

Sermon Easter 2020a: Christ is Alive and Calls us to Open our Hearts

Introduction: One Last Obstacle to Overcome

Alleluia! Christ is risen. (The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!)

Ah, the sweet sound of the greeting of Easter;

The sweet sound of promise and hope and life and love for today and for always.

I love the sound of those words, though I wish you all were with us right now

Because the response usually staggers my heart;

And makes me tear up at the promise these words represent

For our lives and for the life of the world;

But we don't have to be together to share the Easter proclamation;

Or the Easter life because the risen Lord is with us wherever we are.

You see, I love the sound of those words, but not as much as I love the power they hold.

I love the power they hold for those of us

Who have some sense of the new life offered to us at Easter;

And the promise they hold for those of us who aren't quite there yet;

Who sense that something is going on with Easter, with Jesus and us;

But haven't been able or haven't been willing to fully grasp

This promise and life in all its fullness.

The Easter greeting, this acclamation of faith and life speaks to a new order of things.

Because Christ has lived as one of us, we know that God loves us, just as we are;

Because Christ suffered and died on a cross;

We know that we are not alone in our darkest, most difficult moments;

He has been there, too, and is with us even now in this shadow time;

Because Christ is raised from the dead,

We know that our deaths are no longer our ends;

But have become a doorway to a life and a love that are beyond our imaginings.

Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead mean that everything has changed;
Jesus has opened the way to life with God;
Christ has overcome our aloneness and separation from God;
Jesus has set us free from the fear and power of sin and death forever;
And only one thing is left for Christ to overcome - your heart and mine.

One last obstacle remains for those of us who hear the Easter acclamation
And know or sense the power and the love and the life that is ours for the asking;
And that last obstacle is the willingness to open our hearts to this loving Savior;
Who offers us life with God now and a new life beyond the door of death.

It's More Than Just the Evidence

Now for most of us to even consider opening our hearts to anything or anyone
We need a little evidence that to allow ourselves to be changed;
And with Easter that Jesus was actually dead and was raised from the dead;
Evidence so that we can allow Christ to overcome our hearts;
And that's what the scriptures this morning and the Christian movement are all about.

Jesus' resurrection on that first Easter Day was the single most important event
And reality in the lives of the first followers of Jesus, the Christ.

These first followers had seen the empty tomb;
These first followers had touched Him after He was risen;
They had talked with Him and eaten with Him;
They had eyewitness evidence that this Jesus who had died;
Was now alive, changed, of course, but alive and out in the world;
Alive and present in their everyday lives because of His resurrection.

They were changed by what happened on Easter
They were changed and their hearts and their souls and their lives
Reflected the new reality of God's forgiveness;
The new reality of God' promise of life beyond the door of death;

The new reality of God's love and presence with them at every moment of every day.

Everyone who met these first followers after Easter witnessed to their deep sense of joy;

They saw the gracious power of God at work in their lives;

And by their lives, the whole world would come to know of Jesus' resurrection.

And there is written and historic evidence as well that may open our hearts this Easter.

The account of that first Easter we read from Matthew's Gospel is part of the evidence

That Jesus rose from the dead on Easter;

And there's more evidence from Matthew and the other Gospel accounts;

That we may consider to open the way for Christ to enter in.

Les Stroebe, legal writer for The Chicago Tribune wrote an interesting book years ago

Entitled The Case for Christ, where he lays out the evidence in the Gospels

As it might be heard in a formal trial today.

Stroebe got interested in the resurrection story when his wife became a Christian;

When his wife opened herself up to God and Jesus' resurrection in a new way;

And was living differently, more hope-filled, more gracious, more religious.

Les wasn't sure that's what he wanted for his wife or for himself;

Change is hard for all of us and this change really challenged him

And the life they had been living up to that moment;

So he decided to use the evidence in the Gospels to disprove Jesus' resurrection;

So she and their family could return to normal, to the way their life had been.

It's funny to me and to him, though,

That after careful study and application through his legal training and experience;

Stroebe concludes that the evidence presented in the Gospels;

Would be proof enough that Jesus was, in fact, raised from the dead

And he ends up becoming a Christian himself.

There's other evidence, of course,

Evidence of nearly 2000 years of the existence of Church;
And the millions of people through the ages and today who are living the resurrection.

But it's not just the evidence that has been passed down that's important;

It's not just the historic truth that's so absolutely critical for Easter;
After all, consistent polling through the years shows
That nearly 80% of Americans still believe Jesus rose from the dead;
What's important is the last stronghold that Jesus has to overcome;
What's important, what's critical, is the willingness on our part to open our hearts;
So that the risen Christ can come in and live with us in our daily lives.

Women at the Tomb

The importance of our willing hearts is the difference maker for Christ to come in;

Let's look again at the women at the empty tomb this morning;

They had all the evidence anyone would need

To conclude that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

They knew Jesus before and were witnesses to His painful death on the cross;

They had seen Him laid in the borrowed tomb;

They had watched as the stone was rolled into place, shutting Him in.

And when they returned on the third day to dress His body more properly, on Sunday;

They were met with an earthquake; with angels rolling the stone away;

With the angel's announcement that He is not here, but has risen;

And then with Jesus Himself, who spoke to them

And whom they touched and worshiped.

In some ways it doesn't take a lot of faith

For these women to believe the Easter acclamation;

But like all of Jesus' followers, the evidence, while important, is not the end;

It's just the starting point.

Notice they don't set up some kind of memorial on the site;
They don't stand still on the holy ground for the rest of their lives;
They don't set up some kind of tomb-side stand to sell trinkets and postcards;
But instead are compelled to make the evidence known to others;
First, to some of Jesus' other followers and now to you and to me.

At some point they had to have given their hearts over to the risen Lord;
They knew His presence with them in such a powerful and joyous way;
That they experienced the risen Christ alive in their hearts and their souls
Far beyond that first Easter Day;
And their lives and the life of the world has never been the same.

Opening Our Hearts

So what about you and me?

So what about all of us this morning as we hear the Easter greeting?
Will you allow Christ to overcome the last obstacle, your heart?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was never meant to be proved alone;
As some mere historical fact - it was meant to be experienced.

And the most convincing evidence of the resurrection of Christ is the transformation
Of the people who know Jesus and believe in Him;
And the only evidence I'll ever need is memory;
I remember what my life was like before I met the risen Christ;
And I know what my life is like now, as I share it with Him.

I can't stand here and tell you that I am always the person I should be;
And that like many of you I am struggling in these difficult times;
But thanks to the presence of the risen Christ in my life;
I'm not the person I used to be either and His presence has made all the difference.

Christ is risen and will continue or begin to live in you and me if we will let Him;
Christ is risen and will continue or begin to fill us with a deep sense of joy and hope,
If we will allow it;
Christ is risen and offers us a power and a peace for our lives;
And for the life of the world if we will open the door of hearts
And let Him enter in.

So let this Easter Day be the day when you renew or when you allow
The power of Jesus' death and resurrection
To become the most important reality of your life;
Open your heart and soul so that Christ may come in;
Open your heart with a simple prayer or a thought and the door will be opened
And He will come in.

Lift up your heart to God and allow God to enter into your life;
So that the sweet sound of the Easter greeting
May become the music and source of your life today and always;
For Christ is risen and has come to you and to me and to all people.

Amen.