

Welcome on this Easter Sunday 2015 the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. This is the most important day in the year for Christians.

Unfortunately, **tomorrow** is the biggest day of the year for some golfers. It is the start of The Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia.

You think I'm kidding about their relative importance? Years ago, Frank Chirkinian, the head of CBS Sports, discovered that The Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset at this conflict, he demanded of his colleagues, "Who sets the date of Easter? Didn't they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let's get to that person and have him change it." (1)

I don't know how they resolved that conflict. I'm pretty sure they didn't change the date for Easter though if they could, they probably would. Sports are a powerful force in our society.

You know by now how the drama of Easter unfolds. It begins two days earlier, on Good Friday. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the religious authorities. He was nailed to a cross and a sword pierced his side. The soldiers affixed a sign above his head which read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Death came rather swiftly and mercifully, after only about six hours. Some crucified men lingered for days, which has led some writers to propose that Christ died of a broken heart. After a Roman centurion confirmed his death, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect for that territory, granted permission to a man named Joseph of Arimathea to claim his body.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and pious man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who had become a follower of Jesus. Joseph was aided by a wealthy Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. It was Nicodemus, you'll remember, who had come to Christ under the darkness of night to ask him about his teachings. It was to Nicodemus that Christ said that in order for him to enter the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus would have to be born all over again. Evidently the message took, for when Jesus' closest disciples had fled in fear, there was Nicodemus aiding Joseph of Arimathea in claiming Jesus' body. Carefully and with much effort they removed the nails from the Master's hands and feet and lowered him to the ground. Along with a group of women who had remained close by through it all, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Christ's body for burial.

They had to act quickly, these blessed saints who were there to minister to the mangled body of their Master. The Jewish Sabbath began on Friday evening and they would need to have him in the tomb with the tomb sealed before the Sabbath began. It most certainly is not how they would have preferred to have treated their Master. They were perhaps risking their lives in performing this act of love and honor. Certainly they were risking their reputations. That showed how much he meant to them. Indeed, he meant everything to them, and now to have to hurry through the burial preparations was salt in their own emotional wounds.

It is significant that they laid him in a borrowed grave. Jesus said on one occasion, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). He owned no property on which to be buried. The tomb belonged to this same Joseph of Arimathea. Probably he had prepared it for his own burial.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the tomb was "hewn out in the rock." This would confirm Joseph's wealth. Only royalty or wealthy individuals could afford to have their tombs carved out of a wall of stone or in the side of a mountain. Poorer men were buried in simple graves. (2)

A time-honored piece of humor says 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. He only needed it for the weekend. But the act was done. Christ now lay in the tomb and these devoted friends were back safely in their homes as they grieved and awaited the dawning of the first day of the week when they could take their time and anoint his body in a more appropriate way.

This all happened before Easter Sunday morning. And so we can appreciate the words with which John begins his description of that first Easter. He writes, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . ."

What beautiful and significant words. **"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . ."** Would you agree with me that before the resurrection of Jesus, the world was a dark, dark place?

There was once a widely known Baptist preacher named Carlyle Marney. Marney once visited the campus of Duke University. A student asked, "Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?"

Marney answered, "I will not discuss that with people like you."

The student was shocked and wanted to know why.

Marney said, "Look at you, in the prime of the life . . . Never have you known honest-to-God failure, heart-burn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?"

No wonder that story is so well known. It is a dark world which only makes sense if Christ be raised.

And so we read these words: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . ."

The darkness also speaks of the eagerness with which Mary of Magdala hastened to the tomb to perform this one last act of love for her Master. She had waited through the Sabbath and the dark hours before the dawning of Sunday morning. Now she could wait no longer. Remember there were no street lights to guide her feet. Surely she stumbled from time to time. But hers was a desperate journey. They had taken Christ at night. They had flogged him and he had endured a travesty of a trial. Then they hung him hurriedly on a cross. There had been no chance for her to tell him good-bye and then he was gone. Her grief was unspeakable.

Thus, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. **When she arrived there, she saw that the stone had been removed from the**

**entrance to the tomb.** This surely hit her like a punch in the gut. Her first reaction was that someone had stolen Christ's body. Isn't that interesting? Her first thought had not been that he had risen. This thought seems never to have occurred to her. I mean, dead people don't rise from their graves, do they? John tells us, "She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'"

Can you hear the panic in her voice? Remember when the airliner was shot down in the Eastern part of Ukraine last year? Remember how desperate families were to recover the physical remains of their loved ones? Sure, they understood that the bodies were now empty shells that no longer contained the spirits of their loved ones. They knew that, but they desperately needed the closure that only comes with respectfully disposing of their loved ones' remains. Jesus' body had been sealed in a tomb, but now it was gone. Who could have perpetrated such an act of desecration? Mary's heart sank.

Peter and John were mystified. They began running toward the tomb. John got there first, but did not go in. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but, for some reason, didn't go in. Simon Peter, of course, wasn't so reticent. He went straight into the tomb. He also saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally John also went inside. "Our lesson says, "He saw and believed." But then the writer adds, "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

In other words, it was still dark that first Easter morning. The disciples were in the dark just like everyone else. And Mary Magdalene who loved the Master so much was completely in the dark as well, and her heart was breaking.

**It's a dark world without Easter.** No truer statement can be made.

The fifth century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus tells an anecdote about Xerxes, the mighty king of Persia, who is prominent in the book of Esther.

In 480 B.C. Xerxes invaded Greece with an army of nearly two million men. Seeing the whole Hellespont filled with the vessels of his fleet, and the plains covered with his regiments, Xerxes at 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 in his position could possibly have to cry about. The king replied that he had just realized that in a hundred years' time, all these men arrayed before him, every one of the soldiers and sailors with whose help he had terrified the known world, would be dead. (3) And this 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 beautiful story about comedienne Gracie Allen and the importance of life beyond the grave. I realize that many younger members of our congregation never had the chance to see George Burns and Gracie Allen together. They were one of America's favorite comedy teams for more than four decades in vaudeville, films, radio and television. They were also deeply in love. Gracie died in 1964. George Burns, of course, 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 has placed a comma." (4)

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma." Such a sentiment makes no sense without Easter. Without Easter there is no concrete evidence of life beyond the grave. This is what most bothers many people who demand scientific evidence. There is no such thing with concern to life beyond the grave. Oh, we can infer evidence.

For example, biologists tell us that every five to seven years our bodies deteriorate. And yet this process does not destroy us. Millions of our cells die and are almost immediately replaced. In a sense, we have a completely new body every five to seven years. And yet, our personalities go on. Why should that which happens instantaneously, which we call physical death, do any more to destroy the soul of a person than that which is occurring every moment that we live? (5) Still, there is no hard scientific evidence of immortality. Without Easter, there is only blind speculation.

Pastor Jerry Jones tells about a Christian man and his wife who lost their young son in a tragic accident on Good Friday in 1996. The boy's funeral was on Easter Sunday. During the memorial service the father got up and shared with his family and friends that Easter had taken on a new importance. "Until you stare death eye-to-eye," he began sobbing, "Easter is just a word. It's a nice day with bunny rabbits and eggs . . . but when someone so precious to you dies, Easter becomes everything . . . an anchor in a fierce storm . . . a rock on which to stand . . . a hope that raises you above despair and keeps you going." (6)

**It's a dark, dark world without Easter. On the other hand, with Easter, we see hope bursting forward with every blossom of springtime.**

I was amused to read about an elementary school class that was taking a test. One question was, "Upon what do hibernating animals subsist during the winter?"

One child wrote, "All winter long hibernating animals subsist on the hope of the coming spring." (7)

That may not have been the answer the teacher was looking for, but that doesn't keep it from having a ring of truth. We do subsist on hope. It is built into every fiber of our being.

Dr. Jane McAdams, a medical doctor, was shocked to the core when her 68-year-old mother was diagnosed with progressive lymphoma. Doctors gave her less than a month to live. When Dr. McAdams came to break the news, she found the elderly woman looking through a sales catalogue. Her mother, a legendary penny-pincher, pointed out a very expensive summer purse and announced that she wanted that purse for her birthday.

Dr. McAdams realized that her mother wasn't asking for the purse; she was asking how long she would live. Would she live long enough to use a summer purse?

That day, Dr. McAdams decided not to tell her mother the diagnosis. Instead, she went out and bought the most expensive summer purse she could find. And every year since then, she's bought her mother a fancy purse. At the time of her writing, Dr. McAdams' mother was about to celebrate her 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. (8) There is amazing power in hope, is there not? Hope is what Easter is all about. Without Easter this is a dark, dark world. With Easter, hope bursts forward with every blossom of springtime.

**And this leads me to say one last thing: thank God for Easter.** I said that we don't have scientific evidence for life beyond the grave, but we do have historical evidence. The respected 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 experienced Christ's resurrection is so compelling that the only real reason a person might reject it is that it might require them to make a change in how they are living. That is the right, of course, of those who reject it. It is sad, but they are free to reject the Good News of Easter if they so choose. As for me, and, I suspect for you, we will leave this place with "hallelujah!" ringing in our ears and in our hearts. Jesus is alive, and because he lives we shall live, too. Easter is God's light beaming into a dark, dark world. Because Christ lives, the world is brighter than it has ever been before.

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