

Good Morning or better yet Happy Easter!

To begin our message today, I thought we would start out with a story that will bring to our hearts a glimpse of joy that was shared in a brief moment between a father and his son. Here we go; A father took his little boy to a pet shop to pick out a puppy for his birthday present. For half an hour the boy carefully examined all of the puppies available. Finally, his Dad growing a little impatient asked, "Have you decided which one you want?" "Yes," the little boy replied, pointing to a puppy whose tail was wagging enthusiastically. "I want the one with the happy ending!" And speaking of happy endings, I believe that today that we are celebrating together the greatest happy ending of all time, the story of Easter where Jesus triumphs over death and returns to us as our Lord and Savior for ever and ever. In our Easter Message this morning we are going to finish a story that we started last week on Palm Sunday. As many of you may remember, last week's story was a story of Peter's fear and sadness following the death of Jesus. So why was Peter so fearful and sad? Peter was in this condition because he felt in his heart that Jesus had died and was no longer around. And since Jesus was no longer of this earth Peter believed that he would not be able to find forgiveness for denying Jesus three times. Our story left Peter crying and filled with anger. So now that we have recapped Peter's story from last week, lets carry on or continue to find out what happened next. Well, what we find is Peter and the other disciples resting when suddenly Mary Magdalene burst in on them, telling them that Jesus was no longer in the tomb where He had been buried. If we were Peter and heard that Jesus' tomb was empty how would we react to this news? Remember Peter's emotions were those of being sad and angry because he truly believed that Jesus had died and left him. So Peter's first reaction was one of denial and unbelief of the news that Mary was now telling him. But then Peter must have sensed that there was now the possibility that Jesus was no longer dead but was very much alive. And by Jesus being alive Peter now had a chance of being forgiven for what he had done. So maybe that explains why Peter ran so quickly to the opened tomb to see with his own eyes that Jesus was no longer there and may have risen just like Mary Magdalene had described. What is significant for us this morning about Peter's story is his discovery of a newfound hope, a hope of forgiveness, from his sins, by

believing that Jesus is alive. So, how many times have we felt that there is no hope for our sins to be forgiven by coming to know of God's love in our hearts? Or how many times have we felt that Jesus was not in our lives? You see for us, just like Peter, it is the discovery of God's love for us and His promise of forgiveness for our sins that best describes what Easter is all about. Easter is about discovering that Jesus died on that cross for our sins and that He rose from the dead so we would know that we too would overcome death by our faith in Jesus Christ. I would like to continue on with our Easter Morning story by comparing some commonalities between the writers of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We are going to look at each writer's description of what happened on Easter morning because even though each version differs a bit from the others, we will find how similar they really are. When we look at Matthew 28 we find Mary Magdalene along with another women also named Mary who have decided to go to Jesus' tomb. And what they experienced when they arrived was an earthquake that violently shook the ground. And during this earthquake an Angle of the Lord appeared to them and moved back the stone that covered the entrance to Jesus' tomb. The Angel appeared with bright lightning like clothing that was white as snow. In Matthew's version we also find that there were guards there and they become so afraid that they figuratively were like dead men. And then we hear the Angle of the Lord say to them, "Do not be afraid: I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here for he has been raised." Then the angel invited them to enter the tomb and see where Jesus had laid. What came next were some instructions for the two Mary's to go tell Jesus' disciples that He had been raised from the dead and you will see him soon. As the two Mary's were heading back to the disciples, Jesus appeared to them and said, "Greetings" then he told them to not be afraid and go tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they would see Him. Our next version of the story is from Mark as he begins with with Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James already on their way to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices. As they approached the tomb there was one concern they shared and it was about who was going to move away the stone. But then when they got closer to the tomb they found that the great stone had already been moved away. As the women entered the tomb and a young man dressed in a white robe met

them. As he sat where Jesus had lain he told the women to not be alarmed and that Jesus had been raised but he was not there. Then the young man told them to go tell the disciples that Jesus would appear to them in Galilee. Now to Luke's version of what happened. In Luke's version we find that it is very similar to Mark's version in that the women went to the tomb, they found that the stone had already been moved away and as they entered the tomb two men in dazzling clothes met them. The men then said to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." And now on to John's account of what happened that Easter morning. But what is interesting about John's account is that it is very short. He tells of Mary going to the tomb and discovering that Jesus' body had been removed from the tomb. And then he has Mary returning to the disciples with the news of what she saw. So with our retelling of each of the Gospel writer's versions it is obvious that there are some differences. But what are even more obvious are the elements that are very much alike! So what are these common elements?

Well, to start off, each version tells of one or more women going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. When they arrive they find that the great massive stone was or is rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. Then each version has some kind of spiritual encounter with one or two people that are dressed in brilliant white clothing. Then there are the instructions for the women to go tell Peter and the other disciples of what they have witnessed and that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. And in each version the women did find and tell the disciples of what had happened. For this morning's message I wanted to tell each writer's version of the Easter story of Jesus' resurrection because some critics of the Bible use these differences to discredit the validity of the New Testament itself. But for me it is very hard to ignore the similarities that are so evident in each of the Gospel writer's Easter story. And to explain the differences between the writers we only have to think of the campfire game where a story is told to one person then the next and then the next etc. And then when the story has been repeated to everyone sitting around the campfire the beginning version and the ending version are compared and it is more often than not found that the versions are different in content.

It is estimated that the writing of the Gospel stories happened 40 years to 100 years after Jesus' death. And with this understanding I find it amazing how similar the Easter stories between the writers actually are. What I would like to do next for us this Easter Morning is to take the similar themes or actions and see them in a way where we may find the essence of what Easter means to each of us in our journey of being a follower or disciple of Jesus. To begin with there is an aspect of seeking Jesus in our hearts. Just as the women went to seek out Jesus to anoint his body we may seek Jesus in our lives. Next we have the discovery that something is missing. As the women did not find Jesus's body we at times struggle with not finding or feeling Jesus' presence in our lives. But then in our moment of loss there is an amazing burst of emotion where we find a spiritual message that helps us to re-center our faith in Jesus Christ. And then just as the women were told to go and tell what they experienced we are asked also to go and tell others of what we have experienced in our journey of discovering God's love for us. So there you have it, a simple understanding of the Easter Story and what it means for all of us to live as Christians in a world that is becoming more and more challenging. But just like Jesus rose from the dead we too can rise above our earthly experience and rise to a wonderful relationship with God where we find His Love and Grace in our lives. As we experience the Joy of Easter in our hearts today, remember that we may seek the risen Christ, that we may discover the risen Christ, that we may find the risen Christ, and that we may speak of the risen Christ. Let us leave here today and go into the world with a new and joyous understanding of what Easter mean to us. Let us pray,

Dear Heavenly Father, as we celebrate Easter this morning, we wish to thank You for the great sacrifice that Jesus made by His death on the cross for our sins to be forgiven. Please help us to understand that when we come to you with hearts filled with sadness, fear and suffering that You will always take care of us and watch over us. We thank You for Jesus' presence within our hearts so we may know of love, peace and happiness throughout our lives. We praise You in Jesus' name, Amen.