

## HOW FAR AWAY ARE WE?

A special welcome to our guests and visitors here today. If you are visiting and miss being among your own faith family, I hope you will feel especially welcome and that this worship can be for you too. If you are visiting but not part of a Christian fellowship anywhere, please be welcome and feel relaxed among us. Most of us can remember when we were not yet believers or were skeptical about the church.

Nobody I have ever known has come to faith by starting at Easter. That is not where the road begins. If we have not read and experienced the rest of the story, then reading the passage we just read from the end of Luke's Gospel is more likely to confirm doubt than faith. Clearly the people were bereft in their sorrow and were trying to comfort one another. They kept making up greater and greater reassurances until they could no longer back out of the fantastic claim that Jesus had risen. That is the only sane explanation – if you start out at the end, with no context and no experience with Jesus.

So you must forgive me if I don't deal with such doubts today; doubts seem really juvenile to the faithful. And it is to the faithful that I wish to speak today. May I do an unheard-of thing and welcome the faithful to this Easter celebration also? Whether you belong here or are faithful in some other fellowship, may I greet you and share joy with you. He is risen! [He is risen indeed!]

So when do we ever get to come together to truly celebrate – to rejoice in – our experiences of the Living Lord? If you look around, you will even find some familiar faces missing. A small but growing group of the faithful are picking Easter as the one Sunday of the year to *miss church*. Easter is always Visitor Sunday – amateur hour. What's on the minds of the faithful feels too important to take into such an atmosphere. I don't think it is a good choice, but I understand it. I also understand that it is not my job to speak to the unfaithful; that's your job. So let us go to Easter for the faithful.

What is the Easter Message? On the surface, the Message is that JESUS IS ALIVE. That is good news! That is indeed the Message – or rather, it is one-fourth of the Message. It is the only thing we normally hear or consider on Easter Sunday. Now, one out of four may not be too bad in our kind of world. On the other hand, it is not really very good either. Let's try for the full four.

I.) HE IS ALIVE

In no way do we want to neglect or minimize it. This certainly is the mystery, the intrigue, and the excitement that permeate the experience of the early disciples. This prodigal Messiah was lost, and now He is found! He was dead, and now they keep running into Him, encountering Him. The news begins to spread among them. More and more people get into the story. “Is that what happened to you? Incredible! Let me tell you what happened to me ...” The world is not buzzing with the news, but the tiny handful of followers certainly is.

The man was crucified, dead, and buried. But He rose from the dead and began to appear to those who had known Him and followed Him. He conquered death! Clearly that means He conquered SIN and death – and Satan too. You cannot get one without the others. They are connected; it is inherent to the principles of life. God backed Him. The mission and ministry of Jesus were not a mistake after all – not a whim or a piece of fancy imagination. God backed Him! Our world killed Him, but He rose from the dead. How is that for encores?! Take that, villains! All that Jesus taught and showed and urged upon us is vindicated and confirmed. HE IS ALIVE! That is the Easter Message – one-fourth of it.

Wonderful though it is, believe it though we do, shall we also quietly admit that if that were all there was to it – if this one-fourth were the whole show – Christianity would never have survived into the second century, never mind the twenty-first? It is hard, you see, because we really love and honor this dimension of Easter, and for folks like us it is the foundation of the Easter Message. But people who believe *only* this portion of the Message are in a way our worst enemies. Not that they mean to be; nevertheless they are the “friends” who act like they agree with us and talk like they are on our side, but who never work or care about any of what we really mean and live for.

In many ways it is not their fault, but people who believe only this one-fourth of the Message neither participate in nor take the life of the church seriously. They never try to carry the Message themselves. Neither are they on a spiritual pilgrimage that has anything to do with Jesus. For them, Easter is merely a historical curiosity – a museum piece. Celebrating it once a year is perfectly adequate, like celebrating Presidents’ Day. Then it’s back to business as usual: “I have troubles enough of my own and pleasures enough of my own to occupy my time. Easter is not about us, or now. It is about them, way back when.” That is the polite death. “Oh yes, I believe it too! It is definitely true. Only, it doesn’t mean a thing. Not anymore. Not in the here and now.”

II.) THE MESSAGE OF THE EASTER MESSAGE

The early Easter proclamations were *not* merely saying that Jesus was alive. That was incredible, to be sure. But the appearances were for a purpose. The Risen Christ did not just come back – He came back with instructions. To encounter the Risen Christ is to *be commissioned*: personally and specifically commissioned to play a part and take on responsibilities for the Kingdom – for Jesus’ mission in this world. I dare you to show me an exception.

How like us to get all excited and enthralled about His coming back: “What did He wear? How did He look? Where did you see Him? Who was there? Did you see the look on Thomas’ face? So *now* what do you think of Mary?” How like us to get all excited about the incidentals and pay so little attention to what He came back to tell us. Can you feel any irony in that? How we love our agenda: comfort and reassurance. But what about *His* agenda? Loyalty, love, service, and helping Him to build the Kingdom. Or at least helping Him to build pockets of faith families who seek His WAY of Life together, and who live for Him in the here and now.

I have no idea what Jesus went through to get back here. Surely He wanted us to know that He was alive. But He also gave important instructions, and they also are an integral part of the Easter Message. Do you see that? It’s obvious in a way, so forgive me for asking. But it does seem to be a great void in the awareness of many of the Easter People in our culture. There is a Message carried within the Easter Message itself that is as much a part of Easter as the realization that He is risen. And that Message is the one the Risen Christ brought. After all the excitement and “oohs and ahhs” had died down, Jesus reassured His followers, then helped them to make connections between all their past experiences and what had just happened – and then He continued: “So you see,” he said, “*that scripture foretells the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead on the third day, and declares that in his name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are to be witnesses to it all. I am sending upon you the gift promised by my Father; wait here in this city until you are armed with power from on high.*” (Luke 24:46-49)

If you asked me today to proclaim to you the Easter Message, would I not be correct to reply:

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A.) God has always been working for the great reconciliation and preparing to send a Messiah to make it clear – One who would go on continually making it clear and bringing it to light and life.

B.) In His name, YOU are to declare repentance and the forgiveness of sins. YOU are to declare it to whatever individuals you encounter – to whomever will receive the Message. And you collectively are to declare it to all nations and all peoples, not just to the elite. Get *everybody* ready. Invite everybody. (We are about to be adopted.)

C.) YOU are to be witnesses to it all. That is, this is not just a message you *say*. This is a message you *carry within you wherever you go* – because it is a message *happening* to you, as well as a message you carry.

D.) Do not try it alone. This is not your operation! I am sending the gift promised by my Father: the Holy Spirit. Wait until it comes to you. If forgiven and forgiving people do not lead my missions, then the missions will always self-destruct and hurt a lot of people in the process.

Is this not the Easter Proclamation as much as the news that He is risen? It is the proclamation of the Proclamation. And the proclamation is that it is Mission Time! We have a life to live and a lot to be doing – and a lot to turn away from because time is short and there is much to do.

III.) Now we have half of the Easter Message, until we notice that Jesus' instructions introduce the third part of the Message: The empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The command is to WAIT. Do not try to do this on your own. Do not try to do this by counting on your own abilities, no matter how great they may be. Few of us start out being very good at waiting. Procrastination we can manage, sometimes honing it to a high art. But *waiting*? Waiting means we have to trust some power other than ourselves. Waiting means we are not in charge. Waiting means we are expectant, alert, patient, and ready, yet we will not GO until the word comes and the word is clear. Most of all, waiting means we will not engage in any activity that cannot be instantly and totally dropped when the instructions of the Holy Spirit come clear.

In any case, the Message of Easter is larger and more powerful in this third part than in any of the others. Easter is not about “He died and went to Heaven.” We say that about friends and relatives, and it is wonderful that we can say it and mean it. Jesus' Resurrection certainly

does nothing to take away from this. If anything, it adds authority and support to this conviction – a conviction, we might add, which was already held long before Jesus came, and in dozens of cultures and religions aside from Christianity. I don't think the Heaven they describe or the God they expect to meet there is nearly as exciting as the one we expect from believing in Jesus, but then, we could probably say the same about what many Christians seem to be expecting.

Anyway, Easter is not about dying and going to Heaven. Easter is about "He died and is back here *with us here and now.*" This we say of no one else, at least not in the same way. Others leave legacies that are powerful and important to us. (Paul, Peter, Lincoln, our parents, etc.) Many of us have occasional experiences of closeness or help from special people who loved us and have now passed on. But in a much more powerful and immediate way, Jesus is alive and present with us – if we will allow it, invite it: grant even a tiny bit of time and attention to this relationship.

The wonder of Easter is not merely what happened in those long-ago days. How we wish, at times, that we could have been there. At least that's what I hear some people say. No television, no grocery stores, no indoor plumbing, no basketball, no hospitals, no way to get away from the flies – and lots of death and taxes. (But who thinks of those things?) We would like to know – with a full contingent of media reporters, cameras whirring, and on-the-spot interviews – exactly what was taking place in those "appearances" to Mary, Peter, Thomas, Cleopas, James, Paul, and all the rest.

But for us, it is idle curiosity. The wonder of those days is not merely what happened in those days. The Easter Message is that He IS alive – not that He *was* alive. The Easter Message has survived because the Living Christ keeps coming to us: keeps picking us out of all the holes and death places we get ourselves into; keeps changing us; keeps telling us we are loved when we didn't even think "like" was possible; keeps setting our lives on new paths and taking us in directions we didn't even know existed. And let us be clear: some of these new directions have been full of more trouble, defeat, woe, and turmoil than anything we were into before – *except* for THE COMFORT OF HIS PRESENCE.

Yes, Easter is the celebration that HE IS ALIVE – alive now, and here with us. And from here on, the second and third parts of the Easter Message blur and intermingle: "*While he was in their company he*

*directed them not to leave Jerusalem. 'You must wait,' he said, 'for the gift promised by the Father, of which I told you; John, as you know, baptized with water, but within the next few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' When they were all together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time at which you are to restore sovereignty to Israel?'* [Some of them had self-centered, one-track minds, just like some of us.] *He answered, 'It is not for you to know about dates or times which the Father has set within his own control. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and throughout all Judea and Samaria, and even in the farthest corners of the earth.'*" (Acts 1:4-8)

The mission is empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit – the presence of the Living Christ with us. It is not only that we cannot carry this ministry without the guidance and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, though that is certainly true. It is also true that we will have no genuine *desire* to carry this Message until the gift is bestowed. We may carry other messages, for other reasons – something we all know about. But the Risen Christ makes this promise: When disciples have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, they *will* bear witness. The doubt and debate phases are over. *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me."* It is the mark of the Spirit.

If you don't speak this language too well, what it means is that you get put into the game. On Jesus' team, nobody sits on the bench, no matter how much some of us want to, at least from time to time. The bad news is that everybody plays. You are either in the game or off the team; Jesus leaves nobody on the bench. The good news is that there is a real place for us to play – a "position" tailor-made for each one of us, no matter how well or poorly we think we play. That is because of WHO is with us.

IV.) That brings us to the fourth part of the Easter Message: The blessing (the Benediction). That may not seem very important to some of you, but the longer I deal with these things, the bigger it looms. It looms pretty big in the Scriptures too: *"I will be with you always, to the end of time."* (Matthew 28:20) *"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one.... I do not pray you to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one."* (John 17:11,15)

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Or back to our own passage of the morning: *“Then he led them out as far as Bethany and blessed them with uplifted hands.”*

To be placed under the power and protection of God, for all that is to come, and to be placed there by Jesus – more and more, I see that as an integral part of the Easter Message. I get very nearly as grateful for that as I am that He is risen. And more and more it seems to me that the two shade into each other. We never leave a service of worship without remembering that we are blessed, protected, and empowered for the ministry that He gives us. It is a remembrance of the blessing and protection of the Risen Christ.

How far away are we? From being what we are supposed to be? From the Second Coming? From our own death? From our own next conversion? From love? From finding the purpose that is ours to accomplish while we are here?

It all hinges on how far away we are from Easter. And I hope we will never see Easter again through one thin lens or sing the Easter anthems as if they had only one note. The Proclamation and the Celebration are far bigger than that.

- 1.) He is alive.
- 2.) It is Mission Time for us ...
- 3.) But only if and as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- 4.) The One who loves us also blesses us and places us under the power and protection of God.

Indeed, the One who loves us also blesses us and places us under the power and protection of God – until, in the mystery of it all, we realize that under His authority and love, we are now as precious and important to God as Jesus is. May God forgive such blasphemy, for surely He will tolerate no less a claim. Is that not what He keeps telling us? Is that not why He came? He puts all of His worth on the line for us. What, then, are we worth? And does that make Him worth less to us?