

# EEN EVANGELICAL ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

Sermon Starter: March/April 2018

## “Up From the Grave – The Church Arose”

It's Easter, the Paschal celebration, the greatest Holy Day in the life of the Christian church, but what does it mean to you? In years gone by it was a new set of clothes or fancy hat, an Easter parade, or special Sunday dinner. When I was child (insert your childhood Easter memory here), my family would get up before dawn and travel to our little country church to celebrate Easter sunrise.

It was a special time. Mr. Fortney, the best piano player in town and a schoolteacher who never came to church, showed up to play the piano. Mrs. Petie Van Scoyoc, the local piano teacher, joined him on the little electronic organ. Aunt Marie, the best soprano I ever heard, drove “up the mountain” from her home 15 miles away to sing special music. My uncle Charles would stand before the packed congregation and lead the singing. I can still hear *Up from the Grave He Arose* or *In the Garden* or *He Lives*. We never quite got **Christ the Lord is Risen Today!**

It was a celebration, a celebration of family and of love for the church. After “church” we even went to my grandmother's house to have an egg and fried trout breakfast with all the family, but was it a celebration of Easter or of Jesus? (I almost forgot we would search for our Easter baskets filled with chocolate bunnies and peanut butter eggs right after breakfast!)

I've thought about that question for years- did I grow up celebrating family or Jesus on Easter? Certainly, my family thought it was celebrating both, but were we? This isn't to disparage my family or our country church. It's what we were taught, it's what most of America grow-up on. I'm old enough, a baby boomer, to really see that the church I grew up in was loving and kind, but did we really understand Jesus? Did we really understand Easter? I don't think we did and am convinced that even many people who call themselves Jesus followers today simply don't understand the message- the power- of Easter!

Many of us grew up in a church but saw Christianity look more like American culture than followers of the Risen Lord. Did we? Do we really comprehend the power of Easter? The disciples didn't get it first, just listen how Mark tells the story:

### Mark 16: 1-8 (NIV)

*16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. <sup>2</sup> Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb <sup>3</sup> and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”*

*<sup>4</sup> But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

*<sup>6</sup> “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*

*<sup>8</sup> Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

We don’t often read Mark’s telling of Easter as it is confusing, messy, and it isn’t easy to explain. Oh, we get the first part of the women coming to the tomb, the same women that never ran away from the cross like the male disciples did on “Good Friday.” They’re coming out of love and care, out of their compassion to care for their teacher, and their mentor. Perhaps even some of them thought of him as Lord, but that all changed. They were here to mourn a man who took on the world’s sins, but was entombed behind the stone, and under the earth.

Being under the earth is known to me. My grandfathers and dad spent a great deal of time underground as they, and many in my family, were coal miners. I also spent a great deal of time underground as well. My early career was spent in the coal and energy industry where I spent time in mines. From hundred-year-old silver mines in Arizona to coal mines in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and even oil shale mines in Colorado, I know what it’s like to be underground.

But the freshest “under the earth” memory happened just a few weeks ago when my wife and I visited Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico. First, I have to say that my wife and I make a habit of visiting national parks and monuments. These God-given natural wonders are places that throughout my life have fostered my strongest connections to God. In the purple mountains majesties I have encountered Jesus so many times. In fact, our great, wonderful majestic national parks and monuments are the galleries for the greatest art ever created. Masterpieces created by the most brilliant artist ever, God.

From the Sonoran Desert to the Grand Canyon and from Yellowstone to the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Allegheny Hills of my youth, I, like many Americans have encountered God in America’s great outdoors.

However, in our recent exploration of Carlsbad caverns, we found a new kind of majesty. Giant stalagmites and stalactites seemingly appearing from nowhere. Crystals of gypsum and calcite reflecting the scant light more brilliant than a faceted diamond. Even in the very center there’s a place called the Cathedral- an open formation of rocks that as you look up appears as a cross glistening through the darkness. It simply touches your heart and tells you that our Redeemer lives. But perhaps the most striking thing about Carlsbad caverns is the mile long walk from the surface to deep underground, deep under the earth. One descends seemingly forever from the world of light into a world of darkness. Even with the intermittent artificial light that guides the way, one’s gets the sense of going into a void of darkness. It’s an emptying of the world above to sense the presence of God within, and if you open yourself to the experience, a mystical spiritual transformation may occur. In many ways it reminds me of the time Jesus spent under the earth,

in the tomb. This spent time, only understood by God, transformed Jesus, God himself, from a death endured by an instrument of torture into our Risen Lord.

One can't help but notice the similarities between Jesus' resurrection on that first Easter and God's creation of the world in Genesis. Jesus' resurrection and creation both took place in the garden. Eden wasn't just some tiny speck of it. For those who first heard Genesis, it was the known world. The Bible describes Eden in detail from the Tigris and Euphrates River to the Nile. God was saying "I have created you a beautiful planet, a creation that's a garden to be sustained and cared for and used to promote life." And in both the garden of Gethsemane and the garden of Eden, humanity was created (what humanity was supposed to be) and came forth from the earth. First, Adam was shaped out of the clay and life was breathed into him by the intimate kiss of God. Then as the stone was rolled away, Jesus broke forth from the earth as the second Adam. This new Adam gives us the second chance to get it right, the second chance to live as God intended for us to live. For the resurrection of Jesus isn't only about a new opportunity for us to be forgiven of sins. It's a chance for us to join Jesus and be transformed from the underworld experience to become a new creation and members in Jesus' Reign.

The new kingdom isn't just about life after death and going to heaven. While it includes that, it's so much more. It's about living with Jesus today and forever. God's ultimate goal is not the destruction of the earth, but heaven and earth becoming one.

Remember what the angel said in our Scripture just a few minutes ago,

*"He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"*

Jesus is not here, He is going on before you to Galilee. Jesus goes into the world first and not out of it. Galilee remains the starting place for the transformation of this world into God's kingdom. In Easter, Jesus starts the completion of the Lord's Prayer, *Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*

Jesus didn't come out of the earth for us just to say "thank you for forgiving us." Jesus came out of the earth so that His spirit could be set free among us so that we might be Jesus for the world, that we might care and love the world as God does.

Easter represents a surprising and maybe even terrifying time for us who want to follow our Risen Lord, for Christians. Unlike my little country Church, we understand the Bible a bit better. Easter is not just getting our ticket punched so we can go to heaven. It's living and loving in a way that looks just like Jesus and that's scary.

No wonder the women here are afraid in Mark's original ending. They're just like us. It's scary to start to recognize that God wants us with all our human frailties, with all our sins, with all our selfishness, with all of whatever, to be transformed into something better, something new. We are called as new creation, a new family of Adams and Eves. God wants to follow Him and transform this world, God's creation, into a better place. That's what Easter is about, it's not about finding an empty tomb, it's about following the Savior who goes before us to create a

better place, His kingdom. And on this Easter, it's time for the church to come out from beneath the earth, to come out of its sinful nature, to come out of its selfishness and greed, to stop looking for political power, and to follow our risen Lord Jesus for the blessing of all humanity and all creation.

Church, it's time to follow Jesus and stop living in fear and trembling over who's elected to political office and to join with our risen Lord in caring for one another. Let's work toward a time when we all see God in a majestic mountain top. Let's unite and watch our children and grandchildren strive to live unhindered by pollution and the altering of our genes. We can envision a place where our descendants can use their spiritual gifts and their God-given talents to make this world a better place and not worry over school shootings.

Church, it's time to rise out of the earth and be who Jesus calls us to be. Jesus invites us to follow him into Galilee and into the world to love each other just as the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit love each other. We are called to live in a sustainable world that will protect all creation and provide both an abundant physical life for each one of God's children and an abundant spiritual life being connected to God.

Perhaps the most interesting comment I ever heard on Mark's Gospel original ending came from my New Testament teacher. She said to find the answer to the women running away in fear and terror was to run back to the beginning of Mark's gospel and the first verse.

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1, NIV.)*

Mark's gospel is the only gospel that from the get-go declares who Jesus is.

This Easter morning may you rise from under your earth. Whether it's illness or depression or conflict with a family member or job difficulties or worries about the state of the world, Jesus says rise-up. So, let's declare Jesus as our Messiah, our Risen Lord and follow Him. Amen!