

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 (p. 933)

APRIL 1, 2018

JOHN 20:1-18 (p. 880)

BLAINE

EASTER SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

O Gracious Lord, thank you for the gift of Easter morning! And thank you for the overwhelming love behind it! Pour out your Spirit on us today, so that we might grasp this gift's Eternal Significance. Reach out and touch our hearts Lord, please, and cause us to reach out to others! We ask these things in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Amen!

“COMING HOME”

In many respects, Easter Morning is like coming home. Family members are often here, even if only for a visit. Snow birds are usually back, or very soon will be. Spring Vacations are over, for most. And folks who aren't always in church, are giving it a try. Easter Morning feels like coming home!

But how does one approach, coming home? There are different ways to do it, you know. What I mean is, your expectations have a lot to do with what you'll find when you get there. Think about it. What are you looking for? Who are you looking for? What do you expect to see? How do you approach Easter Morning? For that matter, how does one approach an Easter Egg? I mean if you hold onto it too tightly, you will most likely crush it! On the other hand, if you hold onto it too loosely, if it just sits there in the palm of your hand, you could easily drop it! Precious things, like faith, can easily slip away, right out of your hands if you are not careful! So, how do you approach the Garden Tomb?

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, John tells us, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found that it was empty! This was Sunday, the first day of the week. The stone covering the entrance—a bolder really, roughly four to six-feet in diameter—which would have been rolled downhill, in a trough cut out of the rock—has been rolled away! We know from Matthew’s version that this tomb was guarded by a contingent of Roman soldiers and “Officially Sealed” by the Roman Governor! And we know from First Century Historians that that squad of soldiers was charged, under penalty of death, to be super vigilant! And that that seal was made out of wax, with a string or cord from Pilate himself, embedded in it! Yet somehow it has been rolled away!

Mary approached bringing spices, to anoint the body of close friend. She wasn’t allowed to do this immediately following the Crucifixion. You see, between sundown on Friday, and sundown on Saturday, it’s the Sabbath, a day kept Holy for the Lord! And she certainly wasn’t about to go do it in the middle of the night, after sundown! What with all those soldiers standing there! That would be absurd! So early in the morning, on the day after the Sabbath, in her grief, Mary heads out to fulfill a religious obligation, a duty to a dear friend.

And for some, that’s exactly what this whole Easter thing is all about. We are just performing a religious duty here! We are simply observing a ritual! That’s the expectation! Folks head out, week after week, early on Sunday morning, and go through the obligatory motions!

And for some, the church feels like an empty tomb, too! It's dark, and gloomy, and quiet. Or the people there are dark, and gloomy, and quiet. It seems dead! Devoid of life! Like a, tomb, really! Which ought to make the rest of us stop and think! Are we just bringing spices when we come? Are we simply honoring those who have gone before us, those who are no longer here? Are we fulfilling an obligation of some kind, only to then head back out, to life as it's always been?

Historians all agree! Both sources inside the Bible, and sources outside of it! The followers of Jesus have seen some amazing things! This man healed the sick and socialized with the unacceptable! He comforted those who were in distress and distressed those who were comfortable! Jesus hung out with both men and women—educated and not—business owners and slaves, even Roman soldiers! This has definitely been a great run!

This Jesus broke bread with sinners and tax collectors, on a regular basis. But also shared meals with the politically connected and the religious elite. He taught both young and old alike. And did so, with such vivid stories and word pictures, with parables and such! He made the truth come alive! He preached like there was no tomorrow, and even warned that one day there wouldn't be a tomorrow! And He did all this, right up to the time He got into all that trouble with the authorities!

So, is Easter, for you, just a commemoration of an extraordinary, three-year ministry? Is your faith more or less an extended retirement party for a fantastic preacher? Or for arguably, one of the greatest humanitarians who ever lived? Or for a great example of what it means to love others, to love those around you? What do you see when you peer into the empty tomb?

Jesus liked parties, right? He was always getting together with those He loved. I mean just a couple of days ago, on Thursday, He shared the Passover Feast with His closest friends! He said goodbye in that Upper Room, told those around Him what was going to happen next. He then took a stroll, with them, out under the stars, out through the city gates, over to the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer.

So, is this Worship thing simply about fellowship, time together? Are we saying goodbye? Is that why we keep coming back home, week after week, or year after year? Are we just here to share in prayer? Why do we keep walking past the empty tomb?

Do we come to learn from His example? Are we here searching for a mentor? Are we trying to pattern our lives after someone, anyone? And the One Crucified and buried is just as good as any! He didn't write any books, you know. He never traveled more than a hundred miles from the place where He was born. He wasn't a Priest, or Civil Dignitary, or a Military General even. Although He did stand toe-to-toe with the political authorities, with the movers and shakers of His time! He also freely pointed out the ills of society! He spoke truth to power, as they say! And even did so with the religious

authorities too!

Jesus wasn't a slacker. You certainly can't accuse Him of that! You can't accuse Him of being a crowd-pleaser either, or a coward, or of simply paying lip-service to God! You have to admire His chutzpa! He did try to reshape the world into what it was intended to be!

So, are you here to pay your respects? Are you here to process by the Tomb and weep in grief, as you remember the world's loss, your personal loss? Are you like Peter, who initially walked away shaking his head at what he saw, more confused than anything? Are you more like John, who at first started running to the Tomb, eager and excited! But then stopped dead in his tracks when he got there, afraid to venture further in, not sure of what you might see? Have you ever sprinted to the church, only to discover that Jesus was not there?

Maybe you can relate to most of the Disciples, who on Easter morning are off on the fringes somewhere, more or less cowering in fear? Are you also afraid of what those around you might think, if you truly share what's on your heart? Whose Easter story can you best relate to?

Not that long ago, large crowds welcomed Jesus, with open arms in fact, and shouts of "Hosanna" as He came to them as Messiah! But then, over time, something happened! What they expected to find, or what they wanted to find, or what they thought they ought to find, wasn't what Jesus turned out to be! So, rather than adjust to the truth, they

instead, backed off to the sidelines.

What kind of King allows Himself to be tortured, and beaten, and mocked? Why would “God in the Flesh” put up with such humiliation and degradation? Why allow them to make you wear a Crown of Thorns! In that agonizing death by Crucifixion, Jesus took upon Himself the full fury of God’s wrath on our behalf, for our sins! And yet, the vast majority of professed believers, on that first Easter morning, are just standing off in the distance, with only an occasional sideways glance at the empty tomb! So, what do you think changed? How did they go from there, to willingly facing persecution themselves, to spreading the Good News to the very ends of the known world!

Early in the morning, Mary left the protective wall of the darkened city and made her way to the burial site, only to discover that the stone had been removed! She immediately left and went running to find the others. Apparently, she too was confused.

She had watched as Jesus was Crucified, saw it with her own eyes. She looked on, as the Roman soldier pierced His side with a spear. And listened, as that soldier proclaimed that Jesus was dead. She saw them take his body down from the Cross. She knew that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped it in burial linen and laid Him in the Tomb! She most likely watched as they rolled that two to four-thousand-pound stone into place! And saw it sealed it with that “Official Governmental Seal”! But now the tomb is empty! So, Mary goes running to the other Disciples for help!

I'll bet they all were a bundle of emotions, don't you think? Most of the Disciples had given up their livelihoods, their jobs and their futures, in order to join this ministry team. They had seen multitudes fed with a couple of fish and few of loaves of bread. They had witnessed demons cast out of people, blind people given their sight, lame people enabled to walk again, and jump and shout! They witnessed Jesus walk on the water! And one of them, with Jesus' encouragement, even did it himself! They watched as Jesus calmed the wind and the waves with just a verbal command! They have seen extraordinary things! But now their leader is dead! The Romans, the greatest army the world has ever known, has shattered their Messianic dreams!

They had expectations, you know! They too were convinced how the Kingdom of God was supposed to unfold! But now, things are very different! I'll bet some of them were frustrated, don't you think, or angry even. I'll bet some of them were ready to walk away, or maybe even run! Two of them, in fact, decided to actually leave town. That very day they took off for the village of Emmaus! And the rest, the core of the group, the leadership really, well, they chose to lock themselves away, to hide out in the Upper Room!

I think it's fair to say that we have all had loss. And disappointments too, and un-met expectations. We've all had leaders, in the church even, or entire churches maybe, or loved ones in the church, who have let us down. We've all come to the place where we thought Jesus was, only to discover that He was gone!

I know there is a great temptation to just hole-up at home, in your room, or to pack up all your troubles and just leave. I imagine that's exactly how Mary felt, as well as the others, don't you? You know, as they stood there in the pre-dawn light, outside of the empty Tomb. So again, what changed?

You know the facts! You've heard the eyewitness reports! But is seeing the empty tomb enough for you? How about if you were to personally talk with two angels, two messengers from God, who were sitting inside of the Tomb? Matthew tells us that darkness covered the land from noon until three on the day Jesus was Crucified. He also says that the Curtain in the Great Temple, the one separating God from man, was torn in two, from top to bottom. He writes, that as Jesus died, there were earthquakes, and many tombs were opened, and the bodies of many Holy people were raised to life!

Would experiencing any of that, do it for you? What if you saw the strips of burial linen lying there, or the burial napkin that was around Jesus' head, folded up neatly, and set off by its self? What if you knew the old Hebrew custom about napkins. What if you were aware that whenever a servant set out dinner for his master, he would wait just out of sight until the master was finished eating. Only when he knew for sure that the master was done, would he start to clear the table. And the signal for this standard practice of etiquette, was that when the master was done, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers and his mouth, clean his beard, and then wad up his napkin, and toss it onto the table. That was the cue, to go ahead and clean up.

However, if the master folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, that meant something else entirely. A folded napkin told the servant, “I’m not finished yet. I’m coming back”. What if you were aware of this custom, like all of the Disciples would have been? Would seeing that folded napkin, in the Tomb, be enough?

Maybe? I think all of these things would have helped. And I think later, all of them would have jelled in your mind, and became clear. But most people are skeptics—including me. So, let’s be honest, seeing the empty tomb probably wouldn’t cause an absolute conviction of the Resurrection! No, that amazing miracle only comes by experiencing the Risen Lord!

John, if you recall, sprinted to the tomb. And when he finally looked inside, he immediately believed! So, he took off running to share the Good News. But Peter, the Rock, isn’t so sure. Luke even says that “he went away, wondering to himself what had happened”! And Mary, well, it appears as if she starts out in denial! “Who rolled the stone away? Where have they taken Him? What am I going to do with all of these spices?” But she stayed, anyway, didn’t she! And she started asking those tough questions that were stirring in her heart! You can call it whatever you want; tenacity, courage, hard headedness, stamina, determination, or faith! But the truth is she stayed, even though she was confused! And as a result, she had an encounter with the Risen Lord!

And those two Disciples, by-the-way, that I mentioned earlier, the two who were running

away to Emmaus, they encountered Jesus as well!

They didn't recognize Him at first, traveling down the road. But after breaking bread with Him, after sitting in His Presence, they too came to understand. And they too immediately started sharing the Good News! And those fear-filled Disciples, the ones hiding out in the Upper Room, they also had a personal encounter with the Risen Lord, later that same night in fact! And then again, a week later, another, so that the Doubter, Thomas, might experience the same thing!

In fact, in the very next chapter of John we learn that the Risen Lord appeared at the Sea of Tiberius and had breakfast on the shore with some of the Believers. And He appeared again and again and again, Luke tells us in Acts, over a forty-day period of time, “offering many convincing proofs that He was alive!”

“He appeared to over five hundred believers at the same time,” Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, “many of whom are still around to validate that claim!” And on the road to Damascus, the Risen Lord appeared to Paul himself, who then went from being a persecutor of Christians, to one of the most powerful witnesses of all time! There is a pattern here, isn’t there, a definite theme! It has to do with hanging around and seeing Jesus for yourself!

That reminds me. Remember when God was sending Moses to free the people from bondage in Egypt, and Moses asked Him, “who should I say sent me? What’s your name?” God answered him, “Tell them I AM”! Notice God doesn’t say, “I WAS”! This

isn't some kind of history lesson, or a remembrance of yesterday.

And He doesn't say "I WILL BE", as if it is only about the future. He says, "I AM"!

Present tense! ...I AM, right with you, right now. And I will be, always, even to the end of the age! That's what changed!

Each and every experience of our Risen Lord moves us that much closer to the truth, that much deeper in our faith! Which is why, when you think about it, we come back home, why we keep coming back to church. Worship, Prayer, Bible Study, are all intentional times when we might just get a glimpse of the Risen Lord! And the proof, apparently, is in the Presence! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We praise you Lord, as our God, as our loving Father, and as the Creator of all that is, and all that ever will be! We glorify your Holy name. We honor you with humble hearts, and thank you Lord, for loving so very much! Thank you, Father, for this glorious Easter morning! Thank you for bringing us home, here together, to worship you, and to learn of your will for our lives. And thank you Lord, even more, for that first Easter morning, when our Lord and Savior burst forth from the grave! Thank you, dear God, for conquering death, and for creating a way for our sins to be repaid! And thank you most of all for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ.

Father, we acknowledge that we are sinners. We know we've failed, and often fall short of your design for our lives. So, with this prayer, and with our silent prayers just now, we lay each of our burdens down before your altar of grace. We place our sins, our brokenness, and our failures before you, confident of your forgiveness, knowing that the blood of Jesus, the Risen Christ, covers them all. And we thank you Lord, for this great gift of sacrificial love that you paid on our behalf!

Father, you have heard our silent prayers, both our joys and our concerns. You have searched our minds and touched the longing places within our hearts. So please, out of the bounty of your love, grant to us now the blessings that we need. And please Father, smile upon our loved ones as well. We lift up before you.....Please shower your Grace on these precious folks. Please grant health and healing to their bodies, and peace upon their minds. And please grant them the gifts that they need most right now, especially your Presence. We ask these things in the Name of our Risen

Savior, Jesus Christ, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us saying...