

Sermon for Sunday, April 19, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"JESUS AND THE SLIGHTLY USED GRAVE"

St. Mark 16:1-4

Text: "But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it." St. Mark 16:11

Have you ever wondered why Easter is such an important time for Christians? Why is it that year after year Christians flock to church on Easter in great numbers? Can it be explained because of spring or because of bonnets and new frocks? I really don't think so. Personally, I believe something far more profound, something far deeper is at work. For many it may be almost unconscious or only dimly perceived, but the fact is Easter deals with a question that deeply concerns every human being. It is the question of death and eternal life. Does life have any meaning or does death have the last word after all? Was the cross the final end of what we had hoped would be Word from God? Or does Easter tell us something we desperately want to know? Which has the answer, the cross and death, or a lightly used grave and life. Yes, which has the answer?

About the middle of the last century a Frenchman named Renan wrote a book about the life of Jesus. Many books have been written on that subject, but the unusual thing about Renan's book was that he did not believe in Jesus. He was an atheist. When he had brought the story along as far as the cross, he brought his book to a close with a single word, "Finis"--the end. Then, on the flyleaf after that fatal word, a picture of the crucifixion was printed. There was Jesus, hanging on the cross with drooping head and matted hair and pale, bloodstreaked face. Overhead the storm clouds had gathered in the sky and the foot of the cross was deserted for all his friends had forsaken him. Everything about the scene spelled defeat. Yes, "finis"--the end.

That's how the disciples of Jesus felt, too. As our text puts it, "But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it." Across their dreams and hopes the cross had written a cruel "finis." What had started out as a grand adventure had ended with a dead leader hanging upon a cross, his body limp and broken in defeat and death. Yes, the end.

Death did three things to the disciples. Let me share them with you. First of all they lost their faith. When they first met Jesus he had been very attractive to them. In the three years they followed him they were convinced he was who he was. Peter spoke for them all when he cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." They had listened to his teachings and seen his miracles. Surely he was the Messiah. But now, everything was changed. The forces of evil had overwhelmed Jesus and put him on a cross. In the face of such wickedness God had seemed so helpless, so powerless. Their faith in Jesus and even in God was shattered and broken.

Have you ever felt that way? I must confess there have been such times in my own life. A car out of control and loved ones dead on the highway--nacer out of control and a loved one wasting away in awful pain--the accidental discharge of a gun--a job lost--a loved one who no longer loves in return--and where is God when all of these dreadful things are happening? Is God powerless, helpless in the face of the dreadful things that happen to us? Yes, sometimes we feel our faith slipping away.

The second thing that happened to the disciples was that they lost their footing. Everyone builds his life on something and they had built their lives on Jesus. He had looked into their eyes and said simply, "follow me." And they had left everything. Whatever they had been building their lives on they just dropped it and walked off from it. But the cross had collapsed their foundation. Everything they had built life on was gone and they had no place to stand--they had lost their footing.

What are you building your life on their morning? Will it stand up? Are you building on your job--your family--on material security? But what if you lose those things--what will you stand on? I once visited a wealthy lady who was in the hospital. She had gone from doctor to doctor, from city to city, looking for a cure to her problems, but they could find nothing wrong. The truth was she had built her life on material things and on a few close people. But now, as the years moved on, her loved ones had either died or deserted her. She found her money couldn't buy her the love and companionship she desperately needed. "I've lost my footing," she said to me, "everything and everybody has failed me." As we grow older many of us are discovering at the end that we don't have much we can count on, much to stand on.

There was a thrid thing the cross did to write "finis" for the disciples. Worst of all they had lost a friend. Jesus had been the dearest and best friend they had ever had. When they had been lonely and afraid, he had come to them. When they were tempted and tested, he had been their strength. No matter what problem life brought, he could always handle it. No matter what deep feelings or needs they had, he always understood. Now, across that deep friendship, the cross had written a cruel and bloody "finis". How sad, how lonely they were.

People are lonely today. One of the most desperate problems people have is the problem of loneliness. Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist has written a book entitled, "Escape from Loneliness". He said about his book, "I wrote it because the emotional isolation of modern man has deeply impressed me." There is a certain isolation--a certain loneliness--in each of us. Few of us have a friend with whom we can share life, with whom we can share our deepest thoughts and feelings and know that we will be understood and loved.

Well, that is what life is like if the cross and death have the last word. As one of our poets has put it,

If Easter be not true,  
Then faith must mount on broken wing  
Then hope no more immortal spring;  
Then hope must lose her mighty urge;  
life prove a phantom, death a dirge--  
If Easter be not true.

If Easter be not true.  
'Twere foolishness the cross to bear;  
He died in vain who suffered there;  
What matter though we laugh or cry,  
Be good or evil, live or die,  
If Easter be not true? (Henry H. Barstow)

The French writer Renan ended his book with the word "finis" and the picture of the crucifixion. But while it was the end of Renan's book, it was not the end of God's book. You see, the Bible has another chapter. It begins this way, "Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold...an angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen...' Yes, not the end but the beginning and his grave was only slightly used. As some unknown writer has put it, "Lift up your heads, ye sorrowing ones, and be ye glad of heart. For Calvary and Easter morn were just three days apart!"

I think that's why we come to church on Easter. We want to hear it said that God has not lost control and that death doesn't have the last word. And we can trust that. We can trust it because Jesus alive in God's pledge, his down payment, his earnest money, his promise that as he raised Jesus, so shall we be raised. The cross is not the last word--a grave only slightly used is the last word.

Look what Easter did for the disciples. Let's look at faith, footing and friend in the light of Easter. They had lost their faith but now they went out into the world to tell people they could trust God. No matter what happened, or how bad things looked, they could trust God. In spite of the worst that life could do, God was still in control. Easter can give you a faith like that. In the bulletin this morning are the names of many loved ones who have died. To each of you who has buried a loved one, who has had life go wrong, who has suffered heartache or tragedy, I say to you: you can trust God. He is in control. Out of the worst, God always brings good.

The disciples has lost their footing. But on an Easter morning when they were drowning in a sea of despair, they found that their feet touched bottom and it was solid--it was sound--and they had something to stand on that would not fail them. Several years ago a faculty member of Wheaton College--the much loved Dr. Jane Wheeler--was discovered to have inoperable cancer. Let me share with you a part of the letter she wrote to the students and fellow faculty members before her death. "Please do not give a moment's grief to me," she wrote, "Think of me only happily, gaily, as I do of you...I do not say a cold goodbye, but rather a warm, 'till we meet again.' By God's power and grace...in the land of the blessed, (perhaps) I will be allowed to draw aside a curtain and greet you when you enter. With a heart full of love for every one of you." Jane Wheeler had something to stand on and when life did its worst, her footing held. As the hymn puts it, "On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand."

The disciples had lost a friend--or so they thought. But on Easter morning they discovered that Jesus was let loose in the world in a way they never even dreamed or imagined. With his presence in their hearts they went out to turn the world upside down. They were often alone, but never lonely; often threatened but never afraid; often persecuted, but never dismayed. No, they had a companion, a friend, who would never forsake them.

You can have that friend this morning. That's the promise of Easter. Not long ago I read the story of a man who had lost his wife, leaving him alone with their little daughter. The night after the sad funeral, as he was awkwardly trying to manage the tiny buttons of her pajamas, the electricity went off. There had been some failure at the power plant. The little child snuggled in her daddy's arms for a moment and then whispered, "It's awful dark, but I'm not afraid with you

here, Daddy." In the dark he laid his cheek, suddenly wet with tears, upon her hair and whispered back, "Yes, dear, it is darker than you could ever guess, but I'm not afraid either. My friend Jesus is here with me."

Yes, a faith to live by, a footing to stand on, a friend who will never leave you or forsake you. As he himself once put it, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you." The risen Jesus is my friend this morning. I want him to be your friend, too, if he isn't already. Is he your friend? If not, won't you ask him into your heart to be your friend? You see, the cross wasn't the end. Instead, a slightly used grave was just the beginning.