

Risen For Us
John 20:1-18
Easter Day, April 8, 2012

I.

How many times have we heard the story of the empty tomb? And even though we have heard it before, it never grows old. But what really happened that morning? Wouldn't we like to know more?

Well, just hypothetically, suppose modern technology existed back then, and a security camera was in the tomb. Those cameras seem to be everywhere now. What would it have shown?

Would it show Jesus opening his eyes, stretching a little, folding up his burial shroud and then walking out? Maybe there would be a blinding flash of light that would disable the camera. Perhaps Jesus' body would just disappear, here one minute and gone the next. There are several possibilities, and we'll never know.

These various possibilities remind me of a story about a Sunday School teacher who asked her class this question. What happened on Easter? One little girl said "Easter is when the whole family gets together and eats turkey, and we remember the pilgrims.

"No," said the teacher, "That's not it." Another child raised his hand and said "Easter is when you decorate a tree and give gifts to everyone." The teacher was becoming frustrated.

Finally a third student said, "Easter is when Jesus died and was in a tomb for three days." The teacher thought someone finally understood. But the child continued, "and then everyone gathers at the tomb to watch Jesus come out, and if he sees his shadow we have six more weeks of winter."

Well, obviously there can be different ideas about Easter. This morning I would like to briefly talk about what Easter really means to us, and why we can rely on God's promise of eternity that is so evident in the Easter message.

II.

We all probably have heard some of the famous eternal questions. Why are we here? Is this all there is? Is there more to life than just life?

Some people say "No, there isn't." They say that you live, you die, someone puts you in the ground, and that's it.

I don't believe that at all. And Easter is the reason why. Our hopes in our own resurrections exist because Jesus first was raised from the dead. Because of the resurrection of Jesus our own resurrections become possible.

St. Paul explained in his first letter to the Corinthians that our promise of eternal life is linked to the truth of the resurrection (15:16-22). He said that through Christ's resurrection our own mortal bodies will become eternal and imperishable on that final day (15:42-54).

He also said in Philippians, "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory" (3:20). So when we go to the next world we can leave our glasses and hearing aids behind. We won't take our medicines with us. We won't need any of that.

And this belief in our eternal destinies is at the core of our faith. Wouldn't our outlooks be far different if we thought there was nothing beyond the grave? We would not be here right now.

The church would not exist. There would be nothing beyond ourselves. We would live in a dark and dismal world.

But even though we anticipate the joys of eternal life, we still try to delay the aging process, don't we? We try to push that inevitable day as far into the future as possible. A popular song by Kenny Chesney says that "everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now."

And that's the way it should be. God gave us life so that we might reflect his glory, worship him, and love one another. But God also gave Jesus Christ to forgive us because we did not always do those things. And so God raised Jesus from the dead so that we may live forever in his presence.

III.

Easter begins with a simple fact. The tomb was empty. Evidence is clear that Jesus was placed in that tomb on Friday after he was taken from the cross. The Roman governor approved it and the disciples did it.

And its entrance was sealed with a huge stone and guarded by Roman soldiers around the clock. But on Sunday it was empty. The disciples saw it was empty. The Roman soldiers agreed it was empty. And Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus were worried because it was empty.

And while I always would urge us to rely on the Bible, we don't have to go to the Bible to know these things. Many of them are recorded in ancient Roman history written at the time, and written by people who had no reason to change the facts. There is independent corroboration.

And in fact, those historians, who wrote while many of the disciples still were alive, specifically recorded that the disciples believed Jesus had been resurrected. That completely counters some skeptical claims that the resurrection was a legend developed later by the church.

Let's also remember that these disciples were eyewitnesses to all that happened. They all were there at the time. And they all went into the world as missionaries after Jesus' death. Not one returned to his old job.

And this is important because church traditions and early writings tell us that that all of them except John eventually were martyred, were killed, for preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ and the resurrection.

As a result, if the disciples believed the resurrection actually did not happen, and they certainly would know whether or not it had, it is impossible to think they all willingly would have died just to maintain that claim if it was not true. So the fact that they did sacrifice themselves for our resurrected Lord means they believed he had risen.

And I also would ask you to think about this. If the disciples were just trying to build a following based on Jesus' life, they didn't need the resurrection. In fact, treating Jesus as a human prophet would have been easier and more consistent with culture and society. It would have fit in more easily with what people already were willing to accept.

After all, every other religion had been led by ordinary people who eventually died. The Jewish religion started centuries earlier with Abraham and Moses as central figures. Buddhism also was founded by a human leader during the time of the Hebrew prophets. And Islam would arise a few centuries later, again based on the human prophet, Mohammed.

So, the idea of a supernatural resurrection of a divine being would have been revolutionary and radical. If the disciples just wanted to develop a following they could have done so based on Jesus' teaching and preaching during his life. They were familiar with it, they saw the crowds it had produced, and they easily could have carried it forward.

As a result, there would have been no need to invent a resurrection if they did not believe it actually happened. It would have been a wild and crazy idea if it was not true.

The bottom line is that the disciples believed what they saw, and they were willing to die for it. And other Christians willingly followed in their footsteps. They believed Jesus Christ actually was resurrected from the dead, even though it would have been easier to do it a different way.

IV.

So where does this all leave us as we sit here today? Certainly, I would say the resurrection is true, it happened, and it's the basis for our hope of being with God in the next world.

But what do we do about this world? After all we might say or do, a strong life-changing Christian belief is not based on academic arguments or historical analysis, but rather a relationship with our Lord and Savior in our hearts.

We cannot always rely on logic and reason to explain everything. And we cannot assume that humanity knows and understands everything. History shows otherwise. We are called to acknowledge that some things are beyond our ability to know, and remain mysteries that are understood by faith, or not at all.

So, I urge all of you to ask Jesus Christ to come into your lives. Even if you have done it before, do it again. If Jesus already is in your life he always will be there, but he calls us to deepen that relationship. It is not a onetime thing but a way of life.

And when you call upon our Lord and Savior, he will come to you; not perhaps in the way you expect or ask, but he will come and you will know that he is there. And this all is possible because Christ has risen, and has taken his place at the right hand of the Father. *Amen.*