

Children

I

Object: trick candles, the kind that relight themselves when blown out (usually found in gag gift stores)

Good morning, boys and girls. Today is Easter, the day when we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead. Do you remember the Bible story about Easter? God sent His Son Jesus to be the Light of the world, to tell us all about what God is like, and how God wants us to live. (Light the trick candle.) Jesus has been preaching and teaching and telling people all about God, spreading the light of God's love. But He has made the politicians and the professional teachers angry. They don't believe He is the Son of God. They think He is lying and causing trouble. So they decide to kill Him. They whip Him and hang Him on a cross, and when He is dead, they bury Him in a tomb and leave Him there. (Blow out the candle, and let it relight.)

But Jesus didn't stay in that tomb. He came back to life. He's not dead anymore, He's alive. Just like this light can't be blown out, Jesus can't be destroyed. He is still the Light of the world today. He came back from the dead to show us that He really is the Son of God, and now He is in Heaven with God. And that's why we celebrate Easter. Jesus is still al

II

Object: on a piece of paper, write the word HOPE vertically in bold letters down the left side of the paper.

Good morning, boys and girls. Can you tell me what special day this is today? That's right, it's Easter. What's so special about Easter? It's the day when Jesus came back to life after dying. WOW! Now that's exciting! You see, Jesus had been arrested and killed by the Roman guards. Jesus' family and friends were so sad. Jesus had taught them all about God, and He had loved them. Now He was dead, and they thought they'd never be happy again. They had no hope. But when they went to the tomb to see Jesus' body, they found that Jesus was alive again. Can you imagine how happy Jesus' family and friends were? They must have jumped up and down, and yelled and shouted, and just gone crazy with happiness! And that's why we are so happy today when we celebrate Easter. Easter is all about hope. "Hope" is kind of like believing that everything is going to be all right, that good things are going to happen. At Easter, God let us know that everything is going to be all right. He's in control.

In fact, this is how I like to think of the Easter hope. (Write the following phrases out from the side of each letter of the word HOPE) At Easter,

He rose
Overcame death and
Provided life for
Everyone

That's what Easter is all about. Let's pray and thank God for giving us this special Easter hope.

Adult

I

Al Smith was once governor of New York. He was doing his first tour of New York's Sing Sing Prison when the warden asked if he would address the inmates. The governor was taken by surprise, but he agreed. His awkwardness was revealed when he began like this, "My fellow citizens . . ." He stopped himself. He wasn't sure if inmates actually had the full rights of citizenship. So, he changed courses.

"My fellow convicts," he began again. Everyone laughed.

He tried once more. "Well anyhow, I'm glad to see so many of you here . . ." as if his audience had any choice.

Well, you had a choice and I'm glad to see so many of you here today. And where else would you be on Easter? In the comfort of your bed? Well, you could be, but I'm glad you chose to be in this sacred place to give God thanks for Easter.

We live in a strange world. Even Easter is not exempt from some of the fads that are sweeping through our land.

A soldier wrote recently to *Reader's Digest* to tell about an incident that took place on Easter Sunday in the chapel on their military base. The pastor called the children to the front and told them the story of how Jesus was crucified by the Romans, his body placed in a tomb, and the front covered by a stone.

"But on the third day," the pastor said, "the stone was rolled away, and Jesus was not there." Then the pastor turned to the children and asked, "Do you know what happened next?"

One kid shouted, "Jesus turned into a zombie and went after the Romans!" (1)

Well, that's not exactly how the story goes. I'll admit, that's how a modern storyteller might narrate it. But Jesus didn't become a zombie and he didn't go after the Romans. The real story is far more beautiful.

Now it's the morning of the third day and it's Mary Magdalene, of course, making her way to Christ's tomb. She discovers that the stone has been removed from the entrance and the body of her Master is missing. We can only imagine the thoughts that ran through her mind. She ran to two of Jesus' closest disciples and reported to them that someone had taken the Lord's body. Notice that she doesn't even mention the possibility of resurrection. It's important to understand that Jesus' closest friends and followers, even Mary Magdalene, were totally taken off guard by his resurrection. Even though he had tried to prepare them, the idea was simply too big for them to entertain until they experienced it firsthand.

she sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They ask her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. We can understand that. Her eyes were too full of tears.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." And at the sound of her name Mary Magdalene was brought back to reality. She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Crying at the tomb. Many of you have been there, haven't you? A parent, a friend, perhaps even a child you've stood there by a tomb and wept. Perhaps you wept so hard that you could not even sense the risen Master standing next to you seeking to comfort you. And now you are here, seeking as we all do, to hear your name called, to experience the kind of transformation Mary Magdalene experienced, to have the fog of doubt and fear lifted from your mind and heart and to know that the Good News really is true. Christ lives and because he lives, you and I can receive the gift of eternal life. It is natural for us to have these yearnings. Even the most skeptical among us still have a glimmer of hope that the Easter story is true—that Christ has been raised from the dead.

There was a report sometime back in the *The Futurist* magazine. *The Futurist* is a magazine for people who seek to anticipate the changes that are taking place in our society. The subject of this particular report was "virtual immortality." What is virtual immortality? Some of you have already guessed it has something to do with computers. You're right.

Imagine that everything that there is to know about you your appearance, your mannerisms, your voice, and even your knowledge and experience were all digitized and dumped into a very sophisticated database. The computer churns all this information together and then begins bringing to life a virtual representative of yourself an avatar, if you will. This virtual representative of yourself would preserve much of your personality, your preferences and your appearance for eternity. In a sense you would have a form of eternal life inside a computer. (2)

This may not sound very appealing to you, spending eternity as a computer avatar, but we are rapidly approaching a time when this is very much a possibility. Vastly improving information storage and processing and sophisticated virtual-reality graphics already create nearly lifelike experiences. Add the growing wonders of artificial intelligence into the mix, and who knows what is possible? But it is still not us.

A few of you may be familiar with the name Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil is a brilliant scientist, inventor, author and a man who is greatly influencing thought about humanity's future, particular as it relates to the rapid increases in the power of computers. He was featured recently on the cover of *Time* magazine with an article titled, "2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal." Ray Kurzweil claims no religious affiliation; no belief in God. And yet Kurzweil hungers for immortality.

One of the motivations for his life's work is the dream of resurrecting his dead father. This is no joke. This is his dream. He hopes not only to avoid death himself, but also to reconnect someday with his dead father by somehow resurrecting him through the wonders of science.

It is a shame that Ray Kurzweil, this brilliant scientist and thinker, is not able to relax and believe the good news of Easter. Christ has provided a way for him to be reconnected with his dead father. And it has nothing to do with complex algorithms. There is nothing virtual about it. It is real, as real as life itself.

Crying by the tomb. Many of you have been there. Ray Kurzweil has been there. Even the most secular and the most skeptical among us, however, still have a glimmer of hope that the Easter story is true—that Christ has been raised from the dead.

Mary Magdalene was there—crying at the tomb. And the Master spoke her name. Note that he spoke her name. It is when she hears Christ speak her name that the veil of doubt and dread is raised.

There is an enchanting myth from the time of the ancient Greeks. It is the story of the beautiful Helen of Troy. Do you remember the words used to describe Helen? Hers was “the face that launched a thousand ships.”

But there is another legend about Helen of Troy from later in her life. Helen is captured and carried away. She becomes a victim of amnesia. She can’t remember who she is. Neither can she remember that she is of royal blood. And because she can’t remember and there is no one to remind her, Helen of Troy becomes a prostitute.

Meanwhile, back in her homeland Helen’s friends didn’t give up hope of finding her. One old friend in particular goes looking for her. One day he finds himself wandering through the streets of a strange city. He comes across a wretched woman in tattered clothes. It is Helen. Time has not been kind to her. Her face is deeply lined with wrinkles. Believing he recognizes her, however, this friend walks up to Helen and asks, “What is your name?”

She gives him a name, but it is another name and not Helen.

“May I see your hands?” he asks because he remembers some distinctive lines in Helen’s hands. She holds her hands in front of his face. He can’t believe his eyes.

“Helen!” he exclaims. “I’ve found you! You’re Helen!”

At the sound of her name, Helen’s memory begins to return. The fog begins to lift from her brain. She recognizes her name and she senses something familiar in the manner of the one who has spoken her name. She falls into her friends’ arms, weeping with gratitude. She is restored to the queen she was meant to be.

It’s only a pagan myth, but it reminds us of Mary of Magdala’s experience. Even though her grief had blinded her to his presence, when Christ spoke her name, she knew who he was.

Have you ever heard Christ speak your name? I believe he is speaking it right now. In Acts 14, Paul is trying to point pagan believers to the living God revealed in Christ. He speaks these words, In past generations he allowed all Gentiles to go their own ways;^e 17yet, in bestowing his goodness, he did not leave himself without witness, for he gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filled you with nourishment and gladness for your hearts.” In other words, God is constantly revealing Himself to those who would see Him. And God is speaking our name to anyone who will listen. If you are crying on the inside this morning, wipe your tears for a moment and listen. God is here. Christ is alive. He’s speaking your name. He’s saying to you, “It’s all real. I am with you. I have conquered death.”

Mary was crying by the tomb. The Master called her name, just as Christ is calling your name. And something dramatic happened in Mary’s life. Mary Magdalene will never be the same again, because she was the first human being, male or female, who knew for certain that Christ is alive. What a wondrous thing that would be!

You have heard me quote Pastor Tony Campolo many times in the past. Some of you are undoubtedly familiar with Campolo’s famous sermon, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s

Coming,” based on a sermon he once experienced in his home church, a black church in West Philadelphia. Campolo grew up in that church. He’s the only white member of the 2,500 member congregation. African-American congregations and pastors have their own unique and wondrous approach to the Gospel message, notes Campolo. And Campolo himself has been deeply affected by that approach.

He says he remembers when he went to his first black funeral. He was seventeen years old. A friend of his named Clarence had died. The minister was magnificent. Campolo described that preacher like this: “He preached about the Resurrection and he talked about life after death in such glowing terms that I have to tell you, even at seventeen I wished I was dead just listening to him! He came down from the pulpit. Then he went over to the family and spoke words of comfort to them. Last of all, he went over to the open casket and for the last twenty minutes, he preached to the corpse. Can you imagine that? He just yelled at the corpse. ‘Clarence! Clarence!’ he yelled. He said it with such authority,” says Campolo, “I would not have been surprised had there been an answer.”

“Well,” this preacher said, “Clarence, you died too fast. You got away without us thanking you.” He went down this litany of beautiful, wonderful things that Clarence had done for people. Then he said, “That’s it, Clarence. When there’s nothin’ more to say, there’s only one thing to say, good night!”

“Now this is drama,” says Campolo. “White preachers can’t do this! . . . [The preacher] grabbed the lid of the casket and he slammed it shut and he yelled, ‘Good night, Clarence! Good night, Clarence!’ As he slammed that lid shut he pointed to the casket and he said, ‘Good night, Clarence, ‘cause I know, yes, I know that God is going to give you a good morning!’ Then the choir stood and started singing ‘On that great gettin’ up Morning we shall rise, we shall rise.’ People were up on their feet and they were in the aisles hugging and kissing each other and dancing. I was up dancing and hugging people,” says Tony Campolo. “I knew I was in the right church, the kind of church that can take a funeral and turn it into a celebration. That’s what the faith is about. It’s about the promise of eternal life . . . death doesn’t threaten us any more.” (3)Death where is your sting

In the second century during the plagues Christians ran in to the victims, not because they wanted to catch it and die. But death was a celebration. But as Christians they had an obligation to visit the sick. And we who are Christians do as well.

It can’t be expressed any better than that. If in your heart for any reason you are weeping by a tomb this day . . . not just the tomb of a family member or a good friend. Maybe it’s the tomb of a lifelong dream . . . the tomb of disappointment or despair . . . the tomb of heartbreak or rejection . . . the tomb of fear and frustration . . . if you’re crying beside any tomb this day . . . hear the good news for the day. Jesus is calling your name. He’s here with reassurance. The Gospel is true. Jesus is alive, and because he is alive, you can live, too. Mary heard the Master speak her name and through her tears she knew. He is alive. He IS alive. Today and forevermore.

1. Lou DeTufio, Livingston, New Jersey in *Reader’s Digest*.
2. World Trends & Forecasts, July-Aug 2007, p. 12.
3. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/campolo_4604.htm.

In his book, THERE I GO AGAIN, Steven Moseley tells about Anna Pavlova, a Russian ballet superstar of the early 1900s. Ms. Pavlova has been acclaimed as the greatest ballerina of all time. Her most memorable performance, however, took place after her death. Anna was to play the role she made famous, the Dying Swan, at the Apollo Theatre in London. Tragically, she succumbed to pneumonia and died two days before the event. Still, on the appointed night, a crowd of her fans packed the Apollo Theatre. The orchestra began playing, the curtain rose, a spotlight flashed through the dark, and the entire audience rose to its feet. They all stood gazing at a pool of light wandering around the stage, accompanied by the orchestral theme. As the light danced and the orchestra played, they remembered Anna Pavlova. In their hearts they could see her on stage, dressed in white with flashing dark eyes. And when the music stopped at last, they gave the vanished Anna a thunderous ovation that echoed on and on in the night. (1) An empty stage with only a spotlight, but in their hearts she was alive. For some, this is the experience of Easter. The Lord was crucified, he died as all of us will one day die, and he was laid in a borrowed tomb, but in the hearts of his disciples he lives forever. An empty stage, but not an empty tomb. This is not the testimony of the New Testament. Yes, he was crucified. Yes, he did die. Yes, he was laid in a borrowed tomb, but when the women and later his disciples came to visit his tomb on the third day, the stone had been rolled away. The borrowed tomb was empty. The grave clothes that had been wound around his blood-stained body were neatly folded and laid to the side. He was not there! He was alive! He met with them, dined with them, reassured them " not as a mere memory dancing in a spotlight, but as a real person. This is the Easter story. Not an empty stage, but an empty tomb. Is this important? You bet it is. Ultimately, you and I have a choice to make. It is the most important choice we will ever face. It is whether to accept the empty stage or to accept the empty tomb. Does Christ merely live in the hearts of his disciples or is he really alive today just as you and I are alive? Remember Woody Allen's comic assessment? "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work," he

said. "I want to achieve immortality by not dying."
Which is it? Are we immortal because there are those who remember and cherish the fact that once we walked this "vale of tears" or are we immortal because Christ has once and forever battered down the gates of death? Empty stage or empty tomb?

DEATH IS OFTEN AN UGLY EXPERIENCE. It means separation, loss, heartache beyond description. Oh, we try to pretend it is not so.

Has anyone here ever hear of Mrs. Martin Van Butchell? I would be surprised if anyone has. She's been dead for over 200 years.

Mrs. Butchell left a will. It specified that on her death, her husband had control of her fortune only as long as her body remained above ground. I don't know what she had against being buried, but that was her stipulation.

Mausoleums were little known at the time, so the husband hired the Scottish anatomist William Hunter to embalm his dead wife. Then he dressed her in fashionable attire and put her on display in the family parlor.

Daily visiting hours were held for those who wished to view the corpse inside a glass-lidded coffin.

As news of how life-like Mrs. Butchell looked spread, the art of undertaking quickly became a thriving

business. Families were encouraged to soften the loss of loved ones through embalming the person to look as life-like as possible. Some embalmers, to drum up new business, took their prize corpses on tour,

exhibiting embalmed bodies in the windows of barbershops, in public halls, and at country fairs so that rural

folk could get a glimpse of the latest in funeral treatment. And the public was duly impressed. (2)

We disguise death in many ways. Through our language, for example "he passed away, she's gone,

mother's no longer with us. We dress the deceased in his finest suit or her prettiest dress. We make use of

the embalmer's art. Sometimes we retreat into memories of better days. Anything to keep us from dealing

with the finality of death. DEATH IS UGLY IF EASTER IS MERELY A SPOTLIGHT ON AN EMPTY

STAGE. But if it is about an empty tomb, then death is an entirely different matter. Indeed, if Easter really is about an empty tomb, death can be seen in an entirely different light. Many of you know of Tony Campolo. He is one of the most entertaining and thought-provoking speakers in America today. Many of you know about his love for his home church, Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia, which happens to be a predominantly black church. Tony Campolo tells about the first funeral he attended at Mount Carmel when he was twenty years old. Clarence, a college friend of his, had been killed in a subway-train accident. At the beginning of the service, says Tony Campolo, the pastor brilliantly expounded upon what the Bible says about the promise of the resurrection and the joys of being with Christ. Then he came down from the platform and went over to the right side of the sanctuary, where the family of Tony's dead friend was seated in the first three rows. There, he spoke special words of comfort for them. Then the pastor did a most unusual thing. He went over to the open casket and spoke as though to the corpse. He said, "Clarence! Clarence! There were a lot of things we should have said to you when you were alive that we never got around to saying to you. And I want to say them now." What followed was a beautiful litany of memories of things that Clarence had done for many people present and for the church. The list recalled how lovingly Clarence had served others without thought of reward. When he had finished, the pastor looked at Clarence's body and said, "Well, Clarence, that's it. I've got nothing else to say except this: Good night, Clarence. Good Night!" And with that he slammed down the lid of the casket as a stunned silence fell over the congregation. Then a beautiful smile slowly lit up the pastor's face and he shouted, "And I know that God is going to give Clarence a good morning!" With that the choir rose to its feet and started singing, "On that great gettin' up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!" As the choir sang, everyone in the congregation rose to their feet and started singing it with them. "On that great gettin' up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!" There was clapping and crying, but the

tears were tears of laughter. "Celebration had broken out in the face of death. Something of a party that is to come had broken into that church...Death had been swallowed up in victory." (3)

No empty stage, but an empty tomb. That's the message of Easter. Death has been conquered. AND SO HAS LIFE. Because of what happened that first Easter Sunday, you and I can walk in freedom and dignity and joy.

That prince of the pulpit Charles Hadley Spurgeon was walking the streets of London deep in thought when

he saw a young street boy. The lad was carrying an old, bent bird cage. Inside was a tiny field sparrow.

Spurgeon stopped the boy and asked him what he was going to do with the bird.

"Well..." the boy said. "I think I'll play with it for a while, and then when I'm tired of playing with it " I think I'll

kill it." He made that last comment with a wicked grin.

Moved with compassion for the bird, Spurgeon asked, "How much would you sell me that bird for?"

"You don't want this bird, mister," the boy said with a chuckle.

"It's just a bleeding field sparrow." But then

he saw the old gentleman was serious.

"You can have this bird for " two pounds," he said slyly. Two pounds at that time would be worth more than

a hundred dollars today " an astronomical price for a bird worth only pennies. Spurgeon paid the price, and

let the bird go.

The next morning, Easter Sunday morning, an empty bird cage sat on the pulpit of the great Metropolitan

Tabernacle where Spurgeon preached.

"Let me tell you about this cage," Spurgeon said as he began the sermon.

Then he recounted the story

about the little boy and how he had purchased the bird from him at a high cost.

"I tell you this story," he said, "because that's just what Jesus did for us. You see, an evil specter called Sin

had us caged up and unable to escape. But then Jesus came up to Sin and said, "What are you going to do

with those people in that cage?"

"These people?" Sin answered with a laugh. "I'm going to teach them to hate each other. Then I'll play with

them until I'm tired of them " and then I'll kill them."

"How much to buy them back?" Jesus asked.

III Fr Joseph Pelegrino

The restrictions on assembling prevent us from celebrating Easter in the church. But we still proclaim with our lives our joy in the renewal of the world, our Easter joy. Many are suffering from the corona virus, and we keep them all in our prayers. No one is suffering from the loss of our Easter joy. No pandemic can destroy Easter.

The celebration of Easter stands in stark contrast to our commemoration of Good Friday. Think about the Good Fridays you have experienced. On Good Friday, there are no flowers or alleluias. There is solemn music. And there was the Cross.

Yet, both Good Friday and Easter, as well as Holy Thursday, are bound together into one celebration, the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. The name paschal refers to the lamb who was sacrificed and whose sacrifice brought life.

Before Jesus' sacrifice, mankind had lost the capacity to have a spiritual life. Mankind's sin, his decision to push God out of his life, destroyed his own spiritual life. God is the Lord of Life, but mankind decided that he didn't need God. His choice of sin was a choice of death. His pushing God aside allowed the devil to have free reign on the earth. Without God, without a spiritual life, mankind's existence was limited to the here and now. There was no hereafter for him. No eternity. Life ended, and that was that.

But, to use a biblical term, *in the fullness of time*, that means when God saw fit, the Eternal Word of God came as the new Adam, the one who would choose life. Through a paradox beyond our understanding, Jesus' death was a means for restoring life to his brothers and sisters, to us.

Jesus rose from the dead and became the source of spiritual life to all who believe in Him. This is why we call out "Alleluia." We are dead no more. We are alive in the Lord. The sign of our acceptance of the Life of the Lord is our baptism, or, more properly, our living our baptismal commitment.

But how about those who have never been baptized? What happened to the just Jew, like Martin Buber, or the spiritual Hindu, like Mahatma Gandhi, or the moral, humanitarian atheist, like so many we all know? How about these people? Do they have no future after death? We prayed for these people in the ancient petitions of Good Friday. Why did we pray for them? If they have no spiritual life, then they are dead. However, they are not dead. Our faith teaches us that Jesus descended to the dead. He called forth from death those who desired to do what was right and good, people of good will who by choosing to be moral were therefore choosing to have union with God no matter what concept of God they had. Theologians have a name for their salvation. They call it Baptism of Desire.

Every Good Friday, I marvel at the people who come up to venerate the cross. I have been pastor of St. Ignatius for 28 years. I am blessed to know so many of our people's stories, your stories. I see people come forward expressing a deep faith that

the Lord will care for them and their loved ones, a deep trust that all will be well even if the future is uncertain. They represent all the people who are in pain right now, all those who are suffering. They represent those who are fighting cancer and other serious ailments. I also think about and pray for those whose marriages or families have fallen apart, the single parents, the parentless children. All of these come up to venerate the cross. All of these, like all serious Christians, have found happiness in their hope.

St. Augustine loved that phrase, *happiness in hope*. He used it several times in his greatest work, *The City of God*. He used it to describe the Christian attitude in life. The society of man can only provide lasting happiness if it is united to God, if it is a City of God.

It is true that we have to do everything possible to bring peace and justice to the world. This is our way of serving Christ's presence in the poor and downtrodden. We have to protect the lives of those who have been conceived but have not yet been born. We have to fight to end poverty in our country and in our world. We cannot turn our backs on people who are suffering, whether they be Americans or people in another country or continent. We have to demand that those in leadership use their authority justly, even, dare I say, in a Christ like way. And yet, we know that in the end, our society cannot provide lasting happiness for anyone.

We Christians have as our happiness the hope of eternal life. Easter is the celebration of hope. Our hope is that we will share in the fullness of the New Life Jesus won for us through His suffering and death. It is our hope in Christ that helps us endure challenges like the corona virus.

Christ was raised so we can share His New Life. We need to grasp on to our faith with both hands. Only our faith brings sanity, meaning, and purpose to our lives. The corona virus has brought sickness and death, turmoil, unemployment, and all sorts of other crises into our lives, but our faith gets us through because despite the suffering we have happiness in hope. No one can take the Risen Savior from us. No one and no situation, no matter how terrible, can take His Presence from us.

This is the Gift of Easter Sunday! We have entered the spiritual. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. May our spiritual lives have an infinite precedence over our physical lives.

May the life of the Risen Lord flow through our veins, so that every thought word and deed of our lives may shout out: Jesus Lives!

And may we all be happy in the hope of eternal life.