

Meeting the Master ... At the Break of Day

Sterling UMC
April 24, 2011
John 20:1-18

When I think about Easter, and that first Easter morning, I always think about what it would have been like to be there. What would have been like to be one of the disciples or one of the first friends and followers of Jesus Christ? What were the feelings and emotions that were going on within their hearts as the darkness of night began to give way to dawn on that first Easter morning.

Three days earlier they watched their best friend being nailed to a cross. They witnessed His pain as He cried out, "I thirst!" & "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? They listened as finally He bowed His head & said, "It is finished!" and "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." They watched as His body was taken from the cross and buried. All their hopes and dreams were buried with Him.

Friday and all day Saturday they mourned, until finally, on "the first day of the week, early in the morning, at the break of day," the scripture says, some of the women made their way along the path that led to His tomb, wondering who would roll away the stone for them. Mary Magdalene was one of those women. Can you imagine the devastation, the disillusionment, the disappointment they must have felt as they trudged their way to the garden tomb?

But when they arrived, they discovered that the stone had already been rolled away and his body is gone. In its place are two angels dressed in white who say to Mary Magdalene, "Woman, why are you crying?" Through her tears she replies, "They have taken my Lord and I don't know where they have put him."

Then suddenly she hears footsteps from behind. Turning her head she sees a man. Thinking it is the gardener, her heart leaps. Perhaps he knows where the Lord's body has been taken.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" He asks.

Ignoring the question she says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, please tell me where and I will give him a proper burial."

"Mary!" He speaks her name and as he does it is as if scales melt from her eyes and she recognizes him. It is Jesus! He is risen! He is alive! There in a quiet garden, at the break of day she meets the Master. And that meeting changes everything!

My friends, that is the good news of Easter. That is precisely what Easter is trying to teach us. That is what Jesus Christ taught throughout his earthly ministry. That is what he died for—and rose again to underscore. And that is what Mary Magdalene discovered when she met the Master at the break of day. Storms come, heartaches come, Good Fridays come. But they are always followed by Easter Sunday mornings!

You see Easter is all about change. God took the worst possible situation – the death of His Son – turned it around, used it for good and changed the world. Easter changed history. More than that it is still changing individual lives like me, like you, today.

This morning I want to suggest to you that Easter changes things in three important ways.

First it sets you free from the pain of your past. When we remember the good news of Easter we no longer need to fear the past.

Let me take you back to Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus first appeared after his resurrection. She loved him greatly. From her he had cast out seven demons. We don't know the nature of these demons, but popular tradition would lead us to believe that Mary Magdalene was a woman of questionable reputation. What we do know was that Jesus healed her mind, soul, and body. We also know that Mary Magdalene felt such an immense gratitude for what he had done in her life that his death was almost too much to bear.

She hurried to the tomb that Sunday morning to express her love through the last rites of anointing his lifeless body only to find an empty tomb. When he called out her name she fell to the ground and worshipped him. His resurrection was a confirmation that he was who he said he was. That he did have the power to forgive and to take away sin. Easter was a confirmation that indeed her sins and mistakes no longer an issue.

And friends Easter does the same for you and me. Does your past haunt you? Do you worry that people will find out what you are really like? Do you fear that they will discover what you did or said in the past? Do you fear that some of your past decisions will come back to haunt you? Do you fear that some of your past deeds will disqualify you from Heaven? Easter changes that!

When Jesus came back from the dead He proved that the sacrifice of His life was acceptable to God. His resurrection shows that the debt for sin has been paid. God's wrath has been satisfied. We are assured that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." And in the book of Isaiah our Lord says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow."

Maybe today you feel a little like Humpty Dumpty, "Nothing could put me back together again." You're wrong. God specializes in new beginnings. That's what Easter is all about. If you don't get anything else, get this. God does not want you walking around with a load of guilt, stuck in the past. That's what Easter is all about. He sent Jesus Christ to earth to die for all the dumb things you've done, all your stupid decisions, all the bad things – to pay for all my sin and yours so you don't have to pay for it and then to rise triumphantly demonstrating his ultimate victory.

Easter Changes our past, but it also changes our present. It reminds me that MY PRESENT PROBLEMS CAN BE MANAGED.

As I talk to people the number one complaint I hear from people today in northern Virginia is "My life is out of control." I hear it a thousand times. "I feel powerless to change the situation... I feel powerless to break a bad habit... I feel powerless to save a relationship... I feel powerless to get out of debt... I feel powerless to manage my time and my schedule." What you need is a power greater than yourself. You were never meant to live this life just on your own power. God wants to have a relationship with you.

Ephesians 1:20 *"How incredibly great is His power to help those who believe Him, the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead."* The same power that enabled Jesus to rise from death will help you rise above your problems. The same power that God used at resurrection time two thousand years ago can be used in your life right now. You don't know what the future holds. I don't either. I don't know what's going to happen next year, next month, next week. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow and neither do you. But it doesn't matter. Because even though it's out of my control, it's not out of God's. He will give me the power to face it. Philippians 4:13 *"I'm ready for anything through the strength of Christ who lives in me."*

Why does the resurrection matter? Because it changes my past, it changes my present,...

It Changes my future. Because of Easter MY FUTURE CAN BE SECURE.

One of the universal problems we've all got is death. Everybody dies. I'm going to die someday and so are you. Only a fool would go all through life unprepared for something he knows is inevitable. That doesn't make sense. Sometimes we get so busy in the here and now we don't stop to think about the future and what's going to come.

The fact is everybody has a deep internal longing to know, "What's going to happen? What's going to happen after I die?" It's obvious we're going to spend more time on that side of eternity than on this side. Here we only spend 60, 70, 80 maybe 90 years. This is just the first inch of the yardstick. This is preschool for what's going to happen in eternity.

But the resurrection of Jesus answers the most important question of life: "Is there life beyond the grave?" It proves that there is life beyond the grave. Jesus not only told us about this life, He provided the way for us to live beyond the grave in Heaven. This is a life-changing fact.

It changes the way we face our own mortality. For some, getting older is a time of despair. It is like the clock running down to the end of life and then there is NOTHING. However, for the person who places their confidence and trusts in Jesus, the experience is different. It's not a matter of winding down and fading away . . . it is a matter of trying to kick through the finish line. Why? Because of what is ahead. Paul said, "For me, to live is Christ, to die is gain."

The truth of the resurrection also changes the way we deal with the death of those we love. There is no spot quite as lonely as a gravesite. It is natural to grieve any time you lose someone you love. We are going to miss that person and that makes us sad.

However, Paul tells us that we should not grieve like the rest of people who “have no hope”. We know (because of the resurrection of Jesus) that the coffin and grave is not the end of the story. Those who have placed their trust in Christ will meet again. The believer does not say “Good-bye” they say, “See you later.”

That's the difference that Easter can make. That's why it matters. But understanding why Easter happened, why Christ rose from the dead and what a difference it made is not enough. You've got to do something about it. You've got to take some action steps. Understanding what I've just talked about is not enough to get you into heaven. You've got to accept it and act on it. You pray and say Jesus, I want to trust You, follow You, get to know You and have a relationship." That's how Easter changes your life.

All of us came today for many different reasons. Some of you came because it's the thing to do. It's Easter. Tradition. Find a church and go. Some you came out of habit. Others of you came maybe because a friend invited you, somebody who really cares about you. Some of you came because of an advertisement and saw something that attracted your attention. It doesn't matter why you think you came here. You're not here by accident. I think God brought you here. I think He brought you here so He could communicate to you, so He could get you to sit still for few minutes so He could say something to you.

I think this is what God wants to say to you today, "You matter to Me. I understand everything about your life. I know you. I want to have a relationship to you. I sent My Son to die for you. I want you to get to know Me."

Your background may be Catholic, or Presbyterian or Baptist or Muslim or Buddhist. I don't care what your background is. I'm not talking about religion. I'm talking about a relationship to Jesus Christ. That's what Easter is all about.

This morning imagine if we gathered here and there was no resurrection. What if Jesus hadn't risen from the grave? What if Good Friday was the end of the story? What if Mary Magdalene had not met the Master at the break of day? Then the church would be irrelevant. Then the church would have nothing to say to us to encourage us in this life. But what a difference a day makes! Easter changes everything! The tomb is empty. Jesus Christ is alive. He is risen as he said.

Get this! The same power that raised Jesus Christ back to life two thousand years ago is the power that's available to you to make changes in your life. If God has the power to raise the dead, raise a dead person, He can raise a dead marriage. He can raise a dead career. He can raise a dead dream. God can do anything. Easter gives us the power to start over. Jesus gives us the power to keep going. He gives us the power to change, to be different. The bottom line is, Easter is not about big musical productions. Big numbers, big crowds. Easter is really about personal, intimate, internal change in you and me. If you miss that you miss the whole purpose.

And so I ask you how do you respond? Will you go home as if this is just like any other ordinary Sunday, not letting the reality of the resurrection impact your life? Will you try to drown out the message of Easter with a lot of activity so you don't have to deal with the real issues that must be addressed?

You can cover your ears and make lots of noise, but the decision remains. You can wish you had never heard...but you have. You can wish that you could go on indifferently like you have before...but you can't. Easter brings you to a fork in the road of life. My friends, Jesus is alive and you must declare whether you are for him or against him. There is no middle ground. The door is open. Will you walk in, or walk away? That is a decision that only you can make. But there is one thing I can promise you. If you follow him, if you place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and give your life over to him you will never be the same. Because he lives you your past can be forgiven, you're present can be managed, and your future can be secured.

That is the message of Easter. That is the good news of the Christian faith. And that my friends, is news you can use, the most needed, relevant, life-changing news there is.