

## **RISING ABOVE LIFE'S TOUGHEST PROBLEMS - 1**

### **The Confrontation of Easter**

**Mark 16:1-8**

Starting a new series - Rising above life's toughest problems.

Ex. - I enjoy dabbling in woodworking - Shop was my favorite class in H.S. There is so much I don't know. If I have a question about a woodworking problem, I'm not going to go talk to Tom Tartaglia about it, I'm going to Rick Diehl - a master carpenter. If I have an electrical problem, then I'll go see Tom. You see, when I've got a problem, I like to go find someone who has faced that problem, found the solution and can tell me how I can overcome it because they have.

How appropriate to start this topic, "Rising Above Life's Toughest Problems" by talking about the One who rose above the greatest problem of all - death. Because Jesus accomplished that, He has provided us with the means to rise above all of our problems in life, great or small. Heb 4:15 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin.*

Let's talk about Easter this morning. This is the most significant day on the calendar for us. The events that took place from leading up to the crucifixion to the resurrection rocked the world. In fact, our guests today received a small booklet entitled "72 hours that rocked the world."

But what has Easter become today to so many people? A couple of years ago, as we watched the movie, "The Passion of the Christ," the story of Easter became so vividly horrifying, from Pilate's court to the Cross of Calvary, that you would hope the world could not effectively change it's meaning with the usual marketing techniques.

But look what we've let them do to Easter! We've allowed ourselves to get caught up in a carnal celebration of the most significant moment in our Christian heritage. People are rushing out to buy baskets and fill them with cute little chocolate bunnies, candy eggs. It's now become Spring break instead of Easter. Just last week the news reported that up in Davenport, NH, there was an attempt to change the name of Good Friday to Spring Holiday. It met with a resounding "NO", but the attempt was made, the door was opened and in the near future it will probably happen. Chocolate bunnies have replaced the cross. Stores have great sales.

A couple of years ago we received a flyer \* from the Kohl's store advertising it's late night specials Friday night for the "Night owls" and the early bird specials Saturday morning. This's what's become important on Good Friday.

\*The Giants grocery store where we were had this huge poster on it's window that says, "For your shopping convenience, we will be open from 6:00 am to 10:00 pm on Easter Sunday. Happy Easter." Notice the Easter eggs.

Over near \* one of our Shopping Centers down in Virginia I found his banner. "Spring Fest - Free brunch with bunny, petting zoo and live entertainment."

Folks, that's not Easter. People are out shopping instead of remembering the most significant, life changing, earth shattering event in all of history.

Now to be fare, \* I saw this sign posted on our Kentucky Fried Chicken here in Greece. I applaud them. But that's rare. *"We apologize for the inconvenience, however we will be open for limited hours on Easter Sunday, 11:30 until 8:00 p.m. so that our employees can spend more time with their families! Thank and we appreciate your patronage."*

Today we celebrate EASTER...Christianity's finest hour. Easter is not meant to be cute or cuddly, like those stuffed animals that are jumping off the shelf. I'm not condemning the fun of Easter that we can enjoy, however, that cannot replace Easter. There is nothing cute about Easter at all.

This morning, I want us to take a closer look at Easter.

The story in Matthew tells us that Easter began with an earthquake. It says, that the guards were so afraid of the angel that appeared, they shook and became like dead men - they fainted.

From the moment we begin to read the account, \* we're reminded that Easter is confrontational, and those who bother to understand its significance find it impossible to ignore what it means.

The \* guards were the first to confront Easter. Not only were they afraid of the angel, but later they stand trembling, fearing they would face the wrath of the Roman Emperor for their failure to keep Jesus in the tomb. They were so frightened by the appearance of the angel that we later find out they had to be bribed into keeping the whole experience quiet. Isn't it interesting that 2000 years later, people are still so afraid of the living Christ, that they keep trying to make up stories and are trying their hardest to prove Jesus must still be in the tomb.

The \* women were the second to confront Easter. We know what they were thinking about as they made their way from town to the place where Jesus had been laid. They were thinking that it would be impossible to move that big stone from the grave without some help. We can almost imagine their conversation as they hurried to the tomb. *"That stone is huge. How in the world will we ever get it moved? You know, Mary, maybe we're wasting our time. We may not even be able to get to Jesus. Oh well, at least we're making the effort. Wouldn't you know it? We can't even find the men to help us. They're all hiding somewhere because they're afraid. They're never there when you need them."*

But the women had no more faith in Christ's promise than the men. They weren't going to the tomb to see if the Lord's words were true. They weren't hurrying to see if Jesus had, in fact, risen from the dead. No. They truthfully expected to find the body of Jesus and anoint it with the customary burial oils. And their biggest concern was the stone. They weren't prepared for what they found. Certainly not an open tomb and a missing Jesus! Even their reaction surprises us. Instead of crying out, "Oh, yes!", they cried, "Oh, no!" Just like the disciples who would come later, the women had forgotten what Jesus said about His Resurrection.

When the women run to tell the disciples that Jesus is missing, Peter \* wants to see for himself. Can't you see him? He's breaking a sweat as he runs through town, and climbs the hill that leads to the tombs. It's not, "Here comes Peter Cottontail, hopping down the bunny trail". I think Peter is frantic and fearful.

Yes, Easter is confrontational. We want our Easter to be a joyous occasion - and so it should be. But, Easter's mood, that morning, wasn't joy at all, at least not yet...it was fear.

The guards were afraid. The women were afraid. Peter was afraid. And, it got worse. When the women stepped into the tomb, there, in the cool darkness, Matthew's account says they encountered an angel. And look at the reaction of the women..."they were alarmed."

Evidently, this was a very perceptive angel, because he said right off, *"Don't be alarmed."* Notice, he didn't say, "Come and rejoice with me." He said, "Don't be alarmed." Why? Because the women were terrified!

Then, the angel delivered the most alarming news of all. *"You're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here."* Then, he pointed at the proof and said, *"See the place where they laid him."* We can read between the lines: the ledge where the body had been laid was empty.

Did that settle their nerves and have a great calming effect on them? Not on your life! They got out of there as fast as their feet could carry them. *"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* Mk. 16:7

I was looking at Easter cards the other day. There were all kinds...cards for mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends. And not one of the cards had a picture on the front of these three women, with their skirts all gathered up in their hands, running for their lives. But isn't that the real image of Easter? It was a shocking time. It was a terrifying morning.

You may be thinking about now, "But Pastor, Easter is a time of joy. Remember? Jesus is risen. He is alive. Death is dead because Christ is alive. Isn't that the message you're supposed to preach today?"

You're right: Easter IS a time of joy. But, not without a healthy dose of fear first. With no fear, there's nothing to be joyful about.

What are you afraid of? Monsters? The IRS? That this sermon will last forever? I have a hunch that one of your greatest fears is the fear of death. No one wants to look that one in the eye for very long.

But the truth is that the person to the left of you, and the person to the right of you are both terminal - they're going to die. And guess what? So are YOU! That's not good news. I'm not trying to be morbid. I'm just telling you the truth. We are all going to die. Sooner or later, every one of us will find ourselves in a room filled with flowers and people talking in whispers.

Are you afraid of death? Most of us are, to some degree. You can't blame the women or Peter for running. YOU meet an angel in a graveyard in the dark -- and see what you'll do. YOU find out that somebody you left for dead, all sealed tight in a tomb, is up and at 'em again -- and tell me you'll stand around waiting for them to come back.

Easter isn't all nice and calm, prim and proper. That's not Easter at all! Easter is an earthquake, a giant rolling stone, an empty graveyard, a dead man up and gone! When you don't try to dress it up, Easter is a terrifying thing.

Maybe, you've never seen it this way. Maybe, you're used to the toned down version of Easter and you're wondering why -- why is Easter so frightening? I think the biblical accounts give us three good reasons.

### **1. Jesus is on the loose**

First of all, Easter is so frightening to people \* because JESUS IS ON THE LOOSE. Look again at what the angel told the women as they ran over each other, getting out of the tomb. He said in Mark 16:7 *"Go tell his disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."*

What do you do with someone who has conquered death? What do you expect from someone who has the

power to destroy the grave? And, even more troubling: What does He do with you? *"He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."*

Is that good news? Or, is it bad? If Jesus is risen, what does that mean? If He's out there in the world, waiting for us, expecting us to meet Him there -- what can He possibly want? Are you ready to meet Him?

*"Go tell his disciples and Peter."* What was that all about? Peter was one of the disciples. Why did he say, "Go tell the disciples and Peter?"

The disciples had all fled when He was arrested. Each one, in his own way, had failed miserably and let Jesus down in His greatest hour of need. When the going got tough, they disappeared! But Peter denied His Lord three times, even after Jesus had told him he'd do it, and he had professed that he'd never do it - he did it anyway. And now, Jesus wants to see them? And most importantly to see Peter? He's sent an angel with a heavenly summons. Wouldn't you be afraid? I think I'd be a little worried.

Jesus is on the loose! You know, Jesus, the One we saw die on the cross, the One we saw them take down and seal in a tomb. We weren't standing all that close, but we're sure it was Him.

Before they crucified Him, He was healing and transforming lives. He even raised someone from the dead. They've seen his anger when he chased the money changers out of the temple. What's He going to do now? Unsettling? Disturbing? Frightening? I think so!

## **2. God has the last word**

There's a second reason \* for people to fear at Easter time. GOD HAS THE LAST WORD.

From where we sit this morning, it seems like our own mortality is inevitable. Everything that lives must die and everything that dies is over and done with.

But, the angel said, "He is risen!" If that's true, if Jesus really is risen from the dead -- then death doesn't have the last word. God does. How does that strike you?

If Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried -- then what we suspected about the world is true. Evil reigns supreme. But, if Jesus is risen, if the stone is rolled away and life outlasts death -- then God has the last word. And, if God has the last word, there is great reason for joy.

But, there is also great reason for fear - especially for the world today. Why do you think it's so important to the world to bring into question the death and resurrection of Christ? Why are they so obsessed with trying to disprove the Biblical account of Christ? A couple of years ago it was "The Divinci Code." The next year they claimed they "found" the grave and bones of Jesus and Mary and their son. They're no different from the chief priests in Jesus' day who devised a story and paid the guards to spread the word that the disciples had come in the middle of the night and stolen the body.

Why is it so important to the world to debunk the resurrection of Christ? Because if they can't, they will have to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, that He did indeed rise from the dead, which means that they will be held accountable for all their actions because the Bible tells us that He is coming back to judge the living and the dead. You see, Easter is still a fearful time for them.

Not only do they try to debunk the truth of the resurrection, they also try to ridicule it like little children who don't like somebody. They're no different than the soldiers and the crowd standing around ridiculing Jesus and taunting him from the foot of the cross. A few years ago it was a crucifix in a bottle of urine, and they called it

“art.” The next year it was a chocolate statue of a nude Jesus on the cross. People are afraid of something they don’t understand.

Why don’t they do this to any other religion in the world?

Why only Christ? Because He’s alive. You see, the facts of life and death are turned on their head. Nothing is secure and fixed now. Jesus is risen. God has the last laugh on death. Things just aren’t the same as before.

### **3. Eternity is within our grasp**

That brings us to a third reason \* why Easter should frighten people. ETERNITY IS WITHIN OUR GRASP. If Jesus is on the loose and Easter is God’s last word to us about our destiny, then there is reason for us to tremble. If there is a way to conquer the grave, we can’t cover it over and try to make it cute and cuddly. We can’t dress it up, or tone it down. If there is a way for us to live on, past the grave, we must be very sure that we don’t miss it, or mess it up, with all the sugar coatings we’ve added to Easter. There’s either eternity in heaven or eternity in hell.

You know, God’s absence can be easier than God’s presence. In some ways, it’s a whole lot easier to go out to the cemetery to anoint a dead body than it is to deal with a living God. And, it’s certainly easier to unpack a box of Easter decorations, than it is to confront an empty tomb.

God has placed eternity within our grasp. Yet, so often, we prefer to ignore it, tone it down, and fill our lives with the things of this world.

But God has changed the rules! In submitting to Him, He changes our perception of reality. He gives us a new understanding of how things really are. We begin to see clearly. When we submit to Him we bind ourselves to Him. The Apostle Paul talks about it as becoming slaves to Christ. We are His to use. Scripture says that we are crucified with Christ - that means that we have died to ourselves, our desires, our dreams and we have become His.

When we become totally His, He breaks our bondage to sin, to the world, to Satan, to the desires of the flesh. He sets us free. This is what the world doesn’t understand. God gives us freedom!

I want to show you something the apostle Paul wrote about the resurrection. It’s found in \* I Corinthians 15:20-23. He says, *"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him."*

In verse 51, Paul goes on to tell us how it will happen. \* He says, *"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed -- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

There is a way to conquer death! There is a way to live on past the grave! Paul tells us right here what it is: God *"gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* And that’s the Easter message: Jesus Christ is risen! Because He is risen, death has been defeated! Because death has been defeated, the grave is powerless to hold us! *"O, death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?"*

Easter means three \* things:

- Jesus is on the loose;
- God has the last word;
- and eternity is within our grasp.

Why? Because Jesus is alive! That can be a joyful thing or a frightening thing.

Does it frighten you just a little? Maybe it should. He wants to meet you. What does He want with you? Are you ready to meet Him?

As far as I'm concerned - I can't wait. Why? Because:

I serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today,  
I know that He is living, whatever men may say.  
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer,  
And just the time I need Him, He's always near.

He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today.  
He walks with me, and talks with me,  
Along life's narrow way.  
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart.  
You ask me how I know He lives?  
He lives within my heart.

Next Sunday:

**"Why God Allows Us To Have Problems"**