

Easter 2017

Welcome to our Easter Celebration! What a glorious day as we gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and the triumph of life over death. Hallelujah, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Let's stand. As we begin, let me share with you the good news of Christ' resurrection in the words of St. John Chrysostom from a fourth century Easter message: **“Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of death has annihilated it. By descending into hell, Christ made hell captive...and so now we sing the triumphant hymn: O Death, where is your sting? O hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are overthrown. Christ is risen and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life reigns. Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave.”** ...St. John Chrysostom Let us give thanks as we worship the risen Savior!

Risen and Now Appearing

If you have been following our Lenten reading guide, we have read through the gospels. The last chapter we read however was not from the gospel, but from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul writes, **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am...Whether then it was I or they, this is what we preach and this is what you believed.”** 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Here is the heart of the gospel, the good news: Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, raised on the third day, and this was not done in secret. Eyewitnesses numbering in the hundreds saw the risen Lord. Even after he ascended to heaven, he was still revealing himself to people in life changing ways as evidenced by the apostle Paul, a persecutor of the church who had an encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus and was never

the same. This is the good news. Christ died for us, was buried, three days later he rose from the grave, conquering death and hell and he lives and reigns forevermore!

Let's make sure we understand the first thing Paul mentioned, that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scripture. Jesus death by crucifixion was about us! He died for OUR sins! You see, my name and your name were posted on the execution list that day along with the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus. We were all condemned as sinners, guilty of crimes and sins against God and his perfect order. We were law breakers, all of us and were condemned to die. The perfect law of God required it. "The soul that sins must die." Justice demanded it and the substitutionary offering of lambs and goats as a sacrifice simply wasn't good enough. No other sacrifice was able to atone for our sins. No other sacrifice could cleanse us from our guilt and shame. It couldn't wash the stain of our sin away.

A perfect sacrifice was needed and required, a blameless sacrifice, one who was without sin, one who would lay down his life willingly so that the guilty could in turn be forgiven and set free. And there was only one perfect, sinless sacrifice and that was Jesus Christ, God's Son. He was our substitute. He took our place on death row and was executed in our place.

Imagine if suddenly soldiers came bursting into the service with weapons drawn. They had a list of names, a document legally signed and endorsed by the government, that allowed them to execute the people whose names were on the list. They begin calling out the names. One by one they line us up outside, ready to carry out the orders of execution. Just before they begin firing, Jesus says, "I'll take their place. I'll die so they can go free." That's in part what happened on the cross as Jesus took our place.

The bible says, **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21.** To all who believe and put their faith in Christ alone as Savior and Lord, he takes away our sin and puts his righteousness on us. Jesus' right standing with God is given in exchange for our sins. He took our sins and gave us his right standing with the Father!

Paul said Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. The Scripture testifies, **"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed."** Isaiah 53:4-5

Jesus died and was buried. There is no question that he really died. He was really buried and on the third day according to the Scriptures, the true testimony of God, he was raised from the dead. He wasn't a ghost, or an apparition, he was raised from the dead. He was seen by all of these people Paul mentions. He ate with them, visited with them, walked with them. For forty days he was among the people so this was no hallucination. Jesus was alive, risen from the dead and appearing to people!

Paul mentions specific people and groups that Jesus appeared to after the resurrection. I want to mention a couple of these encounters with the risen Lord. Turn to John 19:38 and I want us to look quickly at John's account of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. John tells us that Joseph of Arimathea had asked for permission to claim the body of Jesus. Following Jewish burial customs he and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body with linen strips, applying 75 lbs. of a mixture of myrrh and aloe in between the strips as they wrapped the body. Because the Sabbath was about to begin, they placed the body of Jesus in a new tomb in a garden near Golgotha and rolled a stone in front of the opening to the tomb.

We know from the other gospels that certain women had remained at the cross the entire time, unlike his disciples. They no doubt followed Joseph to the tomb so they knew where Jesus' was buried. Because the Sabbath was approaching, the ladies made plans to return Sunday morning to finish anointing the body of Jesus, doing what the men had been unable to do in their haste. Stores would open Saturday evening and they would be able to purchase what they needed and return early Sunday morning.

It's interesting that the first person Jesus appeared to after his resurrection didn't make Paul's list. The gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome and Joanna returned early Sunday morning with spices but when they arrived the stone was rolled away. Angels greeted them and said, **"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" Luke 24:5-6.** The angels told them to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus was risen. The other ladies fled in fear but Mary Magdalene found Peter and John. They outran Mary back to the tomb and found it just as she had described. Peter and John left to go tell the other disciples and Mary apparently arrived back at the tomb to find the men and the women gone. She was alone. John said, **"...but Mary stood outside the tomb crying."**

She had been crying for three days. Suddenly a man behind her asks, "Woman, why are you crying?" I can imagine she felt like saying, "why am I crying? How much time do you

have?” We don’t know the course of Mary’s life. The bible tells us Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. Church tradition tried to make her out to be a sinful woman, a prostitute perhaps, but there is no biblical evidence that was the case. She was just a broken woman in desperate need of deliverance when Jesus found her and delivered her. She became a follower of Jesus along with some of the other women we mentioned. She had found a Savior, a deliverer, a friend, a rabbi, a teacher. She had found a man who treated her with love and respect and kindness, and now the most important person in her life was dead. He was gone and with him all of her hopes for the future were gone as well. She was alone again. It was all too much for her. That’s why she was crying. Thinking this man was perhaps the gardener, she says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

There was no way Mary could have carried the body of Jesus, but love and grief don’t usually provide for clear thinking. “Just tell me where you’ve taken his body.” And then he speaks her name. Mary. He actually uses the Hebrew, Miriam. She recognizes his voice now. The fog of fatigue and grief and sorrow lifts as she realizes the person standing before her is Jesus, risen from the dead just as the angel said. She had seen the empty tomb, but it’s not the empty tomb that convinces her, it is the appearance of the risen Christ that makes the difference! “I’m here Mary and it’s going to be all right. I’m here and I’ve got important work for you to do. Go deliver this message to my disciples.” The bible says, **“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’” John 20:18**

To the broken, the grieving, overwhelmed by life and sorrow and circumstances, there is good news. Jesus is risen from the grave. He comes to us in our sorrow and brokenness just as he did for Mary and he calls us by name. He makes his appearance in surprising ways and places and lovingly imparts value to us, restoring our hope and confidence. He comes in our moments of desperation and despair to dry our tears, calm our fears, offer us new life. Mary would tell you “Jesus is risen and I’ll never be the same.”

1 Corinthians 15 tells us there was a special appearance with Peter. We have no record of a private meeting, but we do have a record of Peter’s colossal failure. Peter bragged about how he would never forsake Jesus even if everyone else left him, Peter would not desert him. He would be the last man standing. Sadly, while Jesus is being interrogated by the high priest, Peter denies the Lord three times. Mark tells us when confronted by people in Caiaphas’ courtyard, **“Peter began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man**

you're talking about.' Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.' And he broke down and wept." Mark 14:71-72 The result was sorrow and bitter tears.

Peter denied the Lord. How many times had he failed him and let him down. Surely the Lord was done with Peter. Surely Jesus had no use for someone who would deny him in a moment of crisis, in the very moment he needed him most. What a disappointment Peter turned out to be, and yet after the resurrection, Jesus made a special appearance to talk to Peter. We don't know what was said, but we know from other conversations that forgiveness is extended and restoration is made. Luke tells us that during the Last Supper, Jesus told Peter, **"Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."** Luke 22:31-32

Perhaps you've denied the Lord. You've failed him, let him down. You were certain you would stand up and do the right thing, resist temptation, stay strong and serve the Lord this time, but the next thing you know, you have done it again. Surely the Lord has no use for someone like me. Guess what? The risen Christ is still showing up to encourage people who fail and mess up, folks just like Peter. Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but Jesus has prayed for you too. It's not just for Peter. Maybe you've wept bitter tears over your failure, your past, like Peter. The good news is, there is hope for you. How do I know? Because Jesus is risen. All things are possible. He still shows up to offer hope and forgiveness for failures like us.

One last person Jesus made a special appearance to in John 20. He appears to the disciples on Sunday evening. They are hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. They are expecting a knock at the door any moment with warrants for their arrest as subversives. Instead, suddenly Jesus is standing in the room with them. His resurrected body can't be stopped by locked doors or brick walls. Luke tells us the disciples thought he was a ghost and to prove he wasn't, Jesus finally said, "Do you guys have anything to eat?" They gave him broiled fish and he ate it in their presence. They knew it was Jesus, he was risen and they were overjoyed!

One problem: Thomas wasn't there that night. When they tried to tell him Jesus was alive and had eaten with them, he refused to be persuaded. **"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."** John 20:25

We call him “doubting Thomas” but the truth is, none of the disciples were exactly quick to believe in the resurrection. It took Jesus standing in their midst to convince them so perhaps they shouldn’t be too hard on Thomas. The disciples tried to convince him but he wouldn’t budge. He stood his ground. You have to admire him for standing by his principles.

A week goes by and they gather again. This time Thomas is with them. Once again, though the doors were locked, Jesus is suddenly standing among them and says “Peace.” Then to Thomas Jesus said, **“Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”** Thomas said to him, **‘My Lord and My God!’** Then Jesus told him, **‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’** John 20:27-29

Thomas was a realist. Thank God for cynics and skeptics and questioners. They keep us honest but when confronted with the evidence, it’s time to admit the truth. “Stop doubting and believe” Jesus said to him. Stop doubting, stop running, stop avoiding the truth that is standing in the room with you, staring you in the face! Jesus is alive, risen from the dead. It’s time you stopped doubting and started believing. It’s time you believed and surrendered your heart and life to Jesus. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, for the truth and validity of the Scripture, for the truth of the life changing power of salvation, it is overwhelming.

If you are like Thomas, it’s time for you to stop doubting and start believing! John concluded by saying **“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** John 20:30-31.

Jesus died for your sins, was buried and on the third day he rose from the dead. The risen Christ appeared to Mary in her brokenness, to Peter in his sin and failure, to Thomas in his doubts and he is here this morning, calling you to believe upon him as your savior and Lord so that by believing you may have life in his name. Are you ready to ask Jesus to save you and deliver you? Are you ready to give your life to the risen Savior? “Could he really help someone like me?” A risen Savior can do anything including heal a broken heart like Mary’s, forgive a failure like Peter and overcome a skeptic’s doubts like Thomas. Christ is risen, he is here and he is ready to meet you and give you new life. This is what we preach and this is what we believe!