

April 5, 2015
Holy Week 2015
Why is Easter Important?
Matthew 28:1-10

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not a single one should be wasted. Have you ever stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed everything, Holy Week! On the Christian calendar, Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. It recalls the expectations of Palm Sunday, the rejection of Maundy Thursday, the devastation of Good Friday and the final victory of Easter morning.

This is Easter and on this day we remember the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. It had been a long week for the Master. One week earlier he was the focal point of the crowd. Welcomed like a conquering hero, they cheered for him, but the cheering didn't last long. His cleansing of the temple and his teachings on the Kingdom of God had only upset his enemies. They arranged his arrest and orchestrated his death. By Friday, the cheers of Palm Sunday had been replaced by the tears of Good Friday. On Saturday, his believers were emotionally spent, but this is Sunday. It was the day everything changed. Miraculously, Jesus returned from the dead. Some churches call this Resurrection Day; we call it Easter. Let us hear Matthew's version of that day. Let me call this message *Why is Easter Important?*

Matthew 28:1-10 ¹After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ²There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." ⁸So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

When we last left Jesus, things looked bad! Everyone knows what happened. Jesus, the son of God, the long awaited Messiah, died. Hanging between two thieves, he was executed on a horrible Friday afternoon. His lifeless body was taken down from that

instrument of death and everyone cried. Broken-hearted, his loved ones placed him in an unused tomb. Those who had the unpleasant job must have turned to take their last look. In my position in life, I have taken that last look many times. It is amazing how quickly a body turns into a corpse. With full respect, they placed Jesus's corpse in the tomb and rolled the stone into position. It had to be tight so the smell of decay wouldn't be released. Covering all the details, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate to have a guard placed in front of the entrance of the tomb so the body couldn't be stolen. There was nothing more to do. After all, Jesus was dead! However, this is Easter morning, and we know it isn't over until God says it is over!

According to our reading for today, it is dawn on the first day of the week. That means it is early on Sunday. Jesus was executed on a Friday. Two women, both by the name of Mary, appear at the tomb of Jesus. They were preparing to do what the law prohibited them to do on the Sabbath, treat the body of the dead. They went early for two reasons. First, they couldn't sleep; Jesus's death was hard to accept. Second, they went early because they wanted to complete the horrible task. The only question haunting them was how to roll away that massive stone. There was no need to fear. According to the text, there was a great earthquake. God, himself, had rolled away the stone, exposing to the world the truth - Jesus had returned from the dead. I do not know how that happened because I can't explain a miracle. However, I do know that miracle changed everything.

To those of us of faith, Easter is more than the celebration of spring. It is the very heart of our faith. Historically, Easter is the oldest festival on the Christian calendar. In the Greek Orthodox tradition many tell jokes on Easter because, God, himself, played a joke on Satan. It looked like Satan had won, Jesus was dead! The adversary must have celebrated on that silent Saturday. Then, Easter Sunday came. Jesus returned from the dead. I Corinthians 15:14 says, *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."* Yet, the resurrection is not just some theological point reserved for some academic classroom. The resurrection is practical. Today, I want to look at the practical side of the resurrection. I am going to do that by answering the question, why is Easter important? That single question has three answers. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Easter Defines our Faith!

First, Easter is important because it defines our faith! Today, we celebrate with Christians around the world the resurrection of Jesus. The church stands alone. The scientific world has dismissed the resurrection as nonsense. The secular world has replaced the resurrection with community service and works righteousness (we know we cannot earn our salvation). Other world religions have simply denied it. We are the only ones who know of the significance of the resurrection. It is the cornerstone of our faith and the only thing that really matters. One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 10:9. It says, *"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Many consider that verse

to be the first creed in the church. It is a timeless truth. Your belief in the resurrection is not just important, it is indispensable. It is the one thing that separates us from everyone else. The resurrection is the only thing that really matters in the church.

Several years ago, I preached a sermon series called *Christianity's Family Tree*. It was originally developed by Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. We looked at all the branches of our family tree. We examined all the various traditions and customs found in various churches. Human beings have a way of looking at differences; God only sees what we have in common. Just think about it for a moment. Within the body of the church, we baptize differently. We experience the Eucharist differently. Some churches have a call system and some churches have an appointment system. Some churches emphasize the Holy Spirit, and some churches promote missions. Some observe the various liturgical seasons and some don't. Some churches embrace icons, some statues, and some nothing. I will be completely honest with you. None of those differences bother me. I have the ability to embrace them all. The only thing that really matters to me is the resurrection. It is the one thing we must have in common. Your belief in the resurrection is not optional, it is indispensable. It is the one thing that separates us, Christians, from the rest of the world. We worship a risen savior! Other world religions just remember a dead founder. Easter is important because we are embracing the resurrection, the defining moment of our faith. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Easter Demonstrates God's Power!

Second, Easter is important because it demonstrates God's power! One of the pivotal lines in the Easter passage is verse two. That verse tells us there was a violent earthquake. It is only found in this (Matthew's) account of the resurrection, but it means so much. The earthquake does two things. First, the earthquake rolled away the stone that covered the entrance of the tomb. Second, the earthquake underscores the power of God. There are many who ignore the power of God. It is painfully obvious. We live in incredibly arrogant times. Consider two Bible verses with me. The first is Colossians 1:16. It says, "*For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created by God and for God.*" The second is Psalm 115:3. It says, "*Our God is in heaven; he does what he pleases.*" Think about those words. God created this world for himself; we act like God created this world for us!

We live in incredibly arrogant times. We forget the power of God and try to hold God accountable to our standards. Do you know of anyone who tries to make God accountable to them? They wonder why God doesn't do something about world hunger. They ask why so many people in our world feel unloved. They wonder why there are so many diseases. They wonder why God didn't give them a perfect body. They wonder why their families are so messed up. Do you know of anyone who is trying to get God to live up to their standards? The answer to those questions is very simple. The answer to those questions is, because God is God. In comparison to God, we are nothing.

In comparison to God, you are nothing. The real question is not, why doesn't God do something? The real question is, why don't *we* do something? Why don't we do something about world hunger? Why don't we start loving the unlovable? Why don't we spend more money on medical research and education and less on our hobbies? Why don't we start living healthier lives? Why don't we start taking some accountability for our broken relationships? Never forget the truth. We are accountable to God, and God is not accountable to us. Easter is important because it demonstrates God's power. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Easter Determines Eternity!

Third and finally, Easter is important because it determines our eternity! David Seamand's life has been dominated by missions. He was raised in a missionary's home and served sixteen years in the mission fields himself. I got to know him at Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. He once told of a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. Some of the friends of the former Muslim asked him, "Why have you become a Christian?" He answered, "Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly it forked. Next to the road were two men, one dead and the other alive. Which one would you ask for directions?" We serve a risen savior!

Several years ago, someone asked me, "Russ, what do you look forward to when you get to heaven?" The person was disappointed in my answer. They wanted me to say, singing in the eternal choir, or standing at the throne. The truth is, no one wants me in the choir, and I am too hyperactive to stand anywhere too long. This was my answer: What I look forward to when I get to heaven is being reunited with people who have passed. The twelfth chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us there is a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us at this moment. Some of those saints include some of the spiritual giants of the past. Some of the saints include some of the saints in our families. Some of the saints include some of the saints of this church. Some of the saints are personal friends. It is a great cloud of witnesses. Can I ask you a question on this Easter morning? Who are you going to look for when you get to heaven? Easter is important because it determines our eternity. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Let me end with this old preaching story. A Sunday School teacher asked her class, "Why is Easter important?" One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, eats turkey and remembers the pilgrims." "No, that's not it," said the teacher. "I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you decorate an evergreen tree and pass out gifts." "Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher. Finally, a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, put in a tomb and was left for three days." "Ah, thank goodness somebody knows" the teacher thought to herself. But then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and wonders if Jesus will see his shadow. No one wants six more weeks of winter!"

Why is Easter important? Easter is important because it is on that day we remember the resurrection of our Lord and Savior. The resurrection is practical. It does three

things. First, the resurrection **defines our faith**. Without the resurrection, we are like everyone else. Our belief in the resurrection means we stand alone. We serve a risen savior! Second, the resurrection **demonstrates the power of God**. Never forget, we are accountable to God and not God to us. Third, the resurrection **determines our eternity**. Someday, we are going to heaven. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" May God bless you on this glorious Easter morning.