

Lessons: Acts 10:34-43, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3:1-4, Matthew 28:1-10

INTRO

We begin this Easter message in the name of the Father, and of the Son +, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen

Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!

Well, we celebrate this day — as the Psalmist says,

*“This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.” —Psalm 118:24*

For as the angel explained to the two Mary’s at the tomb,

“He is not here, for he has risen, just as he said.” —Matthew 28:6

So today is a the greatest day — the day of Jesus’ resurrection!

Thank you for tuning in to this message — I know that many of you have been listening to our audio recordings over the last few weeks, but today we’re trying something different — video, in full technicolour! And just like in previous weeks, I’ll invite you to pause this video & take time to read the Scripture lessons for today, Easter Sunday. They are: Acts 10:34-43, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3:1-4, Matthew 28:1-10. Once you’ve read these, then feel free to continue on with the video.

LIKE THE FIRST EASTER

Well, this is certainly an Easter unlike any that we’ve known before — it’s like a stripped down, bare bones version — we’re going without. No big crowds, or parties, no flowers all over the church, no brass band or horns playing along to the hymns. This Easter is probably more like the first Easter than any other we’ve had. Because the first Easter was a little like this too — no big crowds, or music, or flowers — just a handful of shocked followers. By our standards it might have looked a little underwhelming.

But none of that is really the point. As much as we love the trappings surrounding holidays like this, Easter isn't about egg hunts, or ham or turkey dinners, or even family — it's about something else entirely, something that can't be taken away from us. The main draw has always been the empty tomb — as empty as our churches are all over the world today! There was a reflection in *Christianity Today* this week. Author Tish Harrison Warren writes:

“The stakes could not be higher. As a deadly virus speeds its way around the world bringing chaos, destruction, and death, it's painfully clear that the Resurrection is either the whole hope of the world—the very center of reality—or Christianity is not worth our time.

I am a Christian today not because it answers all my questions about the world or about our current suffering. It does not. And not because I think it is a nice, coherent moral order by which to live my life. And not because I grew up this way or have fond feelings about felt boards and hymn sings. And not because it motivates justice or helps me to know how to vote. I am a Christian because I believe in the Resurrection.

The truest fact of the universe this Eastertide is not death tolls, emptied sanctuaries, or overcrowded hospitals. The truest fact of the universe is an empty tomb.” —Tish Harrison Warren, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/coronavirus-easter-only-symbol-then-hell-with-it.html>, accessed April 10, 2020.

The empty tomb is the main draw today, & nothing else.

So, even though our churches are empty, and we can't gather together as we'd like, that doesn't mean that we can't celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. You may have seen that at Notre Dame Cathedral officials celebrated a small mass on Good Friday, fully equipped with hard hats & hazmat suits on, almost exactly one year after fire gutted the cathedral. Our church buildings may be destroyed, but God's church (followers of Jesus) will always endure. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church,

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” —2 Corinthians 4:7-9

And that’s certainly true this Easter!

EASTER IS FOR PEOPLE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

I don’t know if you’ve ever been on the outside of a party, watching people celebrate? In our Acts lesson, Peter is preaching the story of Jesus’ death & resurrection to Cornelius, a Roman centurion — a Gentile — someone who had no business with this story. Peter says to Cornelius,

“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” —Acts 10:43

It’s for everyone. Easter is a gust of good news bowling us over as it hits us that this is for us, whether you grew up in the church, whether you’ve drifted away over time, or whether you’ve never had anything to do with Jesus at all. If you don’t think that Jesus is for you — or if you’re on the outside looking in — know that if Jesus was for Cornelius, then Jesus is for you too. Whatever we’re facing today, because of Jesus’ death & resurrection our sins are forgiven and eternal life is an open door that we can walk through.

OUTER CIRCUMSTANCES DON’T DEFINE OUR STANDING WITH GOD

The circumstances of our lives might be dire & desperate, they might look frustrated or hopeless, but the tomb reminds us that our immediate circumstances aren’t reflective of our standing before God. We may feel cut off from one another, we may feel cut off from God, but our eternal destinies aren’t written by our current circumstances. Paul writes in our Colossians lesson,

“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” —Colossians 3:3-4

He’s describing the hope given to those who put their faith in Jesus & his resurrection. So we keep our eyes focused on heavenly realities, not our earthly or immediate ones. Even the worst of our

present hardships & difficulties — the sting of our ongoing sin & brokenness, the alienation that we might be feeling — doesn't stand next to the resurrection, & the promise of eternity in Jesus' presence.

IN THE END IS OUR BEGINNING

The women approached the tomb that first Easter morning expecting one thing, and finding another. They expected that this was the end. This Easter Sunday might look a little like that first Easter — it might look pretty low-key. But the angel appeared to the women and encouraged them, “Do not be afraid.”

Don't be afraid, because this isn't the end after all. God is the kind of God who makes beginnings out of our ends. And he can make a new beginning out of our lives too. He can bring hope into hopelessness. He can bring healing into brokenness. He can bring forgiveness to our guilt & shame. He can bring life out of death. That's the power of the resurrection.

REST IN GOD

Writer Jay Parini wrote for CNN recently about an encounter that he had some 50 years ago with the famous poet W.H. Auden. Parini was in a bit of a funk, and Auden was trying to cheer him up — he writes,

“Auden had a cracked and wrinkled face, like a baked mudflat, and he told me that he would soon be dead. (Indeed, he died a couple of years later.)

‘I've learned a little in my life,’ he said. ‘Not much. But I will share with you what I do know. I hope it will help.’

He lit a cigarette, looked at the ceiling, then said, ‘I know only two things. The first is this: There is no such thing as time.’ He explained that time was an illusion: past, present, future. Eternity was ‘without a beginning or an end,’ and we must come to terms with what underlies time, or exists around its edges. He quoted the Gospel of John, where Jesus said: ‘Before

Abraham was, I am.’ That disjunctive remark upends our notions of chronology once and for all, he told me.

I listened, a bit puzzled, then asked: ‘So what’s the second thing?’

‘Ah, that,’ he said. ‘The second thing is simply advice. Rest in God, dear boy. Rest in God.’” — Jay Parini, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/09/opinions/easter-coronavirus-wh-auden-parini/index.html>, accessed April 10, 2020.

Time is eternity — there is really only one eternal day now, a day of resurrection. And because of the resurrection, eternity is ours.

So rest in God, regardless of what our circumstances are we can rest in the God who defeated sin, death, and the devil. With our hearts & lives in God’s hands we’ve got nothing to fear.

As the great Easter hymn says,

Eternal is the gift he brings,
 Therefore our heart with rapture sings:
 “Christ has triumphed! He is living!”
 Now still he comes to give us life
 And by his presence stills all strife.
 Christ has triumphed! He is living!
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
 —*Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds, vs. 2*