

April 1, 2018

Holy Week 2018
Our Cornerstone
Matthew 28:1-10

Opening Words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not even 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 our world forever: 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 morning, and on Easter morning we remember the single greatest event in the history of the world: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let me say this clearly. If you are of the mindset that the resurrection of Jesus is not important, then you have abandoned the faith. The resurrection of Jesus is the very foundation of our faith. Your belief in the resurrected Jesus is not just important, it is indispensable. May God give you ears to hear Matthew's version of that very first Easter morning. We are in the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew, verses one through ten. Let me call this message *Our Cornerstone*.

Matthew 28:1-10 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then 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."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Joseph Wirthlin was an American businessman. He once said, "*The resurrection is at the core of our beliefs as Christians. Without it, our faith is meaningless.*" In other words, he is saying, the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. I couldn't agree more. If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

I love the following story. A Sunday School teacher on Palm Sunday asked her class this question: What is Easter? One little girl spoke up saying, "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey and sing about the pilgrims and all that." "No, that's not it," said the teacher. "I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree and decorate it and give gifts to everybody and sing lots of songs." "Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher. Finally, a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, and put in a tomb and 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 waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside, and we have six more weeks of winter!"

Let there be no doubt about it. Easter is not a national day of thanksgiving. Easter is not the celebration of a newborn babe in a barn filled with animals. Easter is not a celebration of spring, nor is it an excellent excuse to color eggs. Easter is a true Christian holiday because Easter is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ! They tell me in the Greek Orthodox tradition, many people tell jokes on Easter because God played the greatest practical joke on Satan. It looked like Satan had won. Jesus was dead, and Satan must have celebrated all day on that silent Saturday. But, Sunday was coming. On Sunday, God thinks outside of the box and resurrects his one and only son, Jesus. His resurrection changed everything. Jesus's resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. I Corinthians 15:14 says, *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."* But Christ has been raised from the dead, so our preaching *is* useful and so is our faith.

Did you know, all but four of the major world religions are based on mere philosophical propositions? Of the four that are based on personalities rather than philosophies, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder. In 1900 B.C., Judaism's Father Abraham died. In 483 B.C., Buddhist writings say Buddha died. Islamic writings say on June 6, 632 A.D., Mohammed died. The only one who is alive is Jesus. Let me make this point clearer. In 33 A.D., Jesus died, but came back to life, appearing to over 500 people over a period of 40 days. The resurrection separates us from the rest the world! The resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. If you believe in the resurrection, say, **"Amen!"** Do you remember the story?

The resurrection really began on a Friday afternoon at 3:00. Jesus is dead, as he hangs there with two common criminals. His body is taken down from the cross. In a certain way Jesus was lucky. It was not uncommon for the crucified to be taken down and thrown into a pile of lifeless corpses; their bodies would be eaten by the buzzards or wild dogs. Arrangements were made by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus that Jesus' body would be taken down and placed in a new tomb. A large stone was rolled in front of the entrance to protect it from thieves. The Roman government was persuaded by Jesus' enemies to place guards in front of the tomb to eliminate any future problems. This was all done by dark, because the law prohibited any burials on the Sabbath. On

Friday night, all day Saturday and all Saturday night, Jesus lay in the tomb. And why not? He was dead! Jesus had no visitors because it would violate the law.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, it is early on Sunday morning and Jesus receives his first visitors, two women with the same first name. There is Mary Magdalene and another Mary. You know what happened. You hear the story annually! There are really three remarkable events in this story. The first remarkable event is the great earthquake. Only Matthew mentions this earthquake, but this earthquake is worth mentioning because it reveals to us that God has done something truly special. The second remarkable event is that the giant stone has been rolled away. The third remarkable event is the announcement of the resurrection. According to verse three, it is made by an angel, whose clothes were white as snow, symbolizing purity. The angel tells the women about the resurrection, but the women experience the resurrected Jesus for themselves in verse nine. The question is, have you experienced the resurrection? If you believe in the resurrected Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

On February 22 of this year, I woke up to the sad news that Billy Graham (1918-2018) had died. He was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, but became famous for his evangelistic crusades that he seemed to hold in every community around the country. Everyone seemed to have had an experience with Billy Graham. I remember hearing him preach in Cleveland in the 1990's. Southern Baptist to the core, his message resonated with many Americans. He said it countless times, we are saved by grace thanks to the precious blood Jesus shed on the cross. You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and live a life that is completely committed to him. Contrary to what many believe, we are not saved by our works; we are saved by our faith in a resurrected savior. This is the first Easter since his passing. I am not worried about Billy Graham's salvation. He is in heaven. He knew he was going to heaven when he died. He said it best himself. He told his son, Franklin, "*Someday you are going to hear I am dead. Don't believe it. I will be more alive than ever before.*" Billy Graham believed in the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith, and he knew why it was important. This is the question of the day:

Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important to the Christian faith? There is not a single answer; there are four. (They came from Campus Crusade)

- 1. The resurrection proved that Jesus was divine.** His death did not prove anything. In time, everyone dies. Jesus's resurrection proved he was divine. (Roman 1:4)
- 2. The resurrection proved Christ's power to forgive sins.** The resurrection broke the bond sin holds on us. Without the resurrection, we are bound to sin. With the resurrection, we are liberated from sin. (1 Corinthians 15:17)
- 3. The resurrection reveals Christ's power over death.** Jesus did not just live, die, and live again, just to die again. Jesus is alive and well today.

(Romans 6:9). Equally important, death has no hold on us. Through our faith in Jesus, we are going to live for eternity. (Ephesians 2:6)

- 4. The resurrection defeated God's enemy.** Until the day Jesus walked out of the tomb, Satan fought against God. When Jesus died on the cross, Satan must have thought he had won. However, when Jesus came back to life, Satan knew he had lost. Because of the resurrection, Christians should never fear Satan again.

Your belief in the resurrected Jesus is not optional. It is indispensable. The salvation of your very soul depends on it. If you believe in the resurrection, the cornerstone of our faith, say, "**Amen!**"

It was in March of 2009. I was in Washington D.C. with sixteen international students. That was not my first or my last trip to Washington. I used to go to our nation's capital annually for two reasons. First, I love Washington D.C. It is one of my favorite places in the world. If you have not been to Washington D.C. since the fifth grade, I would encourage you to go. Second, I went to Washington annually because I love my wife. For years, she was the Director of Protestant Campus Ministry at Youngstown State. Part of her responsibilities was to chaperone international students as they visited our nation's capital. Those trips were important because there is more to our country than Youngstown. These trips maybe the only chance for these foreign visitors to experience the history and energy of America.

In those three-day trips, we saw all the sights. We went to Arlington National Cemetery. We visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and we saw the Kennedy graves. We visited the Washington and Lincoln Memorials. We visited the Vietnam War Memorial, the Korean War Memorial and the Second World War Memorial. We saw the capitol building and the White House. They toured the holocaust museum and explored the Smithsonian Museum of their choice. We had dinner in Georgetown. We saw all you could see in a few short days. Each trip ended the same way. We visited the National Cathedral. I believe it is the city's best kept secret.

Have you been to the National Cathedral? Built by private funds, the structure alone is impressive. It took 83 years to complete. The construction began in 1907; the cornerstone was set under the guidance of President Theodore Roosevelt. The construction was completed in 1990, when President George H. W. Bush was in office. It is a functioning Episcopal Church, full of Christian symbolism.

I remember that trip because most of those sixteen international students were not Christian. Several were nothing at all. It was March, and the cathedral was decorated for the season of Lent. One of the young women was from Taiwan. Did you know there are twenty million people on that island nation? The largest religion is Buddhism, with 800,000 believers. The second largest religion is Christianity, with 400,000 believers. Most of the people believe nothing, as she believed nothing. She asked me many

questions. She asked me about the season of Lent. I did my best to explain Lent and the Gospel message to her. I told her about the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith. She asked me several questions, but one I will never forget. She asked me, *"And when do you remember the resurgence?"* I really didn't understand what she was asking. I had to think about it, and then it hit me. She wasn't talking about a resurgence. She was talking about the resurrection. And I told her about Easter and how Jesus walked out of the tomb. I told her that we believe that Jesus conquered death itself. I told her, when I die I am going to heaven because Jesus conquered death. I said everyone who knows Jesus as their Lord and Savior is going to heaven. (I hope I planted a seed that day!) She looked at me, and this lovely, bright non-believer said, *"This Jesus must give you great comfort!"* She couldn't have been more right!

This is Easter morning, and on Easter morning we don't remember the resurgence. On Easter morning we don't just celebrate the coming of spring or colored eggs. On Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith! Your belief in the resurrection is not just important, it is indispensable! Do you remember the quote from Joseph Wirthlin? He said, *"The resurrection is at the core of our beliefs as Christians. Without it, our faith is meaningless."* And all of God's resurrected people said, **"Amen!"**