

United with Him in His Resurrection – Easter 2017

Luke 24:1-12, Romans 6:3-5

Today is a day of celebration and victory! For today we declare the glorious news: “Jesus is Alive! He has been raised from the dead! It is the day of resurrection!” The women who had gathered at the tomb expected to find his body and to carry out his burial preparations in the anointing of his body, but instead they encounter angels who say to them: “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” And they go in amazement to tell the disciples. For us in the Christian Church, Easter is truly our high point of the year. We pronounce Christ’s victory over the grave – it is the focal point in the plan of God. Victory has been won over sin and death. God’s plan has been realized in the resurrection of His Son. And so we as followers of this risen Lord can be referred to as “Easter People” or “Resurrection People”. As St. Augustine put it: “ We are Easter people...Alleluia is our song.”

This day had such an impact on the early followers of Christ that the church began worshipping on Sunday instead of Saturday to remember the significance of the empty tomb. So whenever we gather, we come to celebrate the resurrection victory.

There was an interesting ad a newspaper’s classified section. It read like this: First in Bold Letters: USED TOMBSTONE – then the ad’s text as follows: “Used Tombstone for Sale. Perfect for someone named “Homer HendelBergenHeinzel” And the number given to call. The image of a used tombstone might seem a bit strange or even humorous. But the point is that the previous owner had no use for it anymore. It had become an unnecessary item. This is the wonderful message of Easter. Christ’s resurrection proclaims: “The tomb is empty. The tomb is no longer needed. For “He is not here, he has risen just as He said.”

This is why we gather today. To proclaim the significance of this special day. But you know the only way this day makes a difference to you personally is if you are willing to allow the claims of Easter to impact you personally. To allow its message to touch your heart and life.

Isn’t it interesting all the things that have become associated with Easter...just

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like they have with Christmas. All kinds of traditions have evolved around this day. There are Easter parades, Easter sales in stores, there are Easter egg hunts and Easter baskets of candy. In the cartoon “The Family Circus” the two children have found their Easter baskets and are enjoying their treats. One of them asks: “Who colored all the eggs? To which his sister replies: “The Easter bunny, of course.” “And who gave us the jelly beans?” She once again replies: “The Easter bunny.” “And the chocolate rabbit?” “The Easter bunny.” Obviously there was nothing beyond the reach of the Easter bunny. That morning the family attended Easter worship services and heard the minister declare in dramatic fashion: “They came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled back. Who could have done this?” Immediately the little boy jumped up in his pew and shouted: “The Easter bunny!” Easter certainly is associated with a lot of things: New clothes or new shoes, we think about the warmer weather of spring, we may spend time with family or have a special Easter dinner. Well, there nothing wrong with traditions, many traditions are important to us...but it’s possible to participate in the rituals and traditions and miss the real message of the glorious event. It is possible to celebrate Easter, but not let its message affect us. We can go through the Easter motions, but miss the real issue at hand.

It’s kind of like the man who went to the doctor complaining about terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches, and recurring dizzy spells. The doctor examined him and said: “I’m afraid that I have some bad news for you. It looks like you only have 6 months to live.” Well, the doomed man decided he would spend his remaining days on earth enjoying himself. He quit his job, he bought a sports car, and closet full of new suits and shoes. Then he decided to get himself a dozen expensive tailored shirts. He went to the finest shop he could find. The tailor measured him and wrote down, “size 16 neck”. The man immediately interrupted him: “Wait a minute, I always wear a size 14 neck and that is what I want.” To which the tailor replied: “Well, if that’s what you want I’ll do it for you. But I must warn you if you wear a size 14 neck, I can guarantee you that you’re going to have terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches and dizzy spells.”

I guess you could say the tailor had gotten down to the real issue. And when it comes to the Easter message you and I must allow its real message to get into our

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hearts. We all have to ask: “What claim does the message of the risen Christ have on my life?” When I think about the meaning of this day, what does it mean to me personally? It is applying the truth that we talked about during Lent when we are willing to take up the cross and follow Jesus. We said the disciple of Jesus who takes up the cross is united with him in his death. But the glorious news is that it does not end there: here is how Paul put it in the book of Romans: “If we have been united with him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection.” And notice verse 8 of that 6th chapter: “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him.”

The apostle Paul is speaking about our own personal experience of faith. That when I allow the transforming power of the risen Christ to change my life, when I turn from living just for myself and give my heart and life to the Lord, when I am united with him by following the One who went to the cross for me, I open myself to receive his promise to be united with Him in His resurrection. It is allowing the risen Jesus to change my life and to believe that when I come to him in faith, I am given a new life, a life where I can be forgiven, a life where I am set free from those things that keep me being in bondage, a life that is transformed by the message of Easter. It is a message that affects both us now and in the life to come.

Listen to how this is described for us in the book of I Peter: “Praise be to the God and Father of our lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth in to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for you.” He goes on to say that even as we face various trials, we can live with hope because we know the outcome of our faith: “the salvation of our souls.”

Christ’s victory over death has become our victory. We are people with a wonderful promise of life and life eternal. The story is told of an elderly custodian of England’s Winchester Cathedral who never tired of standing on the Cathedral roof and retelling the story of how England received word of Wellington’s victory over Napoleon. News of the great historical battle was communicated overland toward London by semaphore. The message was spelled

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out with the flags by the semaphore atop Winchester Cathedral. The letters spelled out the news “W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d” and then a thick fog settled oppressively over the land. This sad heart-breaking news spread to London, overwhelming the nation in gloom and despair: “Wellington Defeated”

But then the fog lifted and the message of the flags was completed: “Wellington Defeated the Enemy.” Because of the preceding gloom, the message was even more glorious. There was gratitude and jubilant praise: “Wellington Defeated the Enemy!”

When Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb, it seemed like all was despair and gloom. For the disciples of Jesus, the message they would receive in their hearts was: Jesus Defeated. But when the fog of darkness and despair was lifted on that first Easter morning the message from that empty tomb would read: Jesus Defeated Death!” It is what transformed a group of disciples filled with sadness and despair into a powerful band of witnesses who followed a living Lord.

We come this morning as people with a living hope. We are united with him in his resurrection. Christ’s victory over death becomes our victory when we allow it to change us. When I turn to this living Jesus in faith, receive his forgiveness and trust in his amazing grace.

Yes, this is the powerful and wonderful news of Easter. Not Easter bunnies, And eggs, and candy and flowers or even coming to church. It is experiencing Christ’s victory in our hearts. It is turning to the One who gave his life for us and knowing the reality of the resurrection life he gives us.

Today we celebrate the Easter story, but it also becomes our story when we put our trust in the risen Lord! It is the personal testimony of our closing hymn: “He lives, he lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart!”