

“A Big Difference”

John 20:1-21

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 1, 2018

Easter is one of those holidays where things get kind of fuzzy for us. The story is so familiar. We've heard it over and over again. Jesus comes out of the tomb before dawn to hide Easter eggs and if he sees his shadow there's six more weeks of winter. Or something like that. Sometimes we have a little trouble telling what's real from what's not.

But for the last two thousand years there's one thing that's been clear to millions upon millions of Christians, and it's this: The Easter event, the resurrection of Jesus, is the most important event in the history of the world. The Nueces County Historical Society meets here at the church and from time to time I have the privilege of participating as they dedicate historical markers around the city to mark important places in our history. It's important for us to remember the people and places that shape who we are today. But nothing in history has changed our world as much as the resurrection of Jesus. To put it bluntly, "There is no Christian faith without the resurrection." This is what the Apostle Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 15: "If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." It makes a big difference that Jesus really was raised from the grave.

A German theologian named Wolfhart Pannenberg, writing about the resurrection, said: "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

First of all, the resurrection is certainly an unusual event. N.T. Wright tells us, "There were many Messianic movements in the first century. In every case, the would-be Messiah got crucified by Rome, just as Jesus did." He then says, "In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better." In other

words, if you were following one of these messiah-types, and there were lots of them, and your guy got crucified by Rome you either gave up the movement all together or you found a new messiah to follow.

This is what we find in the Gospels. After Jesus was crucified and buried his followers knew it was over. They were finished. The reason they thought this was because they knew that Jesus was really dead. They had seen it with their own eyes. There was no question that Jesus had really died and that they had buried him in the tomb and sealed it up. No one regarded the tomb of Jesus as anything but a disaster. So when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb that morning and finds it empty, to her this is just insult added to injury. She and the other women run to Simon Peter and the other disciple, presumably John since he's the one writing the story, and say, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

John tells us that Mary arrived at the tomb "while it was still dark." Obviously he means that the sun had not come up yet but John likes to include deeper meanings as well. There was a darkness surrounding Jesus' followers. They were not able to see beyond the disaster of Jesus' death. At this point, they were beyond hope.

You and I face the same problem today. At some time in each of our lives we find ourselves facing the darkness. We get that phone call in the middle of the night. There's been an accident. Or there's a diagnosis of cancer. Or, the company's downsizing. Or you're just all alone. As some of you know, I spent the first part of last week in Louisiana. My aunt was in Intensive Care in very critical condition. When we went to the hospital Monday morning the doctor was very blunt that there was not much hope and said she probably wouldn't make it. That was a dark day. I don't know what you may be struggling with but I know that it can

seem that there is no hope, no future. You find yourself coming to the tomb while it's still dark and the darkness seems overwhelming.

The truth is, though, that none of us is really ready to face Easter until we've spent some time in that dark place where hope can't be seen. That's why the message of Easter is always a surprise to us. Jesus is the last person we expect to show up in the darkness.

But he does show up. The Bible tells us that Peter and John go into the tomb and see the linen cloths that they had wrapped Jesus in on the previous Friday and then they went home. But Mary stood there by the grave crying. She stooped down again and looked inside, just trying to make sense of it all, maybe hoping that there had been some mistake. And that's when hope begins to break into her world and into our world. First she sees the two angels sitting in the tomb. Then she turns around and sees Jesus himself and at the moment that Jesus calls her name, the darkness is lifted. Things would never be the same again.

Mary goes and tells the others, "I have seen the Lord." You know, an eyewitness is powerful and the Bible tells us that not only did Mary Magdalene and the other women with her see Jesus alive, but that his followers saw him later that evening and within 25 years of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection the Apostle Paul writes that more than 500 other people saw Jesus alive again and that many of them were still alive when he wrote the letter. What he's basically saying is, "if you don't believe me that Jesus was raised, ask one of these people."

Besides the eyewitnesses, there is other evidence that Jesus was raised. The fact that this scraggly little group of followers of Jesus went from being afraid and hiding to boldly preaching tells us that something significant happened to convince them that Jesus really was who he said he was. And they were willing to die because of their beliefs. The thing that convinced them was that they had seen the risen Jesus face to face. They had seen his hands and his side.

So if this really happened, if Jesus is really raised from death, this is something we can't ignore. This is not some historical fact that we can file away. This means that Jesus really is who he said he is. In John 10 Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." Another way of saying that would be that Jesus and God are the same, which is why they wanted him dead. The truth is that Jesus is God. And that means God is dying to have a relationship with you. That's not the kind of thing that we can say, "well that's an interesting fact." It means we really do have to change the way we live our lives and even the way we think about our lives.

First of all, in Jesus Christ you have forgiveness. Anybody here ever make a mistake in life? Ever make a bad decision or make choices in life that you regret? Is there anything in your life that gets in the way of really following Jesus completely? That's what sin is. It's anything that separates us from God and let me tell you, every one of us is guilty. There are no perfect people in this world. Except Jesus. He lived and died and was raised again to forgive us. Maybe you think you're too far gone, that even God can't help. It's true that we are all too far gone to get ourselves out of this mess. But let me tell you, there is no distance that God is not able to go to bring you back. Resurrection means that your past is not unforgivable.

Second, in Jesus Christ you have a future. Death is no longer the end for us. We get a new life. This was a big shock to Jesus' followers. Over time they began to understand that the power that raised Jesus from the grave is also available to all of us. The really great news is that you don't have to wait until you die to begin participating in this new life. When you come to understand that in Christ you've already died, then living takes on a new meaning. You become more alive than ever because you're free to really live. Now you can live Jesus' life inside you.

The third thing you have when you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior is value. No matter how successful or unsuccessful

you've been in the world's eyes, as a follow of Jesus Christ you are worth more to God than all the money in the world. And no one can take that away. You matter to God and that's all that really matters. But so does everyone else you meet. As followers of Christ we now see others as having that same value. We must treat everyone as if they matter to God because they do. Sometimes we still struggle with this. The world teaches us to see each others' differences and to rate each others' value. But Jesus' resurrection shows us that all of us matter equally to God and so all people should matter equally to you.

That brings me to the final thing I want you to understand. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." Each of us has a job to do. As followers of Jesus we have

the responsibility to tell others about him. It's not enough to say, "I have Jesus." Jesus came and sacrificed everything for us and now he's sending us to do the same thing. That's the mission of the church. We are called first and foremost to make disciples of Jesus. If we're faithful to go where Jesus sends us—and where he is sending us is to the places where he's already put is: our families, our neighborhoods, our jobs, our friendships—the world will never be the same. He promises to be right there with us.

So what about you? The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. The Savior is risen. Will you trust Him? Will you choose to follow Him? Will you let Him change your life? When you do it will make all the difference.

Amen.