

St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

“He Is Risen!”

All around the world this morning - Christians are proclaiming this remarkable message: “HE HAS RISEN!” As I told the children in the Children’s Sermon – that egg was empty and so was Jesus’ tomb! That is what Easter is all about – He died, He rose, and He promised to come and take us with Him, one day. The world loves to tease us with empty promises – but God blesses us with promises that He always keeps!

God is the complete opposite of this world! The world says we can pretty much do whatever we want to do, but God says we should only do that which He wants us to do. The world gives us promises that are full of emptiness, but on Easter - God gave us emptiness that is chock full of promise! This morning on this Easter Sunday, I would like to suggest to you that there are three promises of Easter. Each promise is marked by emptiness:

- An empty cross;
- empty burial clothes;
- And an empty tomb.

Just the fact that these are empty gives us the absolute assurance that God’s promises are very, very, real. Our Christian belief system is based upon the truth that Jesus arose from the tomb to defeat death and sin. If Jesus had not come out of that tomb, we would be like every other religion in the world – we would be following a dead leader. Grave, very grave!

Here is the story of a young Muslim man who came to receive Christ, and when he went back to his friends and family, he found them more than a little upset with him. They demanded to know why he did such a terrible thing. So, he asked his family, “If you needed to get to a town, but did not know the way, and you were walking down a road that split into two roads, and you found a man at the beginning of each road, one dead and the other alive, which one would ask for directions?”

Buddha founded Buddhism but Buddha died. Judaism was founded by Abraham, but Abraham has died, too. Islam was founded by Muhammad and he also died. Christianity – worshipping the one true God, was founded by Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, who came back from the grave and I am here to tell you today – that He still lives! He set us free from sin and eternal death, giving us the hope of spending all eternity with Him!

I would like you to imagine those three crosses by that hill called Golgotha. Please focus on the one in the middle. That is the one Jesus gave up His life on, for you and for me. It was not a pretty picture, nor was it an easy death. I think it is absolutely necessary for all of us to be aware of, and never forget just what Jesus went through on our behalf. I don’t think we can ever really appreciate exactly what He did - unless we know exactly what He did. I can remember watching the movie “The Passion of the Christ” in a theatre in Pennsylvania when it first came out – there was a lot of discomfort in watching the scenes showing the torture that Jesus went through for you and me. One lady woman, on the way out, even went so far as to

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say “that is disgusting!” I am afraid it is – but if you saw the effect of the sin of the world – now that’s truly disgusting! There have been all kinds of stories made up over the centuries to soften the blow - so somebody could keep from having to admit to the agony that Jesus endured on our behalf.

The Roman soldiers were very good at their jobs; trained professionals - masters of torture and death. It was their job to break the legs of those hung on the cross so they could not support themselves and they would hurry and suffocate. Don’t think for a moment that they didn’t have absolute knowledge that Jesus was very dead when they took Him from the cross. The soldiers knew it, the Romans knew it and so did the Jews. These men were glad that Jesus was dead, but when they found out He arose, they needed to keep it quiet from the rest of the people - so they wouldn’t realize that Jesus was indeed the Christ – the Messiah. In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 28, His detractors cooked up a lie in verse 13 which says “*You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'*” An absolute lie that covered up the truth about Jesus, and Lord knows the world has been listening to that lie in one form or another ever since! Common sense states that, with all the authorities wanting Jesus dead, they would have arrested everyone in the city who even had anything to do with stealing Jesus’ body. No matter what you may have heard in your life, there is proof that Jesus died on that cross. And, it was on that cross that Jesus actually defeated sin. The cross remains empty because that is where our sin disappeared, through Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Let’s face it – everyone here today is guilty; every one of us has sinned. We are all sinners. Holy Scripture tells us that “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (Romans 3:23) According to God’s law, what you deserve when you sin – is to be put to death – “*the wages of sin is death,*” and the soul that sins will surely die. Because we are all sinners, what we deserve is to die and be condemned to hell for all eternity. But the Good News is that God does not want us to go there! That’s why He sent Jesus to die; He allowed His mercy, grace and forgiveness to let us be cleansed from sin so that we do not have to go there.

The Bible tells us there is no other Name given under Heaven by which we can be saved; that name my friends is Jesus, the Messiah. Because the cross is empty, we have the full promise of eternal glory with God - fulfilled. Since Jesus died for our sins, God looks at the notations beside all of our names and all He can see is His Son’s blood with the notation “Forgiven.” God the Father sees the righteousness of Jesus instead of our unrighteousness.

On that first Easter morning, just before dawn, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, went to the tomb so they could anoint Jesus’ body with spices and oils. This was quite a solemn task and I can just imagine how their conversation must have been subdued and sullen. On the way there, they were wondering who was going to roll the big heavy stone away from the tomb so they could get in. When they got to the tomb entrance, they felt the earth shake. They were frightened, but they continued toward the tomb. When they got to the front of it, they were shocked to see the Roman soldiers unconscious and the rock was already rolled away. They saw a man dressed in white sitting there and, they became even more frightened.

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The young man told them that they were there to see Jesus, the One who was crucified. He said that Jesus was not there – that He had risen and the tomb was empty! Let me tell you – **that empty tomb has a lot of promise!**

Many people think a woman's place in the kingdom of God is a place of silence and passiveness. Is that what God wants or is that what man wants? Let me remind you that it was the women who God chose to be the first He told about the Resurrection. And after that He told them to "*Go and tell.*" I believe that God wants all of His children actively involved in His kingdom, and that includes His church, too. I am pleased to honor the ministry of women in this church – as Lay readers or lectors, as Lay Eucharistic Ministers, as Acolytes, as choir members and as the members of the Altar Guild who tirelessly prepare the church for the Holy Eucharist and decorate the church, as they have today – and other special celebrations in the life of the church.

Let me tell you about Phillip, a young boy of 8 whose parents had just moved to town from a neighboring state. Phillip did not know anyone, and at that age, that can be devastating in itself. But Phillip had other problems, too. He was a special needs child who had many physical and mental handicaps. His parents started going to the local church and enrolled Phillip in the Sunday school classes. Like most people that age, the other children in that class did not know how to react to Phillip, so they pretty much stayed to themselves and ignored him.

One Sunday, the teacher asked all the kids to bring something in the next week that would help explain something about how Jesus arose from the tomb. The next week came and one boy brought in some towels and said that shows how they wrapped Jesus when they buried Him. One of the girls brought in a poem about how Jesus was hanged on the cross and died there. The teacher reminded the children that the show-and-tell was to focus on how Jesus arose from the tomb, not how He was buried, or how He died on the cross.

Phillip came up next and handed the teacher a large plastic egg that he got from his mother. The teacher opened it and there was nothing inside. At this, all the other kids started laughing at Phillip and a few even called him stupid. Phillip turned to the class and said he wasn't stupid. That the empty egg showed perfectly well how Jesus arose and left the tomb empty – just as empty as the egg. With that, the entire class fell silent. They realized that Phillip was the only one who seemed to have gotten it right. And, within a few weeks, most of them had befriended Phillip and he became happier than he had ever been in his short life.

But, several months later, his physical problems caught up with him and Phillip got very sick and died. At his funeral nine eight year-olds with their teacher brought their symbol of remembrance and placed it near his casket. Their unusual gift of love to Phillip wasn't flowers. It was an empty egg - now a symbol to them of new life and hope. It was Phillip, the "different" child, who had helped his friends see the wonderful hope in the true message of the empty tomb. In the empty tomb we find the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise to each and every one of us that we too will be raised to eternal life.

To those who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, death has lost its sting – it is no longer something to be feared. What fear is there when we have the promise that, because of the empty tomb, we will live forever with Our Lord in Heaven?

Have you ever thought about just why the tomb was empty? It was empty because Jesus is alive. Remember what the angel told the women? He had risen! And the promise of that empty tomb is that we can also live after we die. We can live forever in Heaven, with God the Father, where we shall have the desire to worship Him with all of our love forever and ever.

But there is a third promise of emptiness on this Easter Day. In Luke's Gospel account in chapter 24, when Peter was told about the arisen Jesus, he went to the tomb and there, he saw the strips of linen that Jesus had been buried in. This could have meant only one thing – Jesus was alive!

There are many theories about what really happened. One thing they all have in common is this: None of them explain why there are so many documented proofs of His being seen after the fact. They all seem to say He died, and they just kind of ignore the rest of the story. But, it is in the rest of the story that we find our hope of glory. It is the rest of the story that wraps everything up and ties it all together the way it should be. It is the rest of the story that tells how Jesus was seen by over 500 people. How He walked with them; how He talked with them; and how He ate with them.

Can you imagine what the disciples felt when they saw Jesus again - alive? Here was a man they worshipped. Here was a man they truly loved – having learned from Him and lived with Him for 3 years. And here was a man who was killed and buried, taking Him away from the disciples. Can you imagine how they must have hurt?

But, here He was again – right before them. Can you imagine the joy they felt? And the fact that He has risen should give all of us that same joy today. He has risen; He lives again; and it is the promise of the empty burial clothes that prove it.

It has been nearly 2000 years since Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected. That first Easter Sunday, as the women went to the grave, they had no idea what was about to happen to them. They were not yet aware of the wonderful promises of that day.

Off in the distance stood an empty cross; that emptiness was the promise of forgiveness that their sins would be forgiven. They turned from the cross and went towards the tomb, just to find it empty, too. And, in the emptiness of the tomb, they found the promise of eternal life. Inside the tomb were the empty burial clothes, and it was in the emptiness of the burial clothes that they found they could still have the promise of personal fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

And if you choose, you can know the hope found in the emptiness of so long ago. You can find

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the promises Jesus offers you through the empty cross, the empty tomb, and the empty burial clothes. It is your choice to make today.

This morning, we have heard about three promises that God has given to us.

- The first thing we must ask ourselves is if we think God is serious. I assure you that He is, indeed.
- The second thing we must ask ourselves is if we do not do that today – just when do we think we will ask Him in? Let today be the day – and don't waste another minute!
- The last thing we must ask is the most important question we will ever ask. We must ask God to please forgive us and let His beloved Son come into our hearts to change us. When He grants us that mercy and love, Jesus will begin a change, a transformation in us that will absolutely astound you and everyone else around you.

I need to ask you to answer this question honestly: Do you know Jesus Christ this morning? I didn't ask you if you had heard about Him, I asked if you know Him. If you don't, don't you think you should? Jesus says in the Book of Revelation 3:20; "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*" Do you feel Him knocking at the door of your heart this morning? If you do, open the door and welcome the King of Glory into your life and your heart - ask Jesus to come into your heart – and welcome the new life and the hope of Resurrection into your life! May you have a truly Blessed Easter!