

3.31.2024 Easter Day (Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-10)

In a Sunday morning sermon six years ago, I mentioned Easter Island, the most isolated inhabited landmass anywhere in the world, and the home of the Moai - 900 huge stone figures that on average stand thirteen feet high and weigh fourteen tons. Easter Island was named in the year 1722, when European explorers made contact with the isolated people whose ancestors carved these massive statues, and since that time, scientists, scholars, and visitors to the island have searched for answers about why the islanders carved these giant figures, how they were made, or, better yet, how they were moved to different locations on the island. Theories abound, but with no definite answers, Easter Island, and its huge stone figures, remain a fascinating miracle. An island miracle that may, due to rising sea levels, be in jeopardy of being washed into the ocean.

Easter Island is a victim of our constantly changing climate. The island's inhabitants report rising sea levels that are eroding the shoreline, putting the massive stone figures at risk, uncovering graves, and washing up the bones of their ancestors. The very existence of Easter Island is threatened, and as I considered the remote island's dire circumstances, I couldn't help but recognize parallels between Easter Island and Easter Day.

For two thousand years, twenty centuries of Christianity, our Lord's Resurrection on Easter Day has served as the foundation and the pinnacle of the Christian faith. The entirety of our faith hinges on the reality of this singular event. As St. Paul so bluntly declared: *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith"* (1 Corinthians 15:14 NIV). The Resurrection is the unchanging historic truth that the faith of billions rests upon.

Yet in recent years, for many Christians, Easter Day seems to have become more like Easter Island, a fascinating miracle that is far removed from everyday life. A remote island that we make plans to visit once a year, instead of the home in which we live every day, and if we view Easter Day, and the Resurrection of our Lord, as nothing more than an annual religious observance, instead of a daily reality, then Easter and the Risen Christ, will become an island that we have separated from the continent of our faith. Such

an island would be subject to the rising seas, crashing waves, and shifting sand of our own quickly changing cultural climate.

As we speak, scientists are working to protect the shores and preserve the statues on Easter Island, and as authentic, faithful Christians, we must go to work, earnestly contending Easter Day, for the *“faith which was once delivered unto the saints”* (Jude 1:3), declaring the truth that Easter is not a remote island. Easter is the heartland of our faith.

In the Epistle that we read this morning, St. Paul exhorted Christians, certainly on a daily basis, to *“seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.”* He tells us, *“Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Colossians 3:1-2). Paul tells us to set our affection on the Risen Christ, because our souls were made to live in communion with our Lord and God, who so perfectly, so personally, and so painfully declared His love for us. The Bible offers many examples of saints who have continuously sought such union with our Lord, but through Holy Week, and now once again on Easter Day, in Mary Magdalene we see a very particular example of unceasing devotion. Her example of authentic discipleship helps us recognize that for those who seek Christ, for those whose affection is set on Him, Easter is not an island holiday among the days of the year, but a Holy Day, that presents us with a miraculous, eternal truth that is relevant every day of the year.

For just a moment, consider the way we walk with Christ, in light of the way Mary walked with Him. Mary Magdalene was one of the women who accompanied Jesus as He ministered on this earth (Luke 8:1-3), the woman from whom He *“had cast out seven demons”* (Mark 16:9). Jesus healed Mary’s affliction, rescuing her from a miserable existence, and the depth of her gratitude for His merciful love could not be measured. Perhaps gratitude, which grew into a deep, profound love, led Mary to remain at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday (John 19:25). Perhaps it was gratitude, and the love that springs from a thankful heart, that led Mary to rise early on Easter Day, *“when it was yet dark,”* to discover the empty tomb and to be the first person to witness the Risen Christ (John 20:1-18). Perhaps abundant gratitude, and sincere love for her Lord, led her to forsake all, to devote her life completely to our Lord, and to be the one we see last at the Cross on

Good Friday, and first at the tomb on Easter Day.

When we consider Mary's daily walk with Christ, the first thing we clearly recognize is her gratitude - her grateful love. From the beginning, Mary's example causes us to think about the price Jesus paid to rescue you and I from the most miserable existence, and it makes me wonder, could our failure to even begin to acknowledge that which God, through Christ, has done for us be one of the reasons why, for so many Christians, Easter has become an island, a single yearly celebration, that is disconnected and irrelevant to daily life? It can certainly be said that if a person feels no gratitude for all that Christ accomplished, they will find no reason to respond, but if we, like Mary, are deeply and intensely aware of the innumerable benefits we've received through our Lord's death and resurrection, our grateful love for Him will have no limits. We will be those who spend, and are willing to be spent, for the name of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

The Son of God had set her free, and Mary's grateful, loving response to the healing that only He could provide was to place her life on the altar, to offer her life to our Lord as a living sacrifice, a life of service devoted to God's use. It is this sacrificial devotion that led her to deny her own will, and courageously follow Him. Think about the cultural climate change that Mary faced in Jerusalem on Good Friday. Picture the rising seas and crashing waves created by so many who had joyfully welcomed our Lord just days before on Palm Sunday, but were now calling for His crucifixion. At a time when His friends, strong men, betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him, Mary didn't waiver. She stood in brave opposition to the angry crowd, the Roman soldiers, and the religious leaders, as one who knew, and loved, our Lord. She didn't surrender her place as a follower of Christ when the cultural climate changed. She wasn't ashamed of Jesus even as He hung on the Cross, but remained a faithful disciple of this crucified Man, and on the third day her faithfulness was rewarded when the Risen Christ met her next to the empty tomb and called her by name.

Today, Mary Magdalene is known as the Apostle to the Apostles, because she was the first person to see the Risen Christ, and the first to share the news of the Resurrection with these men. She had a message for them. Her example was a message about faithfulness, devotion, and loving gratitude,

and today, as the first to witness the Resurrection, Mary has a message for us. Her message is that Easter, and the historic truth that Christ is Risen, is not an island. The Resurrection is not a day that we can separate from our faith. It is our faith, because *“if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”*

It's been six years since I mentioned Easter Island during a Sunday morning sermon, and if you were here, that may very well be the last time you thought about that place, because a remote island, 5,000 miles from here, just isn't a relevant part of our daily life. However, if any of us wanted to there's something we could do to change that - we could choose to go there. We could make the choice to encounter Easter Island, and if we made that decision, if we had lunch on the beach, touched the giant stone figures, and made friends with the people, then we'd discover the truth that Easter Island is so much more than a sermon intro or a dot on a map. The truth is: Easter Island exists - whether we choose to go there or not. It is only by visiting the island that we will ever move from simply believing that Easter Island exists, to experiencing it personally, and it's only through personal experience that this island would ever become an important part of our daily life.

This thought can be applied to the Resurrection of our Lord. Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter Day, and we can choose to “go there” once a year to celebrate that fact, or we can choose to “live there,” to have a daily, personal encounter with the Risen Christ, and begin to discover the infinite magnitude of His importance every moment of every day - in this life, and the next. May this be our prayer today, that God would provide us with the grace we so desperately need, not to go there, but to live there, to set our affection on the Risen Christ, to choose Him every day. Like Mary, to walk with Him, and remain faithful to Him in the midst of our changing culture; to kneel at the Cross in the evening, seek Him early in the morning, and in the end, have our faithfulness rewarded on the day when Jesus greets us, and calls us by name.