

Easter Sunday. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 28:1-10

The story is told of an old man who lived alone in rural Idaho. He wanted to spade his potato garden, but it was back breaking work, and his son, Bubba, who used to help him, was now in prison.

The old man mentioned it in a letter he sent to his son by saying; "I'm not sure exactly what to do. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. It looks like I won't be able to plant that garden this year after all.

A few days later, he received a short letter from his son, "Dad, For heaven's sake, don't dig up that garden, that's where I buried the bodies!"

At 4 a.m. the next morning, there was a loud knock on the door, a crew of police officers, and FBI Agents surrounded the house, and brought to the garden plot, earth moving machines and agents with shovels to start looking for bodies. After digging and churning through the garden plot for several hours and finding nothing, they gave up, apologized to the old man and left.

That same day, the old man received another letter from his son. He wrote: "Dear Dad, under these circumstances, that's the best I can do, go ahead and plant your potatoes now."

Sometimes we are like the stubborn earth that stands in the way of experiencing a completely transformed life in Jesus Christ. Instead of being willing to trust, to take direction, and to accept the rewards Christ offers, we remain a potential garden.

A potential garden in need of a resurrection, a potential garden that needs to find the way, the truth, and the life.

Billy Graham in April of 2003 said: "The message of the angel to the women who visited the tomb early that first Easter morning has "lifted Christianity out of the category of dead superstitions and archaic religions and made it an abiding faith of Christians through the centuries."

When the message of the empty tomb and the risen Jesus was whispered in the streets of Jerusalem and spread to the market places of Corinth, Antioch, and Athens, it was shocking news.

"He is risen!" became the central message of those fishermen from Galilee. Within 50 short days after the death of Jesus, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple courts rang with the good news.

Jesus is Lord! He is risen! With boldness these timid fishermen declared that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Everywhere the Apostle Paul went, he declared that God had raised Jesus from the dead. In Athens, Greece, in the market place, he proclaimed the same message, Jesus lives and He will judge the world.

Those who heard about the resurrection from the dead had two responses: "Some sneered, but others said, we want to hear more."

Easter, is the miracle of God, the ultimate test of faith, which ultimately divides believers from the unbelievers. You and I are believers, if we weren't believers we would not be here this day, celebrating this miracle of God, this divine act of God, which is central to the faith.

Easter is victory! The miracle of the resurrection guarantees the words of Jesus to us in John's Gospel chapter 3, verse 14: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him, may have eternal life."

The Bible tells us that the full deity of God the Father dwelt in the person of Jesus. When Jesus died upon that Roman cross on Golgotha on that Friday afternoon, God accepted His holy blood shed there, as a sacrifice there, in our place, enough to restore humanity to friendship with Himself, because Jesus paid the debt, we could never pay.

We have peace with the righteous judge of the universe because Jesus shed His holy and precious blood on the cross and died for us.

At the cross, God chose to remove all the commandments we had broken by nailing the list of sins we had committed.

When you think of all the people in the world, past, present and future, you may ask yourself if God even cares for me? You bet He does.

Remember what the writer of Luke's Gospel says in chapter 2, verse 10. God's love for you and for me, and for all people is summed up in the words of the angel to the shepherds on that night, that Christ Jesus was born into this world. "But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Rick Warren tells the story of when his son, Josh. He writes: "When my son Josh was 3 years old, we were on vacation in Hawaii and nearly lost him 3 times. The kid was getting into everything. We were staying on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the hotel and we walked into the room and he was out on the balcony, he had moved a chair and with half of his body leaning over the top. He was looking at a truck 15 floors below. In horror, we pulled him back. Later on, we were going site-seeing and he got away from us and ran out in front of a car in which he was almost hit. Then a third time he was nearly blown off of a cliff by a strong gust of wind.

Each of those times, he was only three years old, he desperately needed to be rescued, but he didn't have the slightest idea, that he needed it.

You and I may never really realize how much need a savior, but we do. If you and I didn't need a Savior, God would not have come into this world in the person of His Son, Jesus, and die on that cross for your sins, my sins and the sins of the world.

As I have said many times before, God loves you, and He loves you, and He loves. He loves you so much, that if you were the only person in this world, He still would have sent His only beloved Son, into this world to die for you on that cross, so that you would not be separated from Him for all eternity.

God would not have wasted the effort, if you and I didn't need somebody to rescue us from our sins.

Jesus has also rescued us from the guilt of our past. I've never met anybody who doesn't have or carry some level of guilt, and I am sure you know of people like this as well, we all do.

Everybody has made mistakes, everybody has failed at something, everybody has fallen short of what God expects.

We are not perfect. We break God's laws more than we realize. When you break God's Law, you must pay the penalty. God is a just God, and God is a loving God, but He has to satisfy the justice, because God will not wink at sin.

And the punishment for sin is death. But the Good news is, that Christ Jesus died to rescue us from the penalty of our sins.

Somebody has to pay the penalty for the things that you and I have done wrong. God chose to pay the penalty Himself in the person of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Christ Jesus has rescued us from a meaningless life. So many people in our world today, just exist. They just go from job to job, from work to home, back and forth, back and forth. Their lives are empty, because they have never experienced God in their lives, they do not have a relationship of with God through faith in Christ.

Oh, they may try to fill that void with work, money, material things, yet they don't have clue as to what their purpose in life is. They don't know God, nor why God put them here. They just go through the motions of life. It's meaningless.

Jesus tells us, that God has given us a purpose, to love Him, to serve Him, and to serve one another, to live each day by faith, knowing that God has claimed you and I as His own through His baptismal grace and that God is with us, in our successes and in our failures, and He is there with us joys and in our sorrows, God never leaves us or forsakes us.

Finally, Jesus has rescued us from the fear of death. The scriptures tell us, that: "Jesus has set free those who were slaves all of their lives because of the fear of death."

Have you ever invited someone over for coffee or a meal, and said: "Hey let's talk about death."

That is something that we don't like to talk about, but the reality is we all will face it some day. The word death, brings fear to many people, and we can talk about other people dying, but apply the words to ourselves, well, that's another story.

Death is a word that strips the rich of millions, and the poor of what little they have. It is a word, that frustrates ambition, and disappoints hope.

It is easy to think of other people keeping their appointment with death, but difficult for us to understand that we too, will keep the appointment.

The Bible tells us in I Corinthians 15, verse 21 the Apostle Paul writes: "For since death came through a human-being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human-being, for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

All people are doomed to die, infants, young children, teenagers, old people, moral people, religious people, everyone.

However, on this earth, over 2,000 years ago, lived a man who went about doing good, teaching, preaching about God's coming Kingdom, this man performed many miracles, such as: giving sight to the

blind, curing the leper, allowing the deaf to hear, giving the lame the ability to walk, and raising the dead.

His name was Jesus. He was arrested, put through a mock trial by the religious leaders, who saw Him as a threat to their grip on power, He was condemn to death, and his followers watched Him die a painful and slow death on a Roman Cross on Calvary's Hill, outside of the city of Jerusalem, in what was considered a "garbage heap", the Son of God, who had come down from heaven, died as a common criminal, He died as the lowest of the low, so that all people would be drawn unto Him.

He died on a Friday, one of his distant followers, took his body and placed it in a rock-hewn tomb outside of Jerusalem. A large stone was rolled in front of the tomb, and those who followed Him, thought that this was over and that all hope was lost.

God had other plans. On the first day of the week, early that Sunday morning, when the women went to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed, the writer of Matthew's Gospel tells us: "And suddenly there was a great earthquake; the an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him, the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He has been raised as he said." (Matthew 28, verse 2 through 6)

For those who believe that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who came into this world to save us from our sins, that He died on the cross, shedding His holy and precious blood, and that God raised Him from the dead on the third day, thereby, opening the gates to everlasting life, He has promised us eternity in heaven, and one day in near future when Christ returns to this world in power and in glory, to defeat Satan, crush hell underfoot and tear down the kingdoms of men, Christ Jesus will raise our mortal bodies, they will be made perfect we will never die, and we will be in God's eternal kingdom.

This is what Easter is all about: Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life, and he who believes in me shall never die."

The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, gives us hope for today, hope for tomorrow and hope for the future.

The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has impacted countless lives throughout the centuries and it is still impacting lives today.

The miracle of Easter reminds me of that hymn of faith that says: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow."

I would like to close out the message this morning with an essay written by Dr. James A. Francis. Some of you may have read or heard this before, but as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I think this is very appropriate.

He writes: "Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside of a big city. He never traveled more than two-hundred miles from the place he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials, but Himself.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say, that of all the armies that have ever marched, of all the navies that have ever sailed, of all the parliaments that have ever sat and of all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life. Amen.

May you and your family have a Blessed and Joyous Easter.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, through your perfect will and plan for the redemption of a sinful and fallen humanity, You sent your Son, Jesus the Christ, into this world, to take our place upon that cross, to die for us, so that we may not be lost to sin and death, but that we may be forgiven of our sins, and reconciled to You and to one another. By His resurrection, and victory over sin, death and the devil, our Lord Jesus Christ has opened the gates to eternal life for all who believe in Him. Lord God, let this divine act of so long ago, continue to impact our lives as we live day to day by faith, looking towards the Day of Christ's glorious return to this world. All these things we humbly pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.