

Sermon for Sunday, April 10, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri, 63105

"THE ANSWER TO LIFE THAT COMES FROM THE GRAVE"
St. Luke 24:1-12

Text: "...and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise.'" --St. Luke 24:5-7

A good many years ago, off the coast of Provincetown, a submarine sank. As soon as news of the disaster was received, divers were sent out and dropped down to the hull of the vessel resting on the bottom of the ocean. The divers walked about on the hull of the sunken ship, trying to determine if there were any signs of life aboard the submarine. At last they heard a gentle tapping. Listening intently, they recognized the dots and dashes of the Morse code. The words they heard were this: "Is there any hope?" Is not this the agonizing question that comes from every human heart? When trouble and pain grip our lives, when sorrow overwhelms us at the death of a loved one, when we ourselves stand at last trembling on the brink of death--then it is we cry out in fearful uncertainty, "Is there any hope?"

To life's profound question asking if there is hope, an answer comes from the grave--it is the grave of Jesus and the answer is Easter. As the angel said on that first Easter, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen."

The first thing I would like to call to our attention this morning is the fact of the grave of Jesus. In Jerusalem they have uncovered a beautiful garden area in which is located a tomb. Nearby is a hill, the side of which looks amazingly like a skull. Today it is a quiet and lovely place and one can imagine that first Easter morning when the two women came early to take care of the body of Jesus. The first time I stood in that lovely place and remembered Jesus, I was overcome with emotion. Yet, the incredible fact is that Jesus came to this earth and was crucified by us men. There in a garden tomb they laid him. As one stands today in that beautiful place, it is hard not to wonder "why?"

Well, the answer is simple enough. The answer is because someone has to pay for our sins, yours and mine. The answer is because that someone was Jesus. It was necessary for him to die to pay the price of our sins. The one overwhelming feeling I had that day was, "O, how much God loved us." Whatever else Easter may mean to us, surely it must mean this: God's incredible love for you and me. On the wall of an insane asylum some unknown inmate wrote this verse:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
And every blade of grass a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God to man,
Would drain that ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky!

Yes, the very fact of the grave, the fact of that garden tomb, means above all else that God loves us; that he sent his son to die for our sins, yours and mine.

Does that stagger your mind? It does mine. I know what I am really like inside. I know what kinds of thoughts, what kinds of feelings, what kind of actions I am capable of. Yet, in spite of that, God loves me. A missionary working years ago in China

among the lepers tells of trying to teach them about God's love. One day he asked the question, "How do you know that the Lord loves you?" And the lepers responded, "Because of you." How do you know God loves you this morning? You have only to look at that garden tomb and you can reply, "Because of Jesus."

The second thing I would call to our attention on this Easter is the fact of the empty grave. In her play entitled, "King of Sorrows," Dorothy Sayers makes the centurian at the foot of Jesus' cross say, "You see, they have killed him at last--and here I stand...Son of God he called himself--and so I believe he was." Did you catch that fatal past tense, "So I believe he was"? But the fact of the empty tomb says not that he was, but that he is! "He is not here," said the angel, "he is risen." Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples after the resurrection? He said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the ages."

That's what we need, isn't it? We need a companion, a friend, who will go with us through all of life's difficult places; a presence to comfort us; someone who will stand beside us when life is at its worst. The Bible tells us that when Jesus lay in the tomb and the disciples were deprived of his presence, they became cowards, afraid to face life. The Bible tells us they hid out in some upper room for fear of the Jews. Yet, when they knew that Jesus was alive, when they knew that he was with them, they went out to the ends of the earth for him.

During the closing hours of the life of O. Henry, the writer, it is told that he became semiconscious. He cried out for his nurse and the young woman came hurrying into his room to the side of his bed. She asked what her patient wanted. O. Henry replied, "Bring me a candle." "Why, she asked, "do you want a candle, sir?" "Because," he replied, "I'm afraid to go home in the dark." Easter says that he who is the light of the world will also light our lives through this world. When the disciples knew that Jesus was alive and with them, they no longer were afraid. Stephen died at the hands of the Jews and cried out, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Peter went to Rome to be crucified with his head down; Paul went to his death by the sword; and according to tradition, almost all of the disciples perished violently. Yet, they were no longer afraid for Jesus was with them.

Surely Easter means this! We do not worship a dead God or a saviour of the past. No, we have a living Lord who goes with us. As the psalmist once put it, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Are you lonely this morning? Are there things in your life you don't want to face by yourself? Are there times when you feel isolated and cut off from others? All you need to do is to invite Jesus into your heart. He is a living Lord. The empty tomb says we have a companion, a friend, even to the end of the ages. Just recently I read in the papers about an invention that will permit a missile to be guided anywhere in the world. Enemy weapons cannot throw this invention off, it cannot be jammed, it is not susceptible to magnet forces, it never loses its way and unerringly it guides the missile to its destination. Not even storms and winds can disturb this little invention. The secret is a little gyro deep in the heart of the mechanism that is suspended in oil and set on jeweled points that are almost frictionless. No matter what is happening around the missile, it has inside of it a power that keeps it on course. In a far grander sense, the person who has the living Jesus in his heart has a wonderful guidance system. No matter what the enemy tries to do to us, no matter what storms of life beat about us or what adversities come, nothing can throw us off course when we have Jesus in our hearts. Yes, that's what the empty tomb means--it means we have a companion, a friend, to guide us through life and who will never leave us nor forsake us.

There is one final thing the empty tomb says to us. Perhaps it is the most important thing of all. The empty tomb says in the words of Jesus, "Because I live, you shall live also" (St. John 14:18). On Good Friday when they took the body of Jesus down from the cross, great sadness filled the hearts of his disciples. To them it seemed that the last great enemy, Death, had won. When the British General Arthur W. Wellington went to battle against Napoleon of France, there were no telephones, telegraphs or radios to give news of the battle. They had to send the message of events by mirrors reflecting in the sun across the ocean between Britain and France. Finally, one day the watchers in Britain saw the mirrors flashing the message, "Wellington defeated..." Suddenly, a fog rolled across the ocean and the rest of the message was lost in the fog. All night the people of Britain heard the news that Wellington was defeated. Sadness was all across the land. However, the next day the fog had cleared and the message in its entirety was sent again. It read, "Wellington defeated the enemy." Imagine the joy that could now fill the land, for instead of defeat, Britain had won the victory. On Good Friday the message seemed to be, "Jesus defeated..." But on Easter morning, the entire message came through "Jesus defeated the enemy." Yes, and because he lives, we shall live also.

A great deal of research is being done today in the area of death. A number of books have appeared reporting the experiences of people who have died clinically and were then resuscitated. They report an amazing similarity of experiences that have led some scientists to believe in the continuation of the human personality after death. But Christians do not believe in life after death because of such reports. No, we believe because Jesus passed through death and defeated it. As St. Paul once said, "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Yes, as Jesus put it, "Because I live, you shall live also."

The fact of the tomb means that God in Jesus has died for your sins and mine and they are paid for. Easter means that. And the fact of the empty tomb means that Jesus is alive, he is with us to the end of the ages; the fact of the empty tomb means that death is not the end for you or for me or for our loved ones. No, it means that we shall live eternally with God. A little girl whose home was near a cemetery had to follow a path through that cemetery every time her mother sent her to the store. However, she never seemed to entertain any fear, even when she had to walk through the cemetery at dusk. Someone asked her, "Aren't you afraid?" "No," she replied, "I'm not afraid, because my home is just beyond." If you have accepted God's forgiveness and if you have invited Jesus into your heart, you do not have to be afraid of the cemetery either, for our home is just beyond. As Jesus put it, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there you may be also."

In the beginning I told you the story of a submarine that went down off the coast of Provincetown. Trapped below many feet of water, the desperate men aboard that submarine tapped out a message, "Is there any hope?" The divers on the hull of the sunken vessel heard that message and tapped back a response, "Yes, there is hope." To you and me, standing looking out into the dark abyss of death, we raise that searching question, "Is there any hope?" The answer to life that comes from the grave is this: Yes, there is hope. There is hope in Jesus.

A friend of mine was for many years a missionary to Africa. He says that when a native is dying, the witch doctors place in his hand a bone which is his passport into the world beyond. He commented, "When we Christians pass through the grave we do not carry a bone. Instead we hold the hand of the living Lord." Are you holding his hand this morning?