

Sunday March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
Easter Sunday

**PRAYER:** We go to the tomb with Mary Magdalene, early, while it is still dark. The stone is rolled away. We stoop with Peter to look on abandoned clothes, and we do not know what this all means. Now we stand with Mary weeping outside the grave. It is not an angel but your Son we seek. O God; send him to us. Let us turn and see Jesus standing there. Make him no stranger to our eyes; let us see our teacher. Make us familiar to his eyes; let him see his disciples and call us each by name. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** Today we declare the victory of Christ. “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” Our gifts offered in the name of Christ are never offered in vain and by giving to Christ we declare our praise for his victory over death.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Lord, how you conquer! Not with birth in a palace, but with a bed in a manger! Not with a threat to end the world, but with a promise to begin a new age! Not with a mighty blow from your hand, but with a turn of your cheek! Not with an uprising against your enemies, but with the uplifting of your Son on a cross! Not by filling graves with rivals you have defeated, but by emptying the tomb of the Son you have defended!

O Lord, how you conquer! You sent someone we were not expecting, and we came to love him late. Our eyes had become accustomed to other masters. From the time we were small, we had been taught to defend ourselves; we were not ready to defend someone else. So, when you sent your Son, though we wanted to follow, we did not know how. He demanded change. We could not give it. So, we gave him up to die.

We still do. Every day. Turning, hiding, fleeing, denying, we give you up to the world. We can be your disciples in the night while everyone sleeps. But when the sun rises, we closet our faith. We do not want to be different from everybody else, so you are crucified in our place.

Forgive us, Lord. Conquer us as only you can conquer. Love us into submission. Lead us to the empty tomb; let us know you are greater than the greatness of sin. Then lead us back to our homes, our schools, and workplaces, that in the power of your forgiveness we may change. Not for our sake, but for yours. Not for our sake, but for theirs. We will set our spirits on the demands of heaven that we may send our hearts to the defense of earth.

We place the earth in the hands of the One who rolled away the stone. May you touch those who are empty and make them filled; may you touch those who are filled beyond measure and ease their burden. Touch your world through us, even as you did through Jesus Christ. We offer our lives to you for resurrection. Triumphant Victor, into your hands we commend our spirits!

**BENEDICTION:** Do not be afraid. Jesus has risen. You have seen the empty place where he lay. Go tell the world that Jesus is alive. Even now he is going before you into your streets and your homes, your offices and your markets, your prisons, and your hospitals. Look and you will see him. Amen.

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John 20:1-18

“Rolling Away Your Stones”

When I first heard about it, I thought it was some kind of quirky little group of people, taking on the establishment with a kind of tongue and cheek approach. However, I googled their association, and found out they are very real, and truly believe their basic belief. The group I am referring to is called “The Flat Earth Society”. And its basic tenet is that the earth is flat, not a rounded sphere, as we have always been led to believe.

On their website, there is extensive discussion about a “conspiracy”, of unknown motive, to try and convince people that the world is round. They even claim that space travel is a hoax, and that NASA has somehow been duped into perpetrating this falsehood. Generally, they think that money is the reason behind this hoax. It matters not to them that a flat earth would violate the physical laws of gravity, or that mere observational data seems to prove the earth is round.

As I thought about these folks, I wondered, “how can otherwise sensible people believe such nonsense”? And not just believe it but commit themselves to sharing this view with as many people as they possibly can. Then I realized that for most of humanity’s history, people have held all kinds of ridiculous ideas. Ideas they believed helped them explain the world, and universe around them. And so when someone accidentally died, it was the wrath of Zeus, or some other deity. When crops failed it was evil spirits.

Thus, elaborate rituals were developed to counteract the unseen evil in the world. Dances, sacrifices, amulets, and so much more were all conceived. Even our habit of saying “God bless you” after someone sneezes, comes from the superstition in medieval days, that when you sneezed the devil could enter your body. Thus, people used to say “God bless” you to prevent evil getting a foothold. Knocking on wood, avoiding black cats, fear of the number thirteen, horoscopes, all seem like nonsense, but good people still believe these things matter.

Now what I am about to say to you may shock you, but bear with me. On this holiest of days in the church year, I need to tell you that much of the Christian faith is absurd, illogical even. Taken as a whole, our faith is one mass of inconsistencies, ridiculous contradictory statements. For example: Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save his life must lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:24)

This same Jesus, our declared Lord and Saviour also said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” (Matt. 20:26-27) Really? Then he says, “Blessed are the poor...Blessed are you who hunger...Blessed are you who weep...Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.” (Luke 6:20-22)

Then there is this gem. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28) I’m sorry but that’s absurd! Then look what happened to the followers of Jesus. The religious authorities called the apostles in and had them flogged. They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go.

Sunday March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
Easter Sunday

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name of Jesus. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 5:40-42)

Then as we journey through the centuries, we see that this mistreatment of Christ’s followers is not that uncommon. Over the many centuries, hundreds, or thousands of Christians have been tortured and killed. The Romans started it with their spectacles of Christians being torn apart by wild animals, or in Nero’s case, lighting tied up Christians on fire to light his dinner parties; simply because they refused to renounce their faith.

Even today, in many parts of the world, places like Syria, Iran, Yemen, and North Africa, Christians are routinely persecuted and killed; sometimes done in the name of another religion, or in the name of secular governments. How illogical is that? What sense does it make to maintain your religious beliefs if it is going to get you killed? Wouldn’t it make more sense to change religions, or become an atheist to stay alive? How can you do anyone any good if you are dead?

I postulate that the Christian faith is absurd, illogical, nonsensical even, except for one thing, and one thing only. Only, and I firmly believe this; only with the resurrection of Jesus does his teaching, and the behavior of his followers, make any sense. The resurrection is the thread tying everything together. It is the cornerstone of faith. Think about the disciples’ own experience for a moment.

Before Jesus rose from the dead, they just didn’t understand him. In Mark 9:32 we read, “But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.” Luke 9:45, “But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.” Luke 18:34, “The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.”

In John 10:6 we read, “Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.” Do you see a pattern here? It’s a common thread in the gospels, that the twelve disciples, who were with Jesus for three years, listened to his teaching, observed his miracles, watching his life day in and day out- these men who were a consistent witness to everything about Jesus before his crucifixion and resurrection, were still very fuzzy about what he was all about.

If you read the passages about Jesus’ interaction with his disciples, you can come to only two conclusions. Either Jesus by bad luck, had chosen twelve of the most clueless men in all of Galilee; or something was missing. There was a key missing that made everything about Jesus make sense. And that key, of course, was the resurrection. John 2:22 reads, “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scriptures and the words Jesus had spoken.”

John 12:16 reads, “At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him.”

Sunday March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
Easter Sunday

But it wasn't just their understanding that changed, we observe in the book of Acts particularly, a radical change in their behavior. The resurrection of Jesus changed everything.

Before the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were quite cowardly, and scattered to the wind after Jesus was arrested. They chose to save their own skin rather than remain loyal to their master. Peter emphatically denies he even knew Jesus. None of the twelve even asks for Jesus body to give him a decent burial, it was Joseph of Arimathea who took care of it. But after the resurrection, what happens.

These disciples become bold, and fearless; they willingly endure arrest, harassment, torture, and death. Did you know that there is an idea floating around for a long, long, time, that it doesn't matter whether Jesus rose from the dead in a physical, bodily sense; that the important thing is what he taught and how he lived. What rubbish! Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul wrote, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." (I Cor. 15:19) Without the resurrection, it isn't Christianity that make no sense; it is life itself that makes no sense. With no resurrection, there is no hope. If there is no resurrection, what difference does it make what anyone does in this life? Good, bad, indifferent; it wouldn't matter, because without a resurrection, we all end in eternal silence.

Along that same line, if there is no resurrection, then there is no justice. "Justice is mine says the Lord." How can that be true if those who committed atrocities are never judged by their creator? Maybe I have shared this bit of news with you before, but because of Laura's previous work in the funeral business we have had a front row seat to changes in how we honour our dead. More and more there is no formal service for the deceased.

And quite often, if there is any recognition of someone dying, it has become nothing more than a gathering of friends and family at the local legion or favourite tavern to hoist a few. There is even a new category of attending clergy for funerals called "celebrants". These are folks trained to prepare memorial services that are completely devoid of any religious language or symbolism. The best a celebrant can offer is a fond remembrance of the past; but where is the hope in that.

Anyone who thinks such an approach is a good thing is in Paul's words, "Most to be pitied among people". What's the point of life without a resurrection? How do you bring hope to millions of people who live in poverty, injustice, and war-torn countries? Is their misery all there is for them? With no resurrection, our charitable works are meaningless. For many of these people, if there is no resurrection, it would have been better if they were never born, because without hope people perish.

I saw on March 15<sup>th</sup> an interview with Dr. David Suzuki conducted by Peter Mansbridge in recognition of Dr. Suzuki turning 80 years old. At one point in the interview, Dr. Suzuki admitted that the environmental movement had failed. That the degradation of the environment is getting worse, not better. That when it comes to global warming it may be too late to stop the devastation coming.

Sunday March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
Easter Sunday

As I listened, I reflected on the fact that if there is no resurrection, why should I care about the environment? If when I die that's it, why should I care about the air my grandchildren will breathe? I'll be eternally gone. Without the resurrection, I will never know whether our efforts to halt global warming worked.

If the world is uninhabitable in 100 years, so what; I won't be here. But if there is a resurrection, I will be answerable for my actions. Because I have experienced hope, I want my descendants to also experience hope.

Easter matters, more than ever, in a world that invents new cruelties every day. It matters that Jesus rose from the dead. Why? Well Paul writes "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also." (1 Cor. 6:14) I have a current new favourite contemporary Christian song. I appreciate this piece because it sums up the nature of my faith very well. If you have never heard it sung by its recording group, I urge you to look it up and have a listen.

From the group Casting Crowns comes the wonderful song "Glorious Day". The whole piece is great but the chorus says it all...

Living, He loved me  
Dying, He saved me  
Buried, He carried my sins far away  
Rising, he justified freely forever  
One day He's coming  
O glorious day, oh glorious day.

What is so glorious about any day without our risen Jesus?