

Sermon for Sunday, April 6, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"DID YOU MOVE THE STONE"
I Corinthians 15:1-19

Text: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men
most to be pitied." I Corinthians 15:19

Over in the Old Testament, Job asked a question that still faces men today. That question is this: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" What do you think about that question? Now there are some ways that we sometimes talk about immortality of a sort. For example, the pyramids of Egypt are in a sense a sort of immortal reminder of the Pharaohs that once lived. Or, again, men like Alexander the Great or Adolph Hitler have made for themselves a historical immortality for men will always recount their deeds for good or bad. In still another sense, a man like Plato can be thought of as living on in his disciples and those philosophers today who still adhere to his teachings.

But would you be satisfied with that sort of immortality? I don't know about you, but I'm not content to live on in my children, or in a monument, or even in the history books. No, what I would really like to do is keep on living as me. Is that true for you? Well, if we both want that, is there any chance that it happens? Are you and I just passing incidents in a long line of other incidents stretching backwards and forwards into time? As a popular song puts it, "Is that all there is?" Are we just flames that burn brightly for a moment and then are blown out by a puff of wind from Father Time? Or, is there something eternal about you and me--something that lasts beyond the grave and endures for all eternity? It is about those questions that I wish to speak this morning.

Is there such a thing as human immortality? Has anyone ever come back from the other side of the grave to tell us beyond death there is life? Well, we have had a number of books lately about so-called "near death experiences" in which some claims have been made, but we cannot be very sure about them. However, there is one indisputable event which occurred in which a man came back and said, "Because I live, you shall live also." That man was Jesus.

The empty grave of Jesus is one of the best established facts of ancient history. There is more proof that Jesus came back from the grave than there is that Napoleon fought at Waterloo. Dr. J. N. D. Anderson, a director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London made a speech at Harvard University some years ago in which he looked at the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus from the critical standpoint of an expert trial lawyer. He concluded from his objective study and analysis of the evidence that one is driven to the conclusion of the resurrection.

But if the fact of the resurrection is one of the best established events of ancient history, why do so many today deny the resurrection? I think there are two basic reasons. The first reason is that some people want man to be supreme. Man and his reason, his intelligence, his logic are put at the center of everything. He is in effect God. And the people who feel this way about reason and intellect don't want to admit to God for it dethrones man's mind as the measure of all things. That is basically an egotistical position. The second reason is because some people are living impure, immoral lives. If there is a God he stands in judgment on them. To accept a belief in God would be to accept condemnation to their life-styles and demand a change. Because they are not willing to change and do not wish to be condemned, they deny God. Therefore such people deny the resurrection.

But the fact is, the grave of Jesus was empty. Who moved the stone? You can say it never happened, but all the evidence says that it did. Let's call this fact confirmation. It is confirmation that Jesus rose from the grave. But if there is confirmation that Jesus rose, what did it mean? What was the significance of it? You see, the Christian faith has always held that resurrection of Jesus was central to what it believed. It lies at the center of Christian faith and is not some peripheral thing. Well, let's consider what the empty grave of Jesus means.

The Bible tells us that Jesus took our place on the cross and died in our place. Because of our sins, we were subject to penalty, to paying for them. But Jesus did that for us. He took our place. He substituted himself for us. Then the Bible says that if we will accept this free gift, God will forgive us. But let me ask you, what are we saved for if death is the end. What are we saved from, if the grave is final? So the cross represents our forgiveness, but the empty grave represents that we have eternal life. That's why you never see a crucifix in a Presbyterian Church. A crucifix is a cross with the figure of Jesus still nailed to it. But we believe in an empty cross. The crucifixion is only half of what God does for us. An empty cross not only tells us what God did for us and in paying for our sins, but the fact that it is empty tells us Jesus is alive from the dead and because he lives, we shall live also. Praise the Lord!

That's why St. Paul wrote that the resurrection lies at the heart of the New Testament message. He put it this way, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith in vain." That's plain enough, isn't it? Either Jesus rose from the dead and guaranteed our own resurrection, or everything we believe about him is foolishness. We can believe in the virgin birth, we can believe in the teachings of Jesus, we can believe he is the Son of God, and we can believe he died for our sins. But if he did not rise from the dead and thereby guarantee our own resurrection and immortality, it doesn't mean a thing. So, first, the empty tomb is confirmation that Jesus rose, and second, it is information that if he lives we shall live also.

Now, let me add a third ingredient. You can accept the confirmation of the empty tomb. You can believe the information of your own eternal life. Yet, with the confirmation and the information it will do you no good whatsoever without what I am going to call transformation. Now, why would I say that? It is very simple. Unless that confirmation and information works a transformation in your heart, it will not change your life. You see, it is not enough to be convinced intellectually by the confirmation and the information. What God is really interested in is the transformation of your life and mine.

Will facts change people? You may need the facts in order to change, but having the facts doesn't mean you will change. For example, what makes a good American? Most of us have the facts. He pays his taxes, he supports his government, he is law abiding, he votes in every election, he works hard and is a responsible citizen. But does knowing those facts make us a good American? Well, of course not. By the same token, having the confirmation of the empty tomb having the information that it means we have eternal life, do not mean we are living transformed lives.

Why are you here this morning? What does Easter mean to you? Does it mean you really believe that Jesus rose from the dead and his tomb is empty? Does that mean you are letting Jesus control your heart and will and that you are living a transformed life?

Perhaps there is something that we need to understand about Easter. Yes, it means Jesus rose from the grave. Yes, it means you and I have eternal life. But the real question is this: where are we going to spend eternity? Now, if a person really believe that we have eternal life because Jesus rose, shouldn't he ask himself where he will spend it?

Well, let me put that question to you. Since we have the confirmation of the empty tomb and the information that it means we have eternal life, where will you spend eternity? You see, that depends on transformation--whether or not you have let Jesus into your heart to transform your life and to make you into what God really wants you to be. That doesn't mean you earn eternal life in heaven with Jesus by being good, but it does mean that if you are not being transformed, if you are not doing the good things of God, then you haven't let Jesus have your heart.

Maybe you never thought of it this way before, but between us and Jesus is a great stone door--a door like the stone door at the grave of Jesus. Somebody has to move that stone. And only I can move it in my heart. Only you can move it in your heart. So, it's Easter, but have you moved the stone? Let me tell you a story about a young woman who moved the stone in her heart and let Jesus in. A famous choral director was working with a group of singers in a large church in preparation for Easter music. A beautiful young woman with an exquisite voice, the leading contralto of the choir, was asked to sing as a part of the program that matchless anthem, "I know that My Redeemer Liveth." She sang with great ability and with every note executed with mechanical perfection. Musically it was an outstanding performance. But the director was obviously disappointed. He addressed the young woman in a troubled voice, "My child, do you truly know for yourself that your Redeemer lives?" She was startled by the question and was obviously embarrassed as she mumbled some reply. But that question had gone straight to her heart. That night when she got ready for bed she knelt down and asked the living Jesus to become her personal Redeemer. She moved the stone and asked Jesus to come into her heart and transform her. The next night at rehearsal she sang again, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." As her voice filled the sanctuary with sound it was as though the very presence of God filled the place. The director came with tears in his eyes, "My dear, he said, "I do not know what has happened to you, but tonight we all know that your Redeemer lives."

Confirmation, information, transformation. When you and I move the stone in our hearts and let Jesus into transform us, our family will know, our friends will know, indeed, the whole world will know that our Redeemer lives. Yes, it is Easter--Jesus lives!--but have you moved the stone? Does he live in you?

You are invited to make your Sunday morning complete by attending Sunday School. All visitors and members are welcome. There are ten classes for adults and there is something for every age group at both 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. Come join us!