

“What If There’d Been No Easter”

I Corinthians 15:12-26, Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

Have you ever heard of a man named Harry Houdini? Some of you have, but in case you haven’t, he was a **Hungarian-American illusionist and magician;** chiefly remember today for his tremendous feats as an **escape artist!** Born in Hungary in 1874, he immigrated with his parents to the United States as a young boy and died in New York at the age of 84 in 1926.

He was said to have been such a great escape artist that he laughed at locks and he sneered at chains. Harry Houdini, some people said, had the **flexibility of an eel** and enjoyed the **nine lives of a cat.** Once he was locked in a **maximum security prison but he escaped.** He was sealed in a **coffin, but he escaped.** He was riveted to a **boiler but set himself free.** He was locked inside of a **gigantic stainless steel milk-can at a local dairy, but he escaped. He was locked inside of a big beer barrel at a local brewery but set himself free. He was sewn up tightly** inside of a large canvas bag, but once again he escaped!

But then in October 1926, that old grim reaper called death laid its icy hands upon Harry Houdini and he was buried three days later, six feet below the ground in a cold and dark grave! He has yet to escape, even though he told his wife just before he died: **“If there is any way out, my dear, you know that I will find it! I’ll make contact with you again, one day, on the anniversary of my death!”** --For ten years Mrs. Harry Houdini kept a light burning over his portrait in her living room parlor, but on the tenth anniversary of her husband’s death she finally turned that light out, never to be lighted again. **Death had conquered Harry Houdini and there was no way he could ever escape!**

So let me ask you, do you think that Mrs. Harry Houdini **was really all that much shocked, by the fact that her husband could not escape death and that he never returned to her on the anniversary of his death?** She probably wasn’t really all that shocked, was she, by the fact that he never returned to her!?!

But I want you to know that those first disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ were mightily shocked by the events they experienced there in the city of Jerusalem on that week we now look back to and celebrate as Christians as the first Holy Week!

Jesus’ disciples certainly knew that his having raised Lazarus from the dead in the previous week had caused quite a stir, and SHOCKED A GREAT MANY PASSOVER PILGRIMS who were making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate another Passover.

Why it was that event that help to incite all the excitement in the city streets of Jerusalem for our Savior’s Palm Sunday ride! But the fact that Jesus entered into the temple in Jerusalem that next day on Monday, and drove out the money changers, and told them with respect to their tables and sacrificial animals: **“Get these things out of here, for it is written, ‘My Father’s house shall be a house of prayer for all people, but you have turned it into a den of thieves!’”** Certainly these events must have mightily shocked the religious establishment too!

How shocked the disciples of Jesus must have been when the temple police entered the Garden of Gethsemane, together with a cohort of Roman soldiers, where our Savior was praying with his disciples to arrest him! Then there were those three bogus trials that he had to endure; one before the **High Priest Caiaphas who accused Jesus of Blasphemy,** when he responded in the affirmative, that yes he was the Messiah, the Holy Son of God! Caiaphas sends him to Pilate, who hopes to pass the buck to **“King Herod,” as that name was given to Herod by the**

Romans, who is greatly disappointed that Jesus will perform no miracles for him! Herod sends him back to Pilate, who three times addresses the mob who is demanding Jesus' crucifixion saying: "Crucify him? Why? What evil has he done! I have thoroughly examined him and I find him guilty of no wrongdoing!"

But when Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere but that the mob rule was only growing more violent and vocal in nature, he relinquished his real concern for justice, and delivered Jesus over to be crucified!

How horribly shocking it must have been for Jesus' disciples to witness his gruesome crucifixion, for those who did witness it. All of the male disciples abandoned him initially at the hour of his arrest; all except for Peter and John, who entered the courtyard of high priest with him, because John had some connections. Peter denies ever having known our Lord Jesus, three times just as Jesus told Peter that he would, and then he goes out and weeps bitterly. Judas hangs himself. John continues to stand by with the women at the foot of the cross where Jesus has been crucified.

How shocking, some of the things were, that Jesus said when he was hanging from the cross! Even though he is suffering so intensely, Jesus never loses his ability to be focused on the needs of others. **"Father forgive them," he said. "They know not what they do!"** To the repentant thief who asked to be remembered by Jesus, when Jesus would come into his kingdom, he said, **"Today, you will be with me in paradise!"** He made provisions for his mother: **"Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!"** He fulfilled the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 22, calling out: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"** He cried: **"I thirst!"** He said in a loud voice, meaning that he was crying out in a great spirit of triumph and not defeat, **"It is finished!"** And then in his final moments, Matthew tells us he commends his whole self to the Heavenly Father, saying: **"Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit!" And he breathed his last!**

It difficult for us to **imagine really the deep state of emotional shock and trauma that these disciples were experiencing that first Good Friday, and all day long that first Holy Saturday!**

And yet just when Jesus' **first disciples were thinking that nothing could ever be more shocking --- than all these shocking events that they had just experienced firsthand in the previous week**, little did they know that the most shocking event of all the shocking events that took place there in the city of Jerusalem within the span of those few short days—was still to happen next.

St. Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were on their way to the tomb where Jesus had been quickly laid to rest before the Sabbath actually began, just before sundown late that Friday afternoon. They were going there to anoint the dead body of their Lord.

No sooner do they arrive there and there is an earthquake, and if that were not shocking enough, then an angel descends from heaven whose face is like lightning and whose clothing is as white as snow! He rolls away the stone and he sits atop the stone! FOR FEAR OF THAT ANGEL, THE ROMAN GUARDS WERE SHOCKED! SO MUCH SO—MATTHEW SAYS THAT THEY SHOOK LIKE DEAD MEN! In the words of that song made popular by **Elvis Presley back in 1957: "They were all shook up!" (Matthew 28:1-4)**

According to St. Mark, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James and Salome brought sweet spices to Jesus tomb very early in morning, about that morning. And Mark tells us that when they were on the way down there, **they began questioning each other saying: "Who shall roll away for us the stone, for it was very great!" (Mark 16:3).** But to their great **SHOCK ONCE AGAIN, the stone was already rolled away.** And entering the tomb **they saw**

a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment and they were greatly frightened! (Mark 16:4-5).

St. Luke's account lines up very closely with Matthew and Mark's version of the Easter story, but he tells us as John does, that there were two angels inside the tomb. I suspect from our reading in John's Gospel today—that while the other women went back home, **Mary Magdalene stood there in a complete state of shock that first Easter morning, next to Jesus' tomb where the stone had been rolled away and the body of Jesus was now missing.** John tells us that Mary Magdalene also had gone back to tell Peter and John, the author of these words, what had happened! Maybe they deliberated for a while before going down to **"Joseph's Lovely Garden"** as some have given the burial site of Jesus its nomenclature! After all it was that wealthy Pharisee, also a member of the Sanhedrin, **Joseph of Arimathea** who together with that other Pharisee named Nicodemus, who secured the permission from Pilate to take down the body of Jesus from the cross to give it, its proper burial!

When Peter and John go into the tomb **they must have been shocked too**—to discover that though the body of Jesus was missing, the funeral shroud our Lord's body had been wrapped in and the cloth that had been wrapped around his head were all folded up so neat and tidy—nothing a grave robber would have taken time to do. John, being the younger disciple, outran Peter. But being cautious, he only stood at the entrance to the tomb, but when old impetuous Peter got there, he marched right in!

St. John tells us: **"They saw and they believed" (John 20:8).** But what did they see and what did they believe? We don't know for sure! **Maybe the only thing they saw and the only thing they believed at this point is that the stone had been rolled away and the body of Jesus was missing.** Certainly when the women folk take the news back to the men folk that the Risen Lord had appeared to them in his Glorified Body—St. Luke tells us in **Luke 24:11**, **"But the men did not believe them and regarded their report to be nothing more than an idle tale!"**

Not only did the Risen Christ reveal his true identity to Mary Magdalene who had first falsely believed him merely to be the gardener, but she makes a great personal confession of faith in the moments that followed, as she went back to tell the men folk of her further experience was: **"I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18)**

Friends, the fact that that first Easter morning began with all things dark, should be a source of encouragement today; for when the Easter message first comes to us we are by nature spiritually blind and dead and living in the darkness too. Faith isn't something that any of these disciples seem to have acquired immediately. Faith is not something that may come to us any more easily than it did to Jesus' first disciples!

Why do I believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? There are all sorts of answers, brothers and sisters, I could give to you in answer to that question, but I don't have time to share all of those reasons with you!

First, I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because someone has told me about it! Undoubtedly there are people who are bothered by the fact that when Mary told the disciples, **"I have seen the Lord!"** that there is no way for us today to prove that Mary's words were true! And it cannot be proven with the kind of empirical evidence that many unbelievers would demand, that if it were provided to them would make faith an impossibility, because **"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen! (Hebrews 11:1)** We have no photographs of the Risen Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot be proven, nor can it be disproven and this is why there are many brilliant

people who believe that our Easter message today is true as are there many brilliant people who believe it is untrue. You can't prove it either way! What we know of it to a large degree is something we know only because other people have told us about it.

How do you know that Christopher Columbus made it to the New World for the first time in 1492? Were you there? No, you were not there, but there were many people who were there and they have written about it and that is how we know about it!

How do you know that a man named Neil Armstrong actually walked on the moon back in July or 1969? I can tell you that I saw it on television during that summer when I was between the 8th grade and the 9th grade of my education. But there were many people back in that day, and my grandmother was one of them, who insisted that the whole thing was fake, being filmed in a studio somewhere in an attempt to pull a fast-one on the Russians. I saw a documentary not long ago where people contended that the computer equipment was just too primitive back then to pull off a feat like that—when those computers were not any more powerful than one of Apple's first computers—the Commodore 64.

Secondly, I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because the resurrection has stood the test of time! A lot of things start off good but soon fizzle out. Many sports fans will never forget the Chicago Bulls, their favorite basketball team in the NBA for years. The things that **Michael Jordan** accomplished on the floor of the United Center in Chicago were simply impossible to describe. He was the kind of talent that sports journalist love to write about. During the 1990s he eclipsed all other athletes!

Then **Tiger Woods** really arrived on the scene around the year 2000. What Woods did in winning four Major titles in a row in the years 2000 to 2001 is arguably the greatest athletic accomplishment of our time. But, let me tell you something! These athletes and singers and actors are catapulted to the national spotlight, but soon, with respect to every one of them, their "star power" begins to fad too! They fade either because our memories of them fade or because their end up tarnishing their own reputations because the power they were experiencing gave them false conceptions about themselves, maybe even fostering a god-like type of mentality within them.

But the third reason I believe in the resurrection is because I have come to experience it. The first century disciples of Jesus did not believe in the resurrection because they could explain it; they believed in the resurrection because they had experienced it. One whom they had known in the flesh and had seen die was now seen by them as a person who was very much alive again! -- **The best proof of the resurrection is not in what the witnesses just said that they saw, but in how they personally responded to what they said they had seen.** This is the picture that St. John gives us of Jesus' disciples following his crucifixion while they still believed him to be dead. It is the picture of a frightened band of disciples huddled together in a house with the door barred. That is the scene before any news about Jesus' resurrection. But following our Lord's resurrection and our Lord's ascension 40 days later to the Father's right hand, then we witness a powerful band of mighty witnesses being thrust out into the world! And it has been estimated that by the end of the First Century over a half-million people had come under the Christian banner. This is the power of the resurrection!

Brothers and sisters, what if there had been no Easter? Isn't this the question that Paul is answering for some of the believers in the Corinthian congregation in our epistle lesson today! The Corinthians church was plagued with all sorts of big problems that the Apostle addresses for them all throughout this lesson, but the biggest problem to address he saves for last!

It seems that some folks, either among the Corinthian congregation, or others outside their own community of faith were challenging their beliefs and were flat out denying the possibility of a bodily resurrection ever taking place for them one day! **And certainly this would be understandable when we think of those people having been raised in a Hellenistic culture, a culture that fully embraced Greek**

philosophies and thought! They could believe in the immortality of the soul, which they believed would be separated from the body at death, and continue to live in a spiritually pure state forever. But the Greeks did not believe that the human body could play any part at all in any sort of future afterlife, since it was composed of matter, of physical properties, that the Greeks all viewed as being thoroughly evil! Therefore, the twin issues of resurrection and Christ and of the dead were among the most difficult challenges for Christianity to overcome when it came to witnessing to the Gospel to Gentiles!

Within the Corinthian congregation, these people were not denying that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but they were denying the possibility of any future resurrection of the body to be experienced at some later point in time by them! So St. Paul does his best to refute this sort of thinking, using his best attempts at human logic, to help persuade them.

Paul says, in effect, if there is no future resurrection from the dead, then first of all, all of the preaching which he and the other apostles have done up to this point was in vain. Secondly, our faith would be utterly foolish. Thirdly, if there had been no Easter, then Jesus' disciples also in this world would be deceivers. Fourthly, rather than our sins being fully forgiven us by God, so that we know the great personal joy that we do of being benefactors of his great pardon, we would still be liable to God for all the sins that we have committed throughout our lives in this world! If there had been no Easter our faith would be foolish and we of all people in this world should be the most to be pitied. Death would still have its great dominion over the human race. Think of all the millions of believers who have carried the remains of their loved ones to the graveyard in the sure and certain hope that they would one day be raised up from their graves and given new bodies! If there had been no Easter, those hopes would have no basis in reality whatsoever!

But that's why I am glad that the Apostle gives to the Corinthians his own corrective! ***"But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20-22)***

Well, Easter is day for laughter, and that's why I wanted to share a silly little story with you about a cat who dies and goes to heaven, even though it certainly has some false doctrine in it that we need to identify from the outset. Okay the story says a cat had died and gone to heaven if you can imagine that! God meets him at the gate and says, "You have been a good cat all of these years. Anything you desire, will be yours! All you have to do is to ask me for it!"

And we all know what's wrong with this little story from a doctrinal point of view, don't we? No one could gain entrance into heaven by their own efforts. "We are saved by grace through faith alone and this is not our own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast!" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Nevertheless the story does have a valid point to make, so please let me continue...

The cat replies, "Well, I have lived all my life with a poor family on a farm and had to sleep on hardwood floors!"

God interrupts the cat responding: "Say no more!" And instantly a fluffy pillow appears for the cat to sleep on!

A few days later, 6 mice are killed in a tragic accident and they go to heaven. God meets them at the gate with the same offer that he made to the cat. The mice said, "All our lives we've had to run.

Cats, dogs and even women with brooms have been chasing us! If we could only have a pair of roller skates, we wouldn't have to run anymore!"

God replies, "Say no more!" And instantly, each mouse is fitted perfectly with a beautiful new pair of tiny roller skates!

About a week later, God decides to check and see how the cat is doing. The cat is sound asleep on his very fluffy, white pillow! God gently wakes him and asks the cat, "How are you doing! Are you happy here?"

The cat yawns and stretches and says, "Oh, I have never been happier in all my life! And those "Meals on Wheels' you've been sending to me, are simply delicious! Let me tell you! They are out of this world!"

Okay it's a silly little story but it does remind us that no matter how wonderful we might picture heaven to be for ourselves, once we get there it will far exceed our most extravagant imaginations!

Brothers and sisters, we are here today, many of us, because of a faith that God gave to us many years ago; a faith that makes us absolutely certain when we say in the Apostles Creed: "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting!"

And as he invites us forward to his Holy Table again this day to come to us as the Risen Christ with his true Body and true Blood for the forgiveness of all our sins, we too can say "Thank you!" to God. We too can still say to the unbelieving world, the same thing the psalmist says in **Psalm 34:8**, "*O taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is that person who trusts in him!*" Amen