

**“No Fooling – He Is Risen!”**

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

ACTS 10:34-42; 1 COR. 15:19-26; JOHN 20:1-18

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that 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, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

John 20: 1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, F161 "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. 19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

First time in preaching on 37 Easters that it's been on April 1. That is not to say that the preachers task, the task of the faithful, the task of the church has not been each and every Easter to somehow prove that this is no April Fools prank. When we say Jesus is risen. We mean risen.

Speaking of something that sounds April Foolish... This sermon could have been titled 'Easter In Angel Gear.' But, ff your preacher, who is by this point in the Holy Week and Easter spectrum just a bit – exhausted -- was to tell you that you could whip out your phones and google 'angel gear' and somewhere in the midst of the sites trying to sell you caps and t-shirts for the California angels, that there is, no fooling, something that is really and truly known as angel gear. Back in the 50's in New Zealand, daredevil truck drivers, in order to conserve very expensive gasoline, would switch off the ignition on their big rigs, throw it in neutral – or angel gear – hang on for dear life and careen down mountain roads running completely on faith. This is true. Of course what they said was if you are bold enough to go down a mountain in neutral, you may just meet an Angel along the way. Just run in angel gear and leave the rest to God.

Now the point of this bit of triviality is that this is how on Easter mornings all Christians should approach the Easter stories. By putting themselves in "angel gear," which basically means putting our brains in neutral and hanging on for an amazing ride. If we try to control, make sense of, rationalize, categorize or explain resurrection outside of the language of faith and hope that Easter morning represents for each of us it is impossible. "Angel gear" means being absolutely

willing to let all of the stuff that gets in the way of our faith, including our rational judgements, just be put in neutral as we listen, and as we experience the good news. To let it flow over us like wind in our hair and as exhilarating as a down hill run in a run away truck.

A lot of non-Christians have no problem agreeing that this first-century Jesus of Nazareth was a gifted leader, a provocative teacher, a prophet and a powerful moral figure that the world should emulate. But on this morning, Jesus' secular well-wishers and the church's members must part company. This morning we celebrate a mystery and a miracle - the greatest miracle and mystery ever known: Christ is Risen!

Let's not fool ourselves - the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was just as hard on the faith of first century believers as it is on ours. Death has been around for a long time - first-century folk knew its face just as well as we do. In fact, they saw it more closely and intimately and frequently than do we in our hospitalized, sterilized, death-denying attempt to avoid the whole topic. So, to discount death meant for them, as it does for us, the willingness if not the ability to suspend reason. Everything in us, especially our own experience, tells us that death is real and that to overcome death, takes a giant leap of faith.

Naturally, we rely on those who actually saw the resurrected Jesus before his ascension forty days later. We imagine it was much easier for them to believe. But while it is true that none of us had the honor of actually bumping into Jesus in the flesh on the way to church this morning, it is also true that none of us helped

pull his lifeless body off the cross on Friday evening. None of us carried his heavy, limp, blood-stained form into a barren tomb and wrapped it in a shroud. For those who had known the living, laughing, loving Jesus, there was no doubt that he was stone-cold dead. Believing that he could be truly alive again - not just some spiritual apparition, but a warm, living being - was an enormous act of faith for the first disciples.

When the news of Jesus' resurrection, the rumor of an empty tomb, began to circulate, the Roman and synagogue authorities got nervous. Having taken enormous effort to post guards so that Jesus' body could not be stolen, these officials now used these same guards to start spreading a rumor that body-snatching was exactly what had happened. The possibility that a genuine miracle had taken place was too threatening, too incredible for those who had opposed Jesus and put him to death.

They did an excellent job spreading doubt, however, for that rumor still circulates today. There are lots of church members who confess faith in Christ yet continue to suspect that the chief priests and leaders probably had the story straight. For these Christians the concept behind a risen Christ is perfectly acceptable, but the reality of an actual resurrection is just too outlandish to take literally.

We expect life and death to follow a certain set of rules and to meet certain rational criteria. Therefore we scramble around trying to find alternative

explanations for the empty tomb. Maybe the guards did fall asleep and some well-meaning disciples did come to take the body. Maybe Jesus wasn't really dead - only drugged, or in a coma, or hypnotized - and he came out of it and escaped the tomb. Maybe this was all part of an elaborate plan to prove Jesus' messianic nature. Maybe the dastardly Roman soldiers, bored out of their minds on grave duty decided to play an April fool's joke on those poor dumb Galileans, rolled the stone away and stole Jesus body. Maybe it was the gardener and Mary was just hysterical. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

**But maybe, just maybe, all our doubts are wrong!**

Mary didn't doubt she was convinced. In Paul's testimony to what was becoming the second generation of the church he is of course answering the natural doubts and questions of people by sharing direct testimony. Again, he says, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that 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, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me... so we proclaim and so you have come to believe." We have come to believe. Not because of

empirical evidence, but because of faith. “When we refuse to let the miracle be miraculous, when we try to crimp it and cramp it to fit our style, we find ourselves distorting everything that made up Jesus’ life and ministry on earth. It is time to let the mystery shine.”

Let’s quit analyzing Easter. Instead of looking for human explanations for the open tomb, let’s look with awe at that mighty angel perched in front of it. Let us be so convinced of his presence that we see the misty vapors of angel breath billowing from his mouth as he tells the wondering women what has happened to Jesus. Then we must walk with bold faithfulness through the tomb’s opened doorway, look at its empty, uninhabited space and shout the miracle: “He is Risen!”

That’s running in angel gear.

And if we can do that then we can have enough faith to bring our children to the font. We can have enough faith to sidle up to this table for a nibble and a sip. Ask yourself – really? Put water on a baby’s head? Eat a morsel of bread and drink a wee dram of wine? It’s not just ritual. It’s not just drama. It’s a wild ride through life in angel gear because of, not in spite of, resurrection. Life – out of death. It’s how we are able to commend those we love to God’s care at the time of death – because we believe in life – after death. But we don’t even have to believe it **for it to be true**. It’s no april fool’s. It just is. Whether you come 52 times a year or only when it’s time to put on the easter bonnet... Resurrection is not predicated

on what we believe – God doesn't need us to confirm it – but, if you believe it – it has the power to change everything in your living... it has the power to bring life from death... it has the power to change your perspective on everything. On Easter, no fooling, we need to get out of our own way and believe. He is risen!