

## *“Good News from a Graveyard!”*

**Matthew 28:1-10**

**First Peter 1:3-5**

**Acts 10:34-43**

**Easter Sunday**

**March 23, 2008**

The great adventure was over. One wonders, for good reason, if they had caught on to what it was really all about. Some were looking out for themselves and their own personal gain. Some had militaristic expectations, thinking that Jesus would set up a kingdom that would get the Romans off their back. Whatever their thinking, it had been quite a ride and now it was over. Cold, hard reality hit them smack in the face. (Like the day you get the pink slip saying your job is gone, or when the doctor gives you the bad news, or the call says the loved one is gone. It hits hard in the pit of the stomach.)

I wonder if it felt similar to what I would have felt if I had been one of those soldiers who get caught and taken captive. When I hear stories of such things, I think “Oh man, they’re dead meat now.” We know those people who were the early followers were terrorized. They went and hid behind locked doors. Rome had stomped down its mighty foot, and Jesus was dead. They had stood back in the crowd and secretly observed as the mobs called for his head. They had watched on that black Friday afternoon as the death sentence was imposed. They had snuck around to obtain his body and put him in his “final resting place.”

We are never given any information about what Saturday was like. The day after. Is it possible to imagine sitting in a chair, the coffee gone cold, the pop now room temperature, just staring off into space. Everything has gone numb. Many of you know what it feels like – the day after a loved one is buried. I haven’t experienced that since my Dad died 34 years ago, and the years dull the memory.

But this is even beyond anything we have ever known. Because this was the one whom they believed to be the long-awaited Messiah. The one promised by God for generations to be the redeemer of His people. And their hopes and dreams had been crushed under the heel of Rome, like one would step on a bug.

Not only was Jesus gone, but hope was gone. The next day was their Sabbath Day. I wonder if even one of them went to the Temple, or worshipped in their hiding places that day? How do you sing the Lord’s praises on a day like that?

Certainly, in this state of mind, any thoughts of things he had said about being raised in three days were the furthest thing from their minds. The day after the Sabbath the two women at least pulled it together enough to go to the tomb and care for his body. They were going with spices to care for the body as was proper.

Then it happened. One version says an angel spoke to the women. Another version says that Jesus himself, whom one of the women thought was just a gardener, spoke her name. appeared to her. And those women ran back to tell the disciples, still hiding in the living death of fear and depression, that Jesus was alive! And then some of the men of the group

raced as fast as their legs would carry them to the tomb, to find it empty. Good news from a graveyard!

Can there be any good news from a graveyard? I've been to several of those. You've been there too. There isn't ANY news from a graveyard, let alone good news. Would you believe this good news?!?!?

Remember that old television show of many years ago called "Get Smart?" Maxwell Smart was known in his show for saying, "would you believe?" Secret Agent Smart would come up against some bad guy from whom he had to escape. He would try to intimidate his foe by scaring him off with some hopelessly transparent exaggeration:

-right now there are 50 armed police officers surrounding this place.

-ok, try 20 police and an angry dog.

-would you believe a troop of Girl Scouts selling cookies?

In a cartoon, a little boy is eating with his parents. He looks up at them and says, "Would you believe an angel warned me in a dream to avoid brussel sprouts?"

Would you believe there was good news from this graveyard? That is the invitation God has extended to humankind ever since that day and what He invites you to believe today! For about 1980 years people have been gathering on this day to remember and celebrate the great discovery made first by those women on that wonderful morning.

This isn't just something that happened once upon a time, for one person, in a far away place. This resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an awesome display of God's mighty power. It was the same power at work when God created the world in the first place. The power God used when He set free the Israelites from slavery. The power at work when He became a human child. The power at work when He allowed Himself to be nailed on the cross, suffered, bled and died to break the power of sin and death. The power that broke out in its most awesome display on the Resurrection morning.

It is the same power that He turns loose in our lives today when He breaks the power of death over us and gives us life that is eternal and never ends.

Death is a power, more than an event. Death takes on many forms. Death disguises itself and tries to take over our lives. Death takes on the form of everything that is opposite of the good that God wants for us.

Death is a broken relationship.

Death is a selfish attitude.

Death is the loss of hope.

Death is giving in to defeat.

Death is surrendering to the things that try to oppose us and hold us down.

Death is hatred.

Death is self-centeredness.

Death is when we see ourselves as less than a wonderful creation of God, and begin to act that out by doing all kinds of destructive things to ourselves, our own lives, the people around us. We see the evidence of this all around us everyday.

Death will try to defeat you and break you and hold you down.

Death will snuff and strangle the very life out of you. God's desire is for us to never die, but at our own hand we will die a thousand deaths.

Finally, and worst of all, we die spiritually when we reject the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ.

A couple of good friends of mine, Gary and Galen, were caught up letting death try to destroy them through alcohol. Gary lost his wife and family and home before he finally came to his senses. He and Liz started coming to church and finally found the life of God breathed back into them.

It took Galen down even further. He lost absolutely everything but the clothes on his back. But in the Living Christ he found life again. God raised him from the dead. He faithfully attended church, his whole personality turned around, he slowly began rebuilding his life.

We could swap stories all morning about how death tries to destroy. The good news from the graveyard is that God breaks the power of sin and death. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the hope of eternal life for us all.

Eddie Fox, at one time the general secretary of World Methodist Evangelism, tells of an experience after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist governments of Eastern Europe. He observed a sign placed in the churchyard of a little Methodist Church in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The sign went up the very first day after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It read: "The Lamb Wins." Fox notes: "Not the bear, not the lion, not the tiger. But the Lamb. The Lamb Wins."

(Homiletics, January 1996)

Can a church that is faltering grow again? Sure.

Can a troubled marriage be happy again? You bet.

Can a person who has always been told they are worthless ever succeed? Oh yes.

When I have blown it and messed up my life, can I ever be forgiven? That's why Jesus suffered, and died, and rose again.

When everyone is against me, is there anything worth living for? Believe it.

When the loneliness is almost unbearable, can I ever find a way to go on?

The Living Christ says "I am the way."

And that is Resurrection faith !

The earliest Christians were simply people who had an encounter with Jesus, found their lives changed by the encounter, and followed Him. Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book called "The Man from Nazareth: writes:

"The discipleship of the first Christians was devotion to a person. 'Follow me,' he said. It was not a formal creed or an ethical code, but a Man they believed in. He was to them that most powerful force in human experience, an incarnation embodying and

revealing in his own person the truths he presented. When they thought of God it was more and more in terms of Jesus. When they thought of goodness, it meant likeness to Him. So He became to them not only Teacher but Lord and Savior, revealer of the divine, ideal of the human, who having died for their sakes still lived, and to whom, in God's good time, the future belonged.'

A little girl was pounding away on her father's computer. She told him she was writing a story. "What's it about?" father asked. "I don't know," she replied. "I can't read." People want to know what life is about, what's the purpose of it all, is it worth the struggle? You don't know until you hear the good news from the graveyard.

The death of hope. That's what you have with no resurrection. My mom told me many years ago, in a particularly difficult time, that the only place where there are no problems is in the graveyard. That thought cures you of whining real fast. But the Apostle Paul says that if in fact there is no resurrection, then we are of all men most miserable. Where there is no hope there is no life. Where life is hardest around the globe is where you will find the Christian church exploding - because people are desperate for hope. We all survive on hope. You take away hope and you pull the plug on life itself.

Colossians 3:1-4 says:

"You have been raised to life with Christ, so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven where Christ sits on his throne at the right side of God. Keep your minds fixed on things there, not on things here on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. **Your real life is Christ** and when He appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory."