



**EASTER LIVING**  
**Matthew 28:1-15**

It is obvious as we open our lesson today from Matthew's gospel – it was death and not resurrection that filled the hearts and minds of the disciples – the women and the Roman guards. After the day of Sabbath – they were going to prepare the body for burial – not looking for a risen Lord.

Yes, there had been a hasty burial on Friday in order to conform to Sabbath customs – followed by a long Sabbath wait. We know from all four gospels – fear – grief – broken hearts – and shattered dreams consumed them all.

If the sun was shining and a new day was dawning – it was not apparent in their souls and spirits. They did not yet know that day known as Black Friday would eventually be known as Good Friday. It is safe to say these faithful women were not singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” – or “He Lives – He Lives.” The “Hallelujah Chorus” was not upon their lips or resounding from their hearts. For me personally – this is why I know the Easter story is real and believable.

It says to me that the faith of those early believers did not come easily or without pain – but it did come. The reluctance to accept the truth and to experience it “might not be exemplary – but it is instructive to us some 2,000 years later.”<sup>1</sup> The resurrection is a whole lot easier to believe on paper and in theory than it is to “plop” – and plant – this truth right smack into the middle of our lives.

The resurrection is as challenging a message there is to human existence. It is a whole lot easier to live life as a victim – than it is to claim the victory that God wants to make available to humanity.

Palm Sunday is my favorite Sunday – but Easter is the most important. Easter is the reason why our faith community – the church – exists. We are the body of Christ (living) at work in the world – till his glorious return.

As we continue in our lesson today we learn that the stone was rolled away – the body is gone – and angels appear upon the scene. To say they were surprised would be an understatement. They were frightened to the core of their existence.

In **verse 2** the earthquake is our first hint that something new and exciting is about to break open. There will be a new day and pattern for human existence. It is as

though the whole world is being reshaped. I can almost see them hanging on as the earthquake shakes and rattles the terrain when the Angel Gabriel appears on the scene. The angel sits on the stone that had covered the tomb's entrance – which the Roman soldiers are guarding.

I find it very interesting in **verse 2**, where it shares the “Angel sat down” – or “sat on it” – the stone. Angels don't sit down much. As messengers of God – they are always active in their work for God. The Angel sat down to demonstrate that the cosmic struggle with sin and death is over. Hate – violence – and crucifixion had their day – but now God has opened a whole era for us in which to live to his glory and honor.

The Angel sat down on the stone to remind us that it is now a **worthless stone**. This stone ordered by the authorities cannot separate us from God.

All the power of the Roman Empire and its military might was no match for our great God – who created the stones and mountains in the first place.

The gifted writer Max Lucado shares he believes there is a kind of gallery in heaven. There we will see a sampling of items that tell the story of the human/divine encounter. There is Eve's apple and Noah's ark. We can see Gideon's fleece and David's slingshot and items like that. Then there is the stone, or boulder.<sup>2</sup> You can almost see The Angel smiling and laughing at Satan and his demons thinking this could detour God's plan of salvation. Years later St. Paul would write, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone” or foundational stone.

The Angel sat on the stone – not to let Jesus out – but to let the women and others in to see that death had been defeated. The Angel sat down to confirm Jesus' last words “**It is finished.**” However, our response to the resurrection is just beginning.

Gratefully, two women experience the empty tomb and are led to become witnesses of the resurrection. The response of Mary Magdalene began slowly – but it began. They respond to the angel's voice and fall down at the pierced feet of Jesus and worship him. They knew there was a greater stone – a solid rock to stand on.

The United Methodist Bishop, Ken Goodson, tells the story of a famous painting of the crucifixion which was on display in a downtown store window in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, during Holy Week. He said the blood dripping from the crown of thorns was so real you wanted to reach out and wipe it away.

One day a businessman stopped to look at it on his way to the office. A newspaper boy, selling his morning papers, joined him at the store window. After awhile, the man turned to walk away, shaking his head and muttering to himself: “What a pity. What a shame.” The newspaper boy shouted after him: “Hey, Mister! Don't you know? Haven't you heard? He ain't dead anymore. He's alive! He's alive!”

What he thought was the end, wasn't. The young lad was right. It was only the beginning – the doorway to eternal life.

Yes, because Jesus came back from the grave – we can make a comeback as well. God will ultimately right the wrong. **Truth crushed to the earth will rise again.**

The German theologian Helmut Thielike is right when he shared “The day we begin to believe in the resurrection – is the day the universe changes. If Jesus lives and rules, then I am no longer without hope. When I know that my Redeemer liveth – then I know my loved ones have not passed away – but have passed on to him.”

The little prefix ‘re’ has great significance to us. Think about the words restore – redeem – return – renew – rebirth. The word re-surrection. It is the power of the resurrection that frees us from a tomb of limitations that life places before us. Easter living changes that – Easter living in a Good Friday world.

Like Mary and the disciples, I know there are times when it seems like there are **two outs and none on** – in the bottom of the ninth. Yes, there are times when it seems like there are two seconds on the clock – and we need a **three-pointer** to win. There are those times when it seems like when we hear the whistle for the two minute warning – we are losing by six. **Yes, there are moments when all seems lost.**

However, an Angel told a young Jewish teenager named Mary as he explained her role in the entrance of our Lord at Bethlehem – “**Nothing is impossible with God.**” Miracles, comebacks, reversals of defeat are just a part of his glorious game plan, nothing too BIG or small for God to handle.

Yes, our Lord has never ended any adventure “on the wrong side of the Red Sea, or on the wrong side of the cross.” As Tony Campolo likes to say, “I’ve been reading the Bible. And I’ve peeked to see how it ends. **Jesus wins!!!**”

Yes, there are some setbacks along the way. It happens. Why it happens will not be answered until, as Paul wrote, “we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully.” But there is a how to live until then. Look to the cross. Keep the faith! Run the race! Reach for the finish line!

That is why we have a ‘**living hope**’ – that is why “all things are possible with God.” We commit ourselves to Easter living because truth will always triumph over falsehood. Mighty empires have come and gone – but it is the church that is still singing and praying 2,000 years later.

The resurrection we celebrate this Easter Sunday is good news about God. The resurrection demonstrates that God has done everything there is to do about the problems of sin and death which entered the world through Adam and Eve. Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world. However, we must receive and open the gift that God in Christ has given us.

John Mansfield wrote a play entitled **"The Trial of Jesus."** He describes a scene when those in Jerusalem and beyond began to realize that Friday on Calvary was not the end of the story. A newer and finer chapter had begun. In the play – the wife of Pontius Pilate is deeply concerned over the crucifixion of Jesus. A Roman soldier – perhaps the Centurion himself – comes to report that Jesus' is missing. A very lively conversation begins between Mrs. Pilate and the roman soldier:

Mrs. Pilate: Do you believe his claim that he will conquer death?

**Roman Soldier: If a man believes anything up to the point of dying, he will find others believe it also.**

Mrs. Pilate: Do you believe it?

**Roman Soldier: He was a fine young man, my lady, not yet past middle age, and he was all alone, and he defied the Jews and the Romans; and when we were done with him he was a poor broken down thing; dead on a cross.**

Mrs. Pilate: But that's not what I asked you. Do you think he's dead?

**Roman Soldier: No, my lady, I do not. He truly was the Son of God.**

Mrs. Pilate: Then where is he?

**Roman Soldier: He is loose in the world, my lady, where neither Jew nor Roman can stop his truth!<sup>3</sup>**

So, the Risen Christ calls us to live - this side of Easter. Easter living, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we find that life is a feast to be celebrated and shared. Living this side of Easter, we discover that we always live in hope – because God has the last move and the last word. This is why we burn the midnight oil.

The eleven disciples – because of the power of the resurrection – were transformed from a defeated rag-time army to those who became bold witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection. Every one of them except John the beloved disciple were crucified, executed, or martyred for the faith. They died living – not running or hiding behind doors which was their first response.

A brave man named Mallory led an expedition of climbers attempting to conquer Mt. Everest. The expedition failed. Mallory tried again with a second group. Again it ended in failure.

He assembled a third expedition made up of the most experienced and able climbers he could find. But in spite of careful planning, the third expedition ended in disaster when an avalanche struck, killing Mallory and most of the climbers.

Later, when the few survivors returned home to England, they were invited to a banquet given as a tribute to both the deceased and surviving members of Mallory's group. When Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the survivors, was introduced, he first looked at the pictures of his fallen comrades hung around the dining hall. Then, Edmund turned his back to the audience to face a huge picture of Mt. Everest behind the head table. Tears welled up in his eyes as he addressed the mountain on behalf of Mallory and the others:

“I speak to you, Mt. Everest, in the name of all brave Men living and yet unborn. You defeated us once; you Defeated us twice; you defeated us three times. But Mt. Everest, we shall someday defeat you, because you cannot get any bigger and we can.”

That is the message of Easter. Death seemed to defeat the kingdom of God. However, death met its match which took away its power and sting. We can - through the resurrection – get bigger and bolder – death cannot.<sup>4</sup>

Years later, the Apostle Paul – who encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and began his journey of Easter living – would write as he faced the sword of Rome:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor thing present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Almost 70 years ago, the great preacher Dr. Fosdick wrote a famous sermon entitled **A GREAT YEAR FOR EASTER**. It is always a great year for Easter to make your commitment to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – or rededicate your life to His way – truth – and life. A response is required.

St. Augustine was right when he wrote, “Every Christian's life should be a resounding message of Easter – a Hallelujah from head to toe.”

Why don't you sit with the Angel for a moment - at the rolled away stone - and realize what can be rolled away in your life today!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz  
April 4, 2010 – Easter Sunday – 10:30 a.m. service  
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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, **LUKE, The NIV Application Commentary**, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, page 609.

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, **HE STILL MOVES STONES**, Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1993, page 202.

<sup>3</sup> I am unable to document the source of this material as of this writing, beyond what I have.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to my colleague Dr. William Schwein of Indiana for this marvelous illustration.