

Easter 2016    John 20:1-18    March 27, 2016    “It’s Not About Some Dead Guy!”

Today is Easter. We sing of Jesus being alive again after having been cruelly killed and then buried. Alive! Death has no forever power over us! That’s a lot to celebrate. But we live in a very “un-Easter-y” world. It seems we’re all on edge, trying to figure out who to blame for our un-ease. We’re all trying to protect ourselves, not only from terrorist acts but from money challenges and cancer and broken relationships. It may be Easter, but the tough stuff of life just keeps on coming. We see reports of continued raids in Belgium in the wake of the bombings. Many are overwhelmed by grief and fear. Refugees and those trying to deal with too many refugees are desperate and feeling hopeless. Throughout the world, people still get sick and have accidents. Lots of folks in our own town will spend this day without having contact with even one person. There’s a lot in this world that would deny that Easter ever happened, and would challenge us with the question: Even if it DID happen, what difference does Easter make in your life?

Okay Christians, how do we answer this? What is our witness in the face of the brokenness of our world and in the face of our own brokenness?

Most of us have heard the Easter story so many times that it really cannot surprise us. We know how it went. But for Mary and the others that first Easter morning, it was totally unexpected. They had seen Jesus so very dead.

It would be sort of like one of us being with our best friend at the hospital when he or she died, and then going over to Maloney’s to make the final arrangements. You dread having to do it, but there’s nobody else, so you brace yourself and walk in, ready to choose the casket and to decide on visiting hours. But when you enter, Jerry tells you that something has happened: the body has disappeared! Your surprise turns to anger. Who goofed up? Where’s your friend? But then your friend appears at your car, alive again. That *would* be a surprise!

For Jesus, this happened. He was dead, and then the tomb was empty. He was alive again! This happened for the sake of all of us, to provide forgiveness and new life even in the face of the very worst humanity can do to somebody. God’s love will not be stymied, even in the face of torture, cruelty, and death. God’s love is stronger than death.

“Father, forgive them...” That was what Jesus offered in the face of ridicule, misunderstanding, political expediency, desertion, betrayal, and death. Jesus LIVES the truth of what Paul later proclaimed in the eighth chapter of the Book of Romans: “(38) For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing, nothing in life or death, nothing we do, nothing that happens to us, can cut us off from God’s love. That’s the message of Easter.

So how can this good news be made believable when it seems so un-believable? Certainly NOT by preaching at folks! Definitely not by trying to talk people into believing that Jesus is alive and that all this Christianity stuff is true. There is actually only ONE way for us to effectively share God’s good news, and that is by living out a witness to its truth. This does not mean standing at street

corners proclaiming doom for those who don't repent and turn to the Lord, but instead making our own steps, words, and choices in light of the promise of God's forgiveness and love. Jesus told his disciples, shortly before he died, "Love one another, even as I have loved you." It's a clear assignment, but it is often HARD to do.

Hear this old story of a Civil War chaplain, who one day happened upon a wounded soldier on the battlefield. The chaplain asked him if he'd like to hear a few verses from the Bible. "No," gasped the wounded man, "but I'm thirsty. I'd rather have some water." The chaplain gave him a drink, then repeated his question.

"No sir," said the wounded man, "not now -- but could you please put something under my head?" The chaplain did so, and again repeated his question.

"No thank you," says the soldier. "I'm cold. Could you cover me up?" The chaplain took off his greatcoat and wrapped the soldier in it. Afraid now to ask, he did not repeat his question.

He started to go away, but the soldier called him back. "Look, Chaplain, if there's anything in that book of yours that makes a person do for another what you've done for me, then I want to hear it." (From *The Immediate Word*) A living witness.

Church folks who have been through many Easters probably remember gospel-writer Luke's version of the Easter story, where the two men at the tomb ask the women who had arrived there looking for Jesus' body: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen." These words surely speak to us right now!! *We must not let ourselves be a "dead club," but a living witness to what God is doing in our lives and our world TODAY.*

The late theologian Alfred North Whitehead got it right when he stated, "People are not persuaded by our reasoning, but caught by our enthusiasms." If our lives do not point to a life-giving, vital, present God, then we're just doing a memorial dance.

Garret Keizer in *The Christian Century*, May 17, 2003, expressed why Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus is so crucial to the Christian faith: "On the day when I can no longer believe in the Resurrection, I shall no longer be able to follow Christ. It's not that I require a reward after death; it's just that I refuse to have a dead guy running my life."

Good news, folks! We are *not* running after or just remembering some "dead guy"!! We are invited to participate in the *life* – as we live out our years here on earth – of the Living Jesus, the Son of God. As we try to do what Jesus would do (love our enemies, don't retaliate when somebody does us wrong, give of our 'stuff' to help those who don't have enough, seek God's will over our own, forgive even those who hurt us badly), we will discover just how alive Jesus is.

One more story that I heard long ago, that may help us get a grip on what Easter really means for us: There once was a man named George Thomas, a pastor in a small New England town. One Easter Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying a rusty, bent, old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Several eyebrows were raised. In response, Pastor Thomas began to speak: "I was

walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, "What you got there, son?"

"Just some old birds," the boy replied. "What are you gonna do with them?" I asked.

"Take 'em home and have fun with 'em," he answered. "I'm gonna tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a real good time."

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?"

"Oh, I got some cats," said the little boy. "They like birds. They'll eat them."

The pastor was silent for a moment. "How much do you want for those birds, son?"

"Huh??!!! You don't want those birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They don't sing -- they aren't even pretty!" "How much?" the pastor asked again.

The boy sized up the pastor as if he were crazy and said, "\$10?"

The pastor reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The pastor picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, setting them free.

Well, that explained the empty bird cage on the pulpit, but then the pastor began to tell this story: One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting. "Yes, sir, I just caught the world full of people down there. Set me a trap, used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!"

"What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked. Satan replied, "Oh, I'm gonna have fun! I'm gonna teach them how to marry and divorce each other, how to hate and abuse each other, how to drink and smoke and get hooked on drugs and curse. I'm gonna teach them how to invent guns and bombs and kill each other. I'm really gonna have fun!" "And what will you do when you get done with them?" Jesus asked. "Oh, I'll kill 'em," Satan glared proudly.

"How much do you want for them?" Jesus asked. "Oh, you don't want those people. They're no good. Why, you'll take them and they'll just hate you. They'll spit on you, curse you and kill you!! They'll ignore you. You don't want those people!!" "How much?" He asked again.

Satan looked at Jesus and sneered, "All your tears, and all your blood." Jesus said, "DONE!" Then Jesus paid the price.

The pastor picked up the cage, opened the door and walked from the pulpit. (End of story)  
(original source unknown)

It's not about some dead guy! It's about forgiveness right now, healing NOW, hope NOW, a life right now that is filled with surprises, challenges, and blessings as we dare to experience and follow our risen, very much alive Lord! To each of us, the Risen Lord promises, "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of time." (Matthew 28:20) Thank God!! Amen.