good at drafting the Declaration of Independence, but he didn't understand much about the amazing grace of God. The tomb was empty and thus we have the hope and the assurance of eternal life. The grave is not a period at the end of the sentence of life, but a comma connecting us to life to come.

This is what we proclaim when we sing: "Up from the grave He arose, a mighty triumph o'er His foes." With Christ's resurrection comes our resurrection. With Christ's resurrection comes the ultimate defeat of the devil. With Christ's resurrection is the victory of heaven over hell, love over hate, hope over despair, and forgiveness over sin.

Road repairs were being made on one of the main highways in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Two warning signs were erected where the construction began. One read: "Travel at Your Own Risk;" while the other read: "Road Closed beyond the Cemetery." Because of Jesus Christ, the road is not closed beyond the graveyard. Rather, there are two roads beyond the grave: one leads to life everlasting through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; the other to spiritual death.

If you are looking for Jesus, don't go to His grave. You will not find Him there. Is it not interesting that after the disciples were convinced that Jesus had risen that they never visited His tomb again? Why should they go back there; it was only a temporary resting place for the Lord. Why would they spend time worshipping a place when they had the living Savior right there in their presence? The Resurrection is not only Good News; it is the best news imaginable.

Jesus said to Martha just before His death in John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life; those that believe in me, even though they die, they will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus then asked her probably the most important question in her life: "Do you believe this?" This is also the most important question that each of us must answer for ourselves: "Do you believe? Do you believe in the Resurrection? Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

For myself, I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ died on an old rugged cross for my sins, was buried in a cold, dark tomb, and on the third day rose from the grave, defeating the devil and death once and for all, and bringing the possibility of forgiveness of sins, salvation and eternal life for all who believe in Him; He is my Lord and Savior, my Teacher, my friend, my companion and support when life gets tough and closes in on me; the one who gives me happiness and all I need, my daily bread; the one who blesses me with a great family, friends, this church and the privilege to serve Him.

Who is He to you? Are you still looking for Him among the dead? You don't have to go to a cemetery, a mountain top or a sacred site to find Jesus; He is right here, right now. All you have to do is stop, turn around and accept Him. Because if the truth be known, He came looking for each one of us over 2,000 years ago in a manger in Bethlehem and on a cross at Calvary. Don't let another day go by without turning and responding to His loving voice calling you to come back home to Him. Easter is not restricted to one day a year; it should be celebrated year round in your heart. Every day is Easter for those who follow the Risen Lord and Savior. We rejoice with a song of new life and victory. With the dawn of each day we rise and say with the psalmist: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Hear the good news from the graveyard: "He is not here; He is risen; He is risen indeed!"
Thanks be to God. Amen