

“The Foundation of Our Faith”

a sermon by

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Text: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (I Corinthians 15: 20).

One of the more bizarre aspects of the Easter Season is that it has become in recent years a prime marketing time for religious skeptics. Almost without exception there is some spectacular claim in the secular culture each spring that seeks to challenge Christianity’s basic beliefs. Several years ago it was the publication of the *Da Vinci Code*, with its absurd notion that Jesus had married Mary Magdalene and that they later had a number of children who migrated to southern France and became part of the French Royal Family. Last year marked the appearance of the so called Gnostic Gospels – the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, which again argued for the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the notion that Judas had actually done Jesus a favor in betraying him by releasing him from the earthly body that had entrapped his spirit.

This year the hype was about a television program produced on the Discovery Channel, entitled “The Lost Tomb of Jesus.” The producer for this program was James Cameron, who also produced the blockbuster movie “Titanic.” According to the documentary a group of archaeologists in 1980 discovered a cave in the southern part of Jerusalem that contains the remains of Jesus’ body along with his mother Mary, his father Joseph, Mary Magdalene, and a son, Judah. In the last several weeks there has been a very strong outcry from archaeologists, including the head archaeologist of the Israeli Government, denying the validity of this claim. In 1980 they did not discover one tomb with these names on it, they discovered 90 tombs with these

names on. These names were some of the most common names in Jesus' time and the claim that this was somehow the tomb of Jesus was as far fetched as one could imagine.

I.

There is something at stake on Easter morning that should not be denied. There is a sense that there is something about this Sunday that distinguishes it from all other Sundays. I believe that every preacher realizes this in one way or another. The stakes could not be higher. If what we say today is not true, then what we say on every other Sunday will not make any real difference. On the other true on Easter, then perhaps any of the mistakes we make on any other Sunday will not be quite so bad.

The Apostle Paul understands this. He understands that if the notion that God has raised Christ from the dead cannot stand, then the Christian faith falls with it. In I Corinthians 15:12-20 he writes, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain"(I Corinthians 15: 14). In the passage from which I just read, Paul takes this argument a step farther. He argues that just as death has come through the first man, Adam, so now life comes from the second Adam, Christ. Moreover, Christ is the first fruits of those who will be raised. Paul then goes on to make two very critical claims. The first is that our future is connected to Christ. Even as he has been raised from the dead, so will we be raised. The second claim is that the resurrection of Christ leads to the total domination of the Kingdom of God. Every other worldly power will be destroyed. Paul concludes his argument at the place I want to begin. "The last enemy," he says, "to be destroyed is death."

II.

We are not a culture that likes to speak about death. Our focus is on youth and staying young. Americans spend billions of dollars each year on cosmetic surgery and countless other attempts to roll back the inevitable passage of time.

Any religion, however, that cannot speak to the issue of death is a religion that ultimately will not survive. George Kenan, who for a number of years was the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, once wrote that he did not believe that Communism could survive, because it could not give an answer to the question of death. Kenan observed that there was nothing more depressing than a Marxist funeral. There was simply nothing beyond death.

The same is true today with this radical view of Islam that is practiced by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. There is nothing more bankrupt in human culture than the notion of a "suicide bomber." Radical Islam is a culture of death that cannot give life, and because it cannot give life it is ultimately doomed.

Death, however, is not an academic subject. It is as real as anything can be. I was reminded of that in a very personal way two months ago, when my mother and her husband both died within three days of each other. My mother was 92 years old. Her husband was 98. They had both been in relatively good health. This past year they traveled to Australia and New Zealand. On that Monday in late January my brother called to tell me that mother's husband,

Les, had fallen in the retirement center where they lived and that he been placed in the hospital where he contract pneumonia. By the end of the week he was doing better and expected to go back to the nursing wing of the retirement home on Friday. I thought that things were looking up, but on Friday he took a steep turn for the worse and died that evening. The next morning I called my mother to see how she was doing. I wasn't sure whether she fully understood about Les's death. My sister and her husband came from Virginia to Tennessee to be with my mother. They took her to Roan Mountain that day where she enjoyed throwing snowballs with her family. She had dinner that night with her family. The next morning after she had finished breakfast she suddenly slumped over. She had suffered a massive stroke and on Tuesday she was dead. The death of these loved ones and the subsequent struggle with two funerals in a single week was a devastating blow to my family and me.

Death comes in many ways. In the case of my mother it came after a long and very fulfilled life. Her death was not a tragic death. But there are many deaths that are tragic. On more occasions than I would like to remember, I have participated in funeral services for children, young people, and young adults who have died from terrible illnesses and accidents. These deaths haunt us and leave us with the question of what we believe in the face of death.

III.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the gospel because it deals with the problem of historical evil. When Elie Wiesel spoke in Charlotte two weeks ago, he spoke of his faith as a "wounded faith." He could not erase the sight of infants being thrown into the ovens in Auschwitz or the sheer horror of six million Jews being put to death. Several years ago Bob Seiple, who was President of World Vision, spoke of the horror he experienced in 1994 in Rwanda. Standing on a bridge in that country, he had watched thousands of bodies float beneath him in a river scarlet with blood. Hutu tribesman had hacked to death with machetes almost a million Tutsis--their neighbors, their fellow churchmen, their school classmates--for reasons no one could fully explain. In his book, *The Powers That Be*, theologian Walter Wink notes that when the New Testament speaks of "principalities and powers," it is describing something very real that cannot be described in the reductionist language of sociology, politics, and in-depth psychology.

On Good Friday a sinless man named Jesus was put to death by a weak and vacillating Roman governor named Pontius Pilate and a conniving high priest by the name of Caiaphas, and a howling senseless mob. On that Friday evening it seemed that the powers that be had done their worst. Jesus had been crucified. He was dead and buried and his disciples had fled. But God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning; undoing what wicked and evil people had done on Good Friday.

Martin Niemoller, while imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II, preached a sermon he entitled "But God". He pointed out that on Good Friday it appeared that the forces of evil were triumphant. But God raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, the Hitlers of the world, the Saddam Husseins, the Pilates and Caiaphases have to barricade themselves against a word spoken beyond the grave, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

IV.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is also an answer to the problem of physical evil. Two years ago many of us watched in disbelief as Hurricane Katrina cut a devastating path along the shoreline of Louisiana and Mississippi. Even today there is still terrible suffering and hopelessness. In the face of this kind of evil--in the face of the suffering of children--our faith is wounded. We struggle to know how to go on and somehow to reconcile a God who is both loving and sovereign.

Paul Tillich once told in a sermon of an incident that came to life in the Nuremberg War Crime Trials at the end of World War II. One of the witnesses who appeared before the tribunal was a Jew who had lived in a Jewish graveyard in Wilna, Poland. It was the only place that he and others could live in hiding after they had escaped the gas chambers. During that time this gravedigger wrote poetry. One of the poems was the description of the birth of a child. The eighty-year-old gravedigger, wrapped in a linen shroud, assisted. When the newborn child uttered his first cry, the old man prayed, "Great God, have you finally sent the Messiah to us? Who else but the Messiah can be born in a grave?"

Let us not deceive ourselves. When the Apostles' Creed says that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried," it makes it clear that Jesus' death was no illusion. The creed hammers almost relentlessly four nails into the coffin. The cry on the cross, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?," was not an illusion. It was real abandonment and the death of Jesus was real.

We should not minimize the terrible suffering that is a part of our world. But neither should we minimize the powerful effect of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let us make no bones about it: If Easter isn't good news, then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed--then Easter Day, and the Easter message is the true sun, which when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.

Amen!