

April 5, 2015 – Easter Sunday

Giving Up Death -; Romans 5:6-9; and John 5:24

Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance...for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. - John 20:1, 9

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. - Romans 5:6-9

Jesus explained..."I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. - John 5:24

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Who has risen? Jesus! Well, then that means that Jesus is alive. Who is alive? Jesus! Some misguided folks thought they had killed Him, But He is alive and He is present right here right now in our service today even though we cannot see Him. He is present by His Spirit, he is present in our hearts.

Sometimes we are so busy enjoying the holidays that we forget what they are really all about. Easter is about Christ being alive.

And we welcome you this Easter Sunday as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. This is the most important day in the year for Christians.

Now, golfers think it is an important time of the year because The Masters golf tournament starts today in Augusta, George... at least some of the pre-tournament events start today, actual play begins Thursday. You think I'm kidding you about its importance? Several years ago the head of CBS sports, discovered that the Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset, he demanded, "Who sets the date of Easter? Didn't they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let's get on that person and have him change it."

I'm pretty sure they didn't change the date of Easter that year, though if they could they probably would. Sports are a pretty powerful force in our society.

Yet, what we are celebrating today is a much more powerful force in our society. I am sure you know the story by now, but let me briefly tell you. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the religious authorities. He was nailed to a cross and a soldier pierced His side with a spear; when His side was pierced immediately blood and water flowed out. This was a sure indication that He was already dead after hanging on the cross for 6 hours. Though 6 hours was a long time in excruciation pain, it was a relatively short time to die by crucifixion. Some who were crucified could linger for days unless their legs were broken. That would hasten death.

Because of the Jewish Sabbath and a very special one because it was also the Passover, Pilate the Roman governor was asked and gave permission for the legs to be broken, but there was no need to do that when they got to Jesus, for Jesus was already dead.

Once His death was confirmed Pilate granted permission to a man named Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body. Joseph was a rich man which is confirmed by the fact that he owned a tomb that had been carved out of a rock. Only wealthy individuals could afford such tombs. Poorer people were buried in simple graves. Joseph's tomb being lent to the Messiah fulfilled a prophesy of Isaiah

He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave. - Isaiah 53:9

There is a joke that a couple of weeks after the resurrection someone asked Joseph of Arimathea, "why'd you let them bury Jesus in your brand new tomb?" Joseph shrugged his shoulders and answered, "He only needed it for the weekend!" – Well, that's true.

Joseph was aided by a wealthy Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. Ever hear of him? He had come to Jesus after dark one night to ask Jesus about His teachings. It was to Nicodemus that ...

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." - John 3:3

We don't know exactly what questions Nicodemus planned to ask Jesus, but we do know he went to the right source. If all we want to do is ask questions, anyone will do. But if we are hungry for answers, God will be our source.

Nicodemus was confused by this saying he must be born again, wondering how can a person go back into their mother's womb and be born again. Many have heard the term, "Born again" or a "Born Again Believer" and do not understand, maybe even have contempt for the term.

I will never forget the first time I heard this, "unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." It was at the first Bible Study I had ever attended. At the time if you had asked me if I would go to heaven when I died, I would have said sure, I'm a good guy; which I interpreted as not robbing banks or murdering people. But when I heard this from the Bible, from Jesus I thought, "I think I'm going to heaven but I've not been born again, I don't even know what that is, but I better find out, because Jesus said I would not see God's Kingdom unless I was Born again."

Of course Jesus was not talking about a second physical birth, He was talking about a spiritual birth. As He makes clear by His statement in v6 that flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to Spirit. Or as the NLT puts it: John 3:6
Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.

First we need to live a new life. Birth is the beginning of life; to be *born again* is to begin anew, maybe you have been living badly, or with little purpose. Don't think to patch up the old building, but begin from a new foundation and build anew. That foundation is Jesus. First we commit to Him then we build on that.

Secondly, We must *have a new nature*, new principles, new affections, new aims.

Third we must be born *from above*: The Greek word used here translated "again" – born again is *anōthen* and means, "anew" or "from above."

By our *first birth* we are corrupt, shaped in sin; we must therefore undergo a second birth; our souls must be *fashioned* and *enlivened* anew. We must be born *from above*, *from* heaven by God's Spirit to a life of communion with God where we share in His *divine nature*. This is a gift we receive when we place our faith in Jesus by committing our lives to Him. Today if you acknowledge your sin, and are willing to turn from sin, and ask Jesus in to your life you will experience new life, a new nature, a spiritual quickening, and you will understand being born again.

Nicodemus must have gotten it because when the other disciples fled in fear it was Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea claim Jesus' body. They are the ones who carefully and with much effort removed the nails from the Master's hands and feet and lowered Him to the ground. Along with a group of women who remained close by through it all, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Christ's body for burial. Then they put the body in the tomb and a stone is rolled into place to close the tomb.

This all happened before Easter Sunday morning, but then John writes these words, "Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark..." What beautiful and significant words. Before resurrection, before new birth the world is a dark, dark place. Yet, Christ resurrection came while it was still dark.

"Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance."

Paul writes in the verses I read from Romans:

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners... God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

"While it was still dark...the stone had been rolled away from the entrance."

It's a dark world without Easter. In 480 B.C. Xerxes invaded Greece with an army of nearly 2 million men. Seeing the whole Hellespont filled with vessels of his fleet, and the plains covered with his regiments, Xerxes first congratulated himself on his good fortune and abilities. But then, a few moments later, he began to weep. His stunned uncle Artabanus, standing beside him, asked what a man of his position could possibly have to cry about. The king replied that he had just realize that in 100 years' time, all

these men arrayed before him , everyone of the soldier and sailors with whose help he had terrified the known world, would be dead. And it made this strong king cry.

Without Easter, what else is there to do when we contemplate the loss of someone we love but to cry? Without Easter there is no hope of being reunited with them.

There is a story about comedienne Gracie Allen and the importance of life beyond the grave. I realize many of the younger members of the congregation never had the chance to see George Burns and Gracie Allen together. The husband was the straight man for Gracie's jokes. They were very funny and also deeply in love. Gracie died in 1964. George Burns didn't die until 32 years later at the age of 100.

When Gracie died, George was devastated. One of the things that George kept close to him following her death was a love note that always encouraged him. The note said: "Never place a period where God had place a comma."

That would make no sense without Easter. Without Easter there is no concrete evidence of life beyond the grave.

Jesus' rising on Easter morning was more than a showy miracle to shock and awe his attackers and followers. When Jesus rose, He turned the entire order of the universe on its head. The Resurrection shows us that Death does not have the last word. God has the last word, and that word is Life. Suffering and Death end, but God's Kingdom lasts forever.

We may not have scientific evidence for life beyond the grave, but we do have historical evidence. A theologian and author, Wolfhart Pannenberg once said, "the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

He's right, of course. The testimony of those who have experienced Christ's resurrection is so compelling that the only real reason a person might reject it is that it requires them to make a change in how they are living. And they have that right to reject it. It is sad, but they are free to reject the Good News of Easter if they so choose. As for me and many of you we will leave this place today with "hallelujah! Ringing in our ears and in our hearts. Jesus is alive, and because He lives we shall live too. He not only give us life after death, Jesus makes our life better now. Easter is God's light beaming in the dark, dark world. Because Christ lives, the world is brighter than it has ever been before.

Jesus explained..."I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. - John 5:24