

Were you there in the garden when he arose?

Readings: Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-9

Today is Easter Sunday, and all over the world, Christian preachers are preaching on one subject: The Empty Tomb.

One of the difficulties in writing an Easter sermon is that the story is so familiar to most of us.

We can miss what Easter is really all about.

We can so easily lose the power and impact of the resurrection.

We need to shout out and celebrate: Christ is Risen!

Today, of all days in the church calendar, should bring us back to reality and call us to renew our sure and certain hope in the resurrection of Christ and the eternal life he has won for us.

I read a story about a judge in Yugoslavia who had an accident. He was electrocuted when he reached up to turn on a light while he was standing in his bathtub. His wife found him and called for help. The firemen pronounced him dead at the scene and took him to a funeral home. The local radio station broadcast the story over the airwaves. The whole town was in shock on hearing about him. But that isn't the end of the story.

In the middle of the night, lying in the funeral home waiting to be embalmed the judge suddenly came to. The room was dark and he was disoriented and had no idea where he was. He stumbled down the hall in the dark and woke up a student, who lived at the funeral home while he was learning the business. As you might imagine, the young man had the most adverse of reactions to seeing the judge. He ran from the house in his pyjamas, screaming and terrified.

Then the judge phoned his wife to get her to come pick him up but she screamed and fainted. Next he tried calling a couple of his friends but they all thought it was some sort of prank and hung up on him. Finally, he called a friend in the next town that hadn't heard of his death, and he came over to get him and take him to his family to convince them he was not dead after all.

Christianity claims that another man awoke from death too.

This man wasn't just any man, however.

He was Christ Jesus, the Saviour – and the Son of the living God.

And when he arose from the grave,

he arose to a new life in a glorified body, never to die again.

And sceptics, just like the sceptics in that judge's town,
have had trouble believing the story ever since.

But the empty tomb requires a response from every single person that has ever lived:
To science and philosophy it says, "Explain this event."
To history it says, "Repeat this event."
To time it says, "Blot out this event."
To faith it says, "Believe this event."

Do you believe this event?
Everything about our Christian faith rises or falls on the question:
'Did Jesus really rise from the dead?'

I have heard Christian theologians say that if it were proved that Christ's bones still lay in Palestine, their faith would remain intact.
That is just rubbish!

Let me be quite clear.
If Christ was not physically raised, there is no Christianity.

Paul said, "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and...your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have died in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." [1 Cor 15]

If Christ is still dead, we are still in our sins.
Romans 4:25 states, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

The bible teaches that Christ is the perfect sacrificial lamb.
He willingly died for us, making his life an offering for sin, to make us acceptable to God.

To do this, he had to be without sin himself.
God raised him from death, and this shows that God has accepted the sacrifice.
If Christ stayed dead, then he was an imposter,
he was not the perfect sacrificial lamb,
and he died for his own sins and not ours.

But because he rose, we can be sure our sins are forgiven if we put our trust in him.

Today is a day of triumph for Christians.

But that first Easter Day did not start out that way.
It began as a day of defeat.

Luke 24 starts with, "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb."
For these women it was going to be a miserable day.

Imagine.

As they walk the darkened streets on the way to the tomb.

It is quiet...they are quiet.

Trapped with their own thoughts...thinking bitterly about the past few days.

These women knew they had received God's grace and mercy at the hands of Jesus, and out of gratitude to God they served him.

These are women followed Jesus and looked after him and his disciples on their travels.

Now they would serve him in death by finishing the preparation of the body for burial

It was a situation of complete defeat.

Jesus' death appeared as a senseless and useless tragedy.

The end of their hope that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring in the Kingdom of God.

They may have had greater love than the other disciples, who were afraid even to go and see the body and help to finish the job of anointing it for burial.

But they were not going to the tomb because they remembered or believed his words that he would rise from death.

They were there to lay to rest forever their faith in him as Messiah, not to rekindle that faith.

Imagine:

As they approach the tomb. They begin to wonder how they will push the rock away.

But when they come, the rock is moved they rush in, but no body.

Then all of a sudden, two angels in dazzling clothes appear and tell them He is risen,

I love the pointed question asked by the angels:

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Then they add: "Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified and on the third day rise."

Imagine their response...

We read of them rushing back to tell the others.

Now what's going through their heads:

This is too good to be true.

Will the others believe us?

What's going to happen next?

Imagine the people in the room staring in utter disbelief.
How could this be true?

Read their response in verse 11:
'But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.'

I think that would have been a perfectly legitimate response, considering all that they had been through.

But I like Peter's response...he got up and ran to the tomb.
He wanted to check it out for himself.
He had already denied Jesus three times...
He wasn't about to do that again.

Imagine Peter thinking to himself:
"I want to believe that, I want to believe with my whole heart. But it can't be true.
How can someone who was dead come alive again?"

Imagine him replaying in his mind all the things that Jesus had said, wishing he had paid more attention when Jesus said them.

Later that day John records Jesus appearing in the upper room saying, "Peace be with you."

Imagine Peter's response again:
"It is true, Hallelujah, it's true, He has risen. Lord, I believe!!! Hallelujah!!!"

There is no way that anything other than a real and actual resurrection could ever have changed these women, not to mention the other male disciples, who were cowering behind locked doors for fear they too would be killed.

Within a very short time, they were preaching everywhere that Jesus was the Messiah and that he had risen.

They didn't go miles away to some other place...
But in Jerusalem, where all the other events took place.
Where the people knew of the death of Jesus.
They even testified to this before the same tribunal that had sentenced Jesus to death.

That is very compelling evidence that they truly believed they had seen him alive, heard him speak, touched him, eaten with him, and rejoiced that he was truly alive again.

A profound and permanent change came over the disciples and the early church in the days following Easter morning.

The only way to explain this drastic change is that they were thoroughly convinced that Jesus had risen from the grave.

The changed lives of these people and their willingness to be martyred, or worse, for the sake of their faith must be considered as proof of the resurrection.

We see the early church literally erupt with the gospel message, turning the world upside down.

All the disciples, except for John, stood strong in their belief and died for their faith.

So did thousands of others in the early church.

They were fed to hungry lions or tarred and burned on crosses.

Some were even sawed in half because they stood up for what they believed in.

What made the difference?

The resurrection of Jesus made the difference.

Do people die for a lie?

No they don't.

They knew He was alive because they saw Him, or else they knew people who did see Him after He arose.

They couldn't be silenced because they believed what He said, "Because I live, you shall live, also."

What difference has the resurrection made to you?

The resurrection has withstood the test of time, the trails of faith, the doubts of people, the unfaithfulness of many, the disbelief of generations and the most powerful enemy of all the apathy, the indifference of too many to count.

The Easter story continues today, kept alive by many who have been ridiculed, torture, killed and suffered numerous inhumanities so that the truth of this day might live on saying Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Atheistic regimes, like communist Russia, have come and gone in various parts of the world, but the risen Christ is still here.

Marx is dead. Neitzsche is dead. Mao and Pol Pot are dead.

But Jesus has been alive since that first Easter Day, and has never stopped being alive

Even in China, where the Christian faith has been oppressed since the communists took over in 1949, there are today a thousand times more people who believe Jesus rose from the dead than when they came to power.

Christ will outlast that regime too.

The Resurrection singles Jesus out from all other great religious figures and founders.

Moses is buried on Mt Nebo.

Buddha was not resurrected.

Mohammed lies in a tomb at Medina.

Dr. Seamands tells of a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. "Some of his friends asked him, 'Why have you become a Christian?' He answered, 'Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go, and there at the fork in the road were two men, one dead and one alive-which one would you ask which way to go?'" [Warren Webster, April, 1980, HIS, p. 13]

What have you done lately to keep this story alive?

Have you passed it on, or have you become indifferent, apathetic to this good news?

Do you take Easter, the resurrection for granted?

Does your life reflect the excitement of the resurrection each day?

The resurrection provides HOPE for the future.

For those of us who do believe Jesus is alive, today is above all a day of joy and celebration.

This resurrection event is not some strange and isolated event...

It is the beginning of something new and great.

It is the beginning of the victory of life over death.

New life; eternal life.

Jesus is alive and he is the one who will lead us to eternal life.

We need to celebrate Easter Sunday!

Jesus has wrestled death and sin and Satan to the ground.

He has won forgiveness for all the guilt and wrongs that we have done.

He has opened a path to eternal life for all who will follow him.

And he has sent his Holy Spirit to walk with his children, his followers, his believers.

That Spirit is a guide, a helper, a friend, a guarantee that one day Jesus, risen from the dead, will return in glory.

And until that time we can carry on in hope.

Because of Easter...

We can go back to our work knowing that this Jesus, with His holy power...

the power bigger and stronger than the forces of destruction and evil...

is alive and watching over us, even now.

Because of Easter...

the things we do to try and bring some order and healing and hope into life are not done in vain.

Jesus sees us do them.

And he blesses those things we do.

He guides the results.

And he builds on them.

He considers them as being done to him, and for him.

Because Easter is here...

We can make those trips to the cemetery without despair.

We can face the graying of our own heads and the weakening of our own bodies without a sense of hopelessness,

for we know that for the believer in Jesus death no longer has the final word.

But it becomes a door to a greater and richer life, life in the very presence of God, eternal life!

This morning we gather to celebrate a true story that can and does make a difference in our lives.

We have a risen Lord who is working through His spirit in our lives, our world.

We don't honour a memory of a dead God...

we celebrate the glory of a risen God who over come death to be with us

and make a difference in our world.

There is a power alive on this earth today because of the resurrection.

Jesus works through His spirit in our lives to bring His power of the resurrection, his salvation, victory, redemption, comfort, peace, strength and hope as we face all the less than human qualities that live in our lives because of sin.

Christianity is not a dying faith...

Because we serve a risen saviour.

Christ is risen!