

1 Corinthians 15:19-26  
John 20:1-18

## EASTER: ONLY THE BEGINNING

In a sermon I preached four years ago, I shared a personal story about driving at night in central Texas. As I drove north on I-35, I saw a bright blue light, which seemed to hover in the night sky. It stood out from all of the other stars, and as I watched, something extraordinary took place. That brilliant blue light made several lazy corkscrew rotations, and then, in an instance, it seemed to hit “warp speed” and it was gone; it blinked out of sight. I don’t know what I saw – UFO? a secret military aircraft? something else? – I don’t know. I just know that I saw it.

After that sermon, the very next night our Session meeting ended around 9:00 p.m. I raced home, took a quick shower, packed, and got in my car for the 3 1/2 hour drive to Richmond because our son, Andrew, was having chemotherapy early the next morning; it was easier for me to drive to Richmond that night and arrive there by 1:30 a.m. than it was to get up at 4:00 a.m. and be there by 7:30 a.m. Anyway, I had just crossed the bridge spanning the Dan River in South Boston when I saw flashing police lights behind me. I was speeding and the officer gave me a ticket! The next morning, I told Monica what happened; and I said that when I got up to preach on Sunday morning, I was going to say, “Well, I saw some more blue lights in the night sky but, this time, I knew what they were! They were attached to the top of a police car!” Monica responded by saying to me, “No, you’re not!”

I’m not proud of my speeding ticket, but there is a point to be made: both events took place in my life; they actually happened, just as I told you they did. Surely, you believe my second story about the flashing lights atop the police car. And, whether or not you believe what I saw in the Texas sky almost thirty years ago, it still happened even though I cannot begin to explain that strange, out-of-the-ordinary occurrence to you. There is no doubt in my mind that I saw what I saw, although some might scoff.

When the Apollo 11 lunar module landed on the moon in July 1969, there were those who refused to believe the event actually took place. Some were convinced that it was all staged on a television set based in Hollywood. However, whatever one chooses to believe doesn’t change the fact of the lunar landing!

Likewise, some people don’t believe in the Holocaust. They revise history to claim that the Germans never mistreated the Jews during World War II. They say that the statistics are wrong, the photographs are doctored, and the Holocaust never happened. But, if we were to ask a Jewish person or some other minority, who has a number tattooed on his/her arm, they would tell us a different story. Whatever a person chooses to believe about the Holocaust, that doesn’t alter the facts about that horrendous evil.

Some people still believe the earth is flat. You can go to their website at [www.flat-earth.org](http://www.flat-earth.org) and learn that they are a non-profit organization dedicated to overcoming the politically correct view that the earth is spherical. They can believe that the earth is flat all that they want. Whatever one wants to believe about the shape of the earth really doesn’t make a difference. Their belief doesn’t change the facts. (See Lectionary Homiletics, April 2010, p. 13)

I guess you can see where I am going with this line of thinking. We are here this Easter morning to affirm and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Some people believe that it never took place, that it was all a hoax. People believe what they want to believe, but the facts speak for themselves. By facts, I don’t mean that we can prove or explain Jesus’

resurrection, because we can't; we don't know what happened. We only know what we know by faith, which is a gift from God. We know what God has revealed to us by grace and faith alone, and it is this truth that has set us free from sin and death. Or, as the Apostle Paul said, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:20-22).

For twenty-one centuries, millions upon millions of believers have professed faith in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, and we joyfully note that our names are added to that vast number of his disciples. We haven't a clue as to how Jesus was raised up from the grave but that doesn't prevent us from believing the Good News of the Gospel.

In 1992, Monica and I were privileged to take a trip to the Holy Land. At one point on the tour, we entered the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is the traditional site where Jesus was crucified and then buried nearby. However, a little bit later, we were shown a second location, which is known as Gordon's tomb, where Jesus might have been crucified and then buried in a garden area. Or, Jesus' death and resurrection could have occurred in a third locale. It really doesn't matter which one was the genuine article. We don't need actual proof. We know God raised Jesus from the dead, and that's what is important and true.

It all began with that first Easter morning. According to John, Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb but the stone had been removed and the grave was empty. She told Simon Peter and the other disciple; they ran to the tomb, saw what Mary had seen, and then left somewhat perplexed. In the meantime, Mary returned and was weeping outside the tomb. It was horrible enough that the authorities had killed her Master by crucifixion, but stealing his body was adding insult to injury! Mary saw someone who she took to be the gardener or caretaker of the burial place. However, when he called her by name, "Mary," in that same gentle and loving way as before, in an instant Mary knew he was Jesus, who was raised from the dead; and she turned back to him, saying, "Rabbouni! Teacher!" Before long, Mary, the very first disciple to see the risen Jesus, returned to the disciples and witnessed to her faith: "I have seen the Lord!"

That was the first Easter, but it was only the beginning. In fact, just prior to the passage in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul wrote: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve, then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." Even then, that was only the beginning for, over and over and over again, the Risen Christ has appeared and blessed the Church, his body, with new life.

The good news of the resurrection, which began in the past with an open tomb and our Risen Lord set loose in the world, continues to bring hope in the present and in the future. Here are several ways that first Easter continues to impact and bring peace, joy, and fulfillment to our lives.

When we believe in the Risen Christ, words like "hopeless" and "impossible" begin to disappear from our vocabulary. We trust that if God can roll back stones, burst open tombs, and raise the dead, why then anything is possible. God is still opening tombs and bringing people to life.

Ann suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. She was never rescued from the pain of the disease. In fact, it got worse; she became bedridden, her life was filled with pain, and it eventually took her life. But, resurrection cannot be stopped. God rolled away the stone,

brought resurrection to Ann, and she lived a life very much alive to God, even though she had much pain. She began a prayer ministry from her bedside. She spent her days on the phone, talking with, consoling, and comforting persons who suffered any kind of pain, praying with and for them. She spent hours in intercessory prayer, praying over pages and pages of names daily. If you went to visit her, you always felt as if you were the one visited. You left her room feeling warm and loved, remembering her words and smile. Janice Hearn, who tells this story, said that Ann was never rescued from pain. Instead, God brought resurrection, new life, and she lived that new life as no one I've ever known. The promise of the Easter story is for each one of us. God will not always rescue us but God will roll away the stones and bring us out of our tombs.

Along with lifting up individuals, the Lord God is going to finish the good work begun in creation. Easter and Jesus' resurrection are about God being intent on clearing the world of heartbreak. God faced evil, sin, and death on Good Friday, and then on Easter God was victorious over all that seeks to distort and diminish life. Now God intends to do for the whole world what was done for Jesus on Easter. That was only the beginning. Our world has been entered, encountered, and transformed.

Many of you can remember Hitler, the Nazis, and their Third Reich. Wasn't that evil power supposed to stand for a thousand years? And yet, it only lasted from 1933-1945. And, never in my lifetime did I expect to see the end of the Berlin Wall, which divided the East from the West; and yet, those "walls came a'tumblin' down." These historical events and others didn't just happen. No, God was at work through many nations and individuals to bring about a new season of hope, resurrection, and transformation. Easter reminds us that God is doing God's part to redeem the creation and especially humankind.

However, as Easter people, a great responsibility is laid on our shoulders. "The strife is o'er, the battle won" – yes, but – we must join with God in the mopping up actions wherever evil still dares to challenge the reign of God. We are called to get out there and help roll away the stones in order to bring God's resurrection life and abundant hope to our world.

Easter also gives us hope for the future, for the life to come. Christ Jesus' victory over death is our victory as well. Somehow we know, we believe that, at death, we will be transformed into glorious, resurrection bodies. Pain, illness, and even death will be gone and our spirits will be escorted into the full and loving Presence of the Lord; and, we will be joined to the Church Triumphant made up of all the saints of God within the heavenly kingdom. Easter is only the beginning of an eternity of joy.

I remember going to the hospital to see a church member, who was very ill. On the way to her room, I saw and talked with her doctor. I asked him what was wrong with Vivian and he told me she had cancer throughout her body and death was imminent. Since English was not his native language, he asked me if I would communicate that news to her and I told him I would. I entered Vivian's room, sat down beside her, and held her hand. She raised her upper body off the bed and asked me, "Randy, what's wrong with me?" I spoke the truth in love to her as I told her about the cancer. She asked, "Randy, am I going to get better?" Very tenderly and honestly I said to Vivian: "Vivian, I think getting better for you means dying and being raised up into the heavenly kingdom – there to live with the Lord, your loved ones, and all of the saints forever!" Vivian pondered this answer for a moment, and then she laid her head back down gently on the pillow. An angelic smile and a look of peaceful contentment spread over her face. Two days later, Vivian died and was resurrected into eternal glory!

Can we prove all of this is true about the empty tomb, Jesus being raised from the dead, and the consequences of his resurrection victory today, tomorrow, and forever? We cannot

prove it or explain it. We can only point to our own lives or someone else's life and see resurrection in action, transformation in progress.

Some say that Easter is an idle tale or a hoax. They can believe what they want to believe, but that doesn't alter the glorious truth of the Risen Christ. By grace and faith alone, we know better. We know Jesus lives, and because he lives, we too can come fully alive in this life and the next. That's the Gospel truth. For almost two thousand years, that is the story the Church has told, that we have heard and shared and lived by faith. That's our story, and with God's help, we're sticking to it! Amen.

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