

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Really Living as if Jesus is Risen”**

**1 Corinthians 15:1 – 11  
Mark 16:1 – 8**

**April 5, 2015**

**Easter**

Well, I’m sure we’ve all heard the warning that, if something sounds too good to be true... it probably *isn’t* true. At one time or another we’ve no doubt all learned the hard way that, a “too good to be true” deal is probably a scam, a scheme, or some unscrupulous trick to fleece the gullible of their hard-earned cash.

So, when I receive an email from Mr. Sigmund Oompaloompa, of Kenya, informing me that I have a surprise inheritance of \$5 million bucks, just waiting for me in the First National Bank of Nairobi; I’m appropriately suspicious... especially when I discover that I have to pay a small processing fee in order to get the money!

When I find a telephone message on my voicemail from some tour company I’ve never heard of, telling me that I’ve won a two-week stay at a luxury resort in Florida somewhere... I delete the message before it’s even finished, assuming that there’s got to be some kind of catch that’ll end up costing me money at some point down the road.

Back in the days when I was still running five-kilometer footraces, if I crossed the finish line with a time that was two minutes faster than I’d ever run before... it probably meant that the course was short by several hundred meters; not that I’d miraculously become a much better runner overnight. And on, and on, it goes.

We live in an age of skepticism, doubt, and distrust... and we learn from an early age to question authoritative statements, and to discover for ourselves if something which claims to be true, really *is* true. And, as I said, that’s usually a very wise, and sensible, and appropriate approach to take. Because, we don’t want to be taken in; we don’t want to be played for fools; we don’t want to be a bunch of suckers, whose credulity allows us to believe things that simply aren’t true. When it comes to the things we believe, and the decisions we make, and the convictions which shape our lives... we want to make sure that our feet are on solid intellectual ground. Which is how it should be!

Which brings us to this morning: Easter Sunday. The most central, the most crucial, that most critical day in the entire Christian universe. And the central, crucial, critical proclamation of this day: that Jesus Christ is risen. All four gospels testify to this truth; and, in fact, Jesus’ rising from the dead is what called the gospels into existence in the first place; and it’s that empty-tomb Easter event which shapes and colors the entire gospel record from its beginning to its end. Hear, again, what the young man, or angel, said to Mary Magdalene and the other women on that first Easter morning, in our gospel lesson today from Mark:

*“Don't be alarmed,” he said. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”*

Now, at the end of the day, that statement by the angel, from the empty tomb; and then the subsequent interactions which the risen Jesus had with His disciples, is what Easter is all about, right? The conviction that, three days after His arrest, crucifixion, and death... Jesus was raised by the power of God Almighty; and that He walked out of His tomb, and back into the lives of His friends and followers. That's the proclamation that we make in this sanctuary this morning; and that's the same proclamation that the Christian community has been making for two thousand years... ever since the early morning hours of Easter number one.

Jesus Christ is risen! And, by saying that, I don't just mean that Jesus was “brought back to life;” as in, brought back to the same kind of life that He was living before He was nailed to the cross. The kind of life that you and I live which, if applied to the case of Jesus, would mean that, after a short reprieve He would have eventually died again, and been returned back into His tomb.

That's what would have been true of, say, Lazarus, in the Gospel of John. Lazarus also came walking out of his tomb, when Jesus raised him from the dead. But Lazarus was simply brought back to his normal, ordinary, mortal life. And, presumably, Lazarus one day died again. But that's not what we're talking about on Easter. No, when I say “Jesus Christ is risen,” and when the Christian community has said it for the past twenty centuries, what we *mean* is that Jesus has been *resurrected*... and that word, resurrection, has a very special meaning in the thought world of the New Testament: it means not just “brought back to life,” but completely transformed... completely re-created!

Resurrection refers to the new life, the glorified life, that God intends for all of His people. It is life that has overcome the power of death, and decay, and evil... and which is now able to have full and complete communion with God; it's what we mean by the familiar expression, “eternal life.” In the language of the New Testament, resurrection is part of God's “new creation,” which, so our Lord tells us, is the ultimate destiny of this world, and all of us who live in it.

So, when Jesus walked out of that tomb on Easter morning, He hadn't just been “brought back to life...” He'd been resurrected to a new and glorified life, which was no longer subject to death; and which was no longer subject to suffering; and which could no longer be beaten to a bloody pulp by the forces of sin and evil.

And after that resurrection, Jesus said to His friends and followers then... and He says to you and me this morning; *“This resurrected life is what awaits you! This is your destiny! If you will love me, and trust me, and follow me! You shall one day be... like... me!”*

That's what the original Christian disciples, the people who saw Jesus and spoke with Him after His resurrection... that's what the people who were *there* and experienced it all, came to believe about Jesus, and what His resurrection was all about. That was the original Christian proclamation... and it still is today, even after all these years.

When He walked out of His tomb, Jesus destroyed the power of death, and He made available to you and me the gift of new life; the blessing of eternal life; the promise of resurrection life; and all the hope, and peace, and joy, and meaning which come along with it. ***And which no power in this universe will ever be able to take away from us!***

That's God's gift to us... if we would just receive it; if we would only accept it; if we would simply give our hearts and souls to the gracious God who offers it. Now, I don't care who you are... that's good news! The power of death has been broken! The forces of sin and evil have been defeated! The seeds of new creation have been planted... and, one day, they'll grow into beautiful fruition.

And it's right about here that, sometimes, we start to hear that little voice saying, "*Whoa... that's just too good to be true! New life after death? Sin and evil done away with? A suffering-free life in God's kingdom? A bigger meaning to my life than just what's here and now? Come on, man. That's just wishful thinking.*"

I think we're all plagued by thoughts like these, at some time or other. I mean, as I mentioned before, we've been thoroughly conditioned to look at life this way... to regard with a certain suspicion any claim which appears to be massively in our interest. And, certainly, nothing could be *more* in our interest, than the story of Jesus' resurrection. So, as appealing as the Easter story is... sometimes we want to hedge our bets with it, a little bit. We wonder if maybe those guys, writing gospels way back in the first century, just made the whole thing up... to make themselves feel better about the difficulties of their life.

We all know people who've died; and none of them ever came back to life. Why should we believe that Jesus did? Is there some other explanation that would account for the extraordinary things that the first Christians believed about Jesus and His resurrection? Am I being irrational, if I believe the Easter story? Am I being unscientific, if I believe that, in some incredibly powerful way, Almighty God brought Jesus, alive and well, out of His tomb of death? Am I being childish, superstitious, sentimental... if I open my heart, and my mind, to this incredible message of hope, and accept the fact that, my God! It's really true!

If you've had questions like that, or thoughts like that... welcome to the club; you're not alone. Hey, even the disciples themselves at first had a hard time buying the truth of Jesus' resurrection... even after Jesus had been telling them about it for months ahead of time! The Easter narrative in the Gospel of Luke, which we didn't read today, tells us that, when the women returned to the upper room and shared the news of Jesus' resurrection with the disciples, "*they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*" It was only later, after they themselves had had their own life-changing experience of the resurrected Jesus, that they understood that the words of the women were anything *but* nonsense!

So, to sometimes question if the whole Easter story is really true, is simply a part of our ongoing faith journey. In fact, it's actually one of the ways in which we *grow* in our faith; because that doubt, those questions with which we struggle in order to make sure that we're not believing something that's "too good to be true," is one of the ways that we learn; and gain understanding; and arrive, when all is said and done, at a mature and settled faith.

But, if you *are* having doubts about the truth of the Easter story; if you're questioning whether it's intellectually okay to give your allegiance to the incredible proclamation of the earliest Christian disciples; if you're just not sure if you believe it... or not; consider this: It is beyond question that the earliest followers of Jesus, and the people who made up that first post-Easter church community... were absolutely, totally, and utterly convinced that Jesus had been resurrected. There was simply no dispute about this. They believed this completely. So completely, in fact, that many of them were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than say that they *didn't* believe it!

That very early Christian conviction about the resurrection of Jesus is expressed by Paul in our lesson this morning from First Corinthians. Paul put it this way:

*“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.*

*“Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”*

Now, that statement sums up what all Christians believed in the days following Jesus’ resurrection. And that belief is something that those Christians held... even when it cost them their lives. And that is the same belief that we Christians hold today. And then consider this:

It is hard, very hard, to account for the rise of the Christian church apart from the first disciples’ experience of the resurrected Jesus. In fact, according to no less an authority than the renowned New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright... it’s *impossible* to account for the rise of the church, apart from the resurrection of Jesus!

Understand, Jesus was not the first Jewish rabbi to go about gathering disciples and making messianic claims. There were plenty of others before Him; and every last one of them met the same fate that Jesus met: they were captured and killed by the Romans. And when they were captured and killed, their disciples fled, the movement was crushed, and nobody ever heard anything about them again. And, unless you’re a seminary student, or a New Testament scholar, or a serious history buff... you’ve never heard of them either. They exist today as obscure footnotes in big theology books that are read by a tiny handful of people. And that’s it.

Well, Jesus was caught and killed by the Romans; He was buried away in a tomb somewhere; just like all the others. And, what happened? The church happened! The gospel happened! The New Testament happened! *We* happened... along with every other believer who has put his or her faith in Jesus Christ!

Now, how do you explain that? How do you account for that? Well, for hundreds of years people have been trying to come up with a non-biblical answer to that question, which will make sense and stand up to critical scrutiny. You’ve probably come across some of those answers in various magazine articles, and TV specials.

Jesus wasn’t really dead, He was just badly injured; the women went to the wrong tomb; somebody stole the body of Jesus; the grieving disciples suffered from a mass hallucination; the disciples made up the story to further some first-century, palace-intrigue, power-grab; and the list goes on and on.

I don’t have time this morning to address all of these alternative explanations for how the church could have burst into existence on the heels of its founder’s execution. But I can tell you that none of the alternatives even come close to explaining, and I mean *really* explaining, the existence of the Christian community. But what *does* explain it, is what the disciples had been saying from the moment of the very first Easter: Jesus has risen from the dead! God’s kingdom really has come!

And that's the good news of Easter! Jesus is alive! He was alive back then, and He's still alive now... and He is with us every step of the way of *our* life, too! Hey, it may sound sometimes like it's too good to be true... but don't let that throw you. Because in this particular case... it really *is* true! And you are never more wise, never more intelligent, never more spiritually astute... than when you embrace that truth with the full wealth of conviction!

May that be our quest; today, tomorrow, and all the days of our life!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!