

***“The Gift of God”***

How often have you spoken to someone and they are either not truly listening to you, or it is beyond their comprehension? They might be distracted by a sporting event – or a TV show – and then when you're ready to discuss it with them further you have to repeat yourself.

Our Lord Jesus spoke of His resurrection at various stages in the Gospel of Luke, including two of His greatest parables which ended with references to coming back from the dead. In the parable of the Prodigal Son – the father rejoices because his son *“was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* (Luke 15:32) The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus ends with these words: *“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* (Luke 16:31) But ironically nobody ‘heard’ what Jesus was saying. They were puzzled, and I guess understandably so. ‘Resurrection’, in that first century Jewish world, was what God would do in the end for all the righteous dead, giving new bodies to everyone from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob down to the most recent righteous martyrs. Though people could speak of a prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist returning from the dead, I think what they probably meant was that someone would come who seemed to have the same spirit, as well as the same fiery prophecy.

Just look at the event recorded in John 11 when Jesus's friend Martha comes to meet Jesus when her brother Lazarus had died. *“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”* (John 11:21-27) They believed that after Israel's great and final suffering, all God's people would be given new life, and new bodies. Can you just imagine their surprise and astonishment on that first Easter morning? It wasn't simply a lack of faith that prevented them from understanding what Jesus had said about His rising again. It was just that nobody ever dreamed that one single living person could be killed and then be raised to a new sort of bodily life – from the other side of the grave, while the rest of the world continued living their lives.

The women who went to the tomb that Sunday morning certainly weren't expecting what they found. They weren't saying to themselves, ‘Well, we've got the spices with us just in case He's still dead, but let's hope He is alive again.’ They knew and had witnessed throughout their lives that dead people remained dead! The eleven faithful remaining disciples certainly weren't expecting it; they were in hiding in the upper room, for as Scripture says they were in “fear of the Jews.” If this story was made up, I think Luke would most certainly not have had women going first to the tomb. In first century Israel, women were not regarded as credible witnesses; instead he would have had the apostles believe the story right away, ready to be models of faith

Easter Sunday – The Day of Resurrection – March 27, 2016, Year C

and to lead the young church into God's future. But my dear friends, that is not what happened; they acted as if it was a silly fantasy that you'd expect from a few women who were crazy with grief and a lack of sleep. Peter and John had to go see for themselves, and they would tell the others. In Luke 24 we are told that two of the disciples, one who was named Cleopas went on a seven mile journey to Emmaus and met the risen Jesus on the road, not recognizing His new heavenly body, until He sat and ate with them. Then when Jesus was breaking the bread their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him, and He disappeared instantly. Jesus was most certainly alive!

It is so important for us to note that the Resurrection of Jesus is recorded in each one of the four Gospels, and that when you read those accounts carefully you realize that Jesus did not roll away the stone – but that the stone was rolled away by the angel “after” Jesus had triumphantly emerged from that borrowed tomb. Jesus walked out of that closed tomb! The Risen Jesus did not need to have someone remove the stone in order to leave the tomb – but the stone was removed so that the witnesses could report that it was indeed empty.

The mood of Easter morning was one of surprise, astonishment, fear and I would venture to say was of course confusion. The Apostles were probably saying Jesus did say something like this would occur; He told us so, but they still don't know what was truly going on, what all of it meant, and then what will happen next.

Some people see Holy Week as drudgery and cannot wait for it to be over. We are blessed today to have a Pastor from Douglas, Pastor Sam Decasper, who began with the Coffee County Ministerial Association 26 years ago, a Holy Week Luncheon and Message that is given on each day of Holy Week. He certainly does not see it as drudgery and we are grateful that he is with us today, along with his wife Sandy. Some people can't wait for that week to be over; they are tasting the chocolate and they cannot wait to let fly with the “alleluias!” Holy Week is a necessity – for we need to be reminded of the tremendous price that Jesus paid – and to always remember that He did it willingly. I am sure that He couldn't wait for Holy Week to be over so that Satan would be beaten, once and for all – and Jesus would come out of that tomb victorious! Satan thought that he had won, thinking “I got Him arrested,” then “I got Him to stand trial,” and then “I had Him beaten to within an inch of His life, then crucified, dead and buried.” He must have thought to himself “well, I win!” Three days later all that would change entirely as Jesus walked out of the tomb alive again! To Satan's surprise – he may have won the battle on Good Friday, but lost it all on Easter Sunday. Easter is always a surprise, whether we meet it in celebrating the feast itself, or in the sudden surges of God's grace overturning tragedy in our own lives or in the world. From the beginning, the Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, because it dares to tell us things we didn't expect, weren't inclined to believe in the first place and possibly couldn't understand. Did we expect the gospel would be something obvious, something we could have dreamed up for ourselves? No, in answer to the question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “what is truth?” – the truth is the Gospel – that Jesus of Nazareth paid the price, the ransom in our place to free us from the ravages of sin and death –

Easter Sunday – The Day of Resurrection – March 27, 2016, Year C

and He did it willingly. I pray that today more and more people will come to the reality of the Gospel and see Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and invite Him into their hearts.

As we celebrated St. Andrew's Passover Seder on Maundy Thursday, those who were present witnessed how God used the Passover to point repeatedly toward the sacrifice that Jesus, as the Lamb of God, would withstand for the salvation of mankind. Something very powerful and interesting happens during the Passover. During the Seder dinner there is the blessing of the bread, the bread we know as Matzo, which has stripes on it and is pierced. This is something that people have been doing for thousands of years – taking three pieces of matzo in a special pouch; one on top, one in the middle, and one on the bottom. And then the middle matzo is taken out and broken. This is called the afikomen - the coming one. One half is wrapped in linen - to be found by a child for a ransom. They will be given a reward for finding that wrapped middle piece of matzo. Sound familiar? Three pieces of matzo, signifying the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and taking the middle one, the Son, is taken and broken with the other half put back into the pouch. Well, you know the rest of the story and that is what we celebrate today – that Jesus is living! People have been celebrating the Passover for thousands of years but not seeing the reality of Jesus as Savior – The Redeemer, the middle matzo, the Passover Lamb, by whose Blood the world is saved. Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate the fact that they sacrificed a perfect lamb, took the blood of the lamb and with a hyssop branch painted the doorposts – so that the Angel of Death would Passover. They would be saved by the Blood of the Lamb! Does that sound familiar? Indeed!

Think of how excited you get when a youngster, maybe your child, your godchild, or grandchild recognized you for the very first time, there is a connection – and you have a feeling that is indescribable. Or maybe, as I love to see my grandson Essey come running coming from across the room and throwing his arms up for me to pick him up and he is thrilled to see PopPop. Let me tell you he is not as thrilled as PopPop is to see that! The smiles and the joy, that feeling that we get is how, I believe, God and all of heaven rejoices when someone finally recognizes Jesus as Lord and seeks His forgiveness. God longs for our right relationship with Him, so much so that He sent His Son to take your place and your punishment.

This morning, we have a very special event. In just a few minutes we will Baptize David Allen Vickers, son of Jay and Ashley – who we will dedicate to our Lord, with his parents and godparents, Wendy and Jim, making special promises on his behalf. We get to witness these promises and we will witness the work of the Holy Spirit bringing new life to this young man – eternal life. What better day to do this than on Easter Sunday, the day that signifies eternal life for all of the believers and followers of Jesus! We will, as a part of the baptism, renew our own Baptism Vows, identifying the role the Holy Trinity plays in each of our lives.

Today, Resurrection Sunday, Easter Sunday, is the culmination of the total forgiveness of our sins, when we trust and turn to Jesus as our Redeemer, our Passover Lamb. This is a day that is filled with forgiveness, with love, with relationship, and with mercy. Mercy simply means “not getting what you deserve.” God's mercy is so powerful that it overcomes the huge debt that

Easter Sunday – The Day of Resurrection – March 27, 2016, Year C

mankind has rung up, and He pays the bill in our place. The Apostle Paul puts it so clearly for us in Romans 6:23, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Today, as we celebrate that gift – let us all give thanks for His sacrifice, His Resurrection and His promise to come again.