

4.1.2018 Easter Day (Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-10)

You've probably seen them in pictures. Huge stone figures that on average stand thirteen feet high and weigh fourteen tons. The largest one is thought to weigh as much as 165 tons. There are about 900 of these giant statues on the island, and no one is sure why. In the year 1722, European explorers made contact with the isolated people whose ancestors carved these massive statues, and because it was Easter Day, the discovery was named: Easter Island. For centuries, Easter Island has fascinated people who've had the opportunity to visit this remote land. 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, according to recent news, be in jeopardy of being washed into the sea.

Two weeks ago, I read several articles that described Easter Island as the latest victim of climate change. 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. According to these articles, climate change is threatening the very existence of Easter Island, 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 constant, continuous, moment by moment, day by day transforming 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. 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, the crashing waves, and the 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 an island, it’s the heartland of our faith. Our culture pressures us to separate Sunday from Monday, religion from the rest of the week, but we must not, because Easter isn’t just a day of the year, it’s every day of the year. Christ is Risen! Every day. He is alive! Every day. He is our Lord and our God! Every day.

In the Epistle that we read this morning, St. Paul exhorts us, 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), because our souls long to be united to the God who created us. We were made to live in constant communion with the God who so perfectly, so personally, and so painfully, declared His love for us. The Bible offers examples of those who continuously seek Christ, but through Holy Week, and now once again on Easter Day, in Mary Magdalene we see an example of unceasing devotion like no other. 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, whose Truth is miraculous, fully present, and relevant every day of the year.

For just a moment, step back in time with me, and 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. He rescued her from a miserable existence, and the depth of her gratitude 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 gratitude, and the love that springs from a thankful heart, 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 and to devote her life completely to Him. If we look only at the events of Holy Week and Easter Day, it would be easy for us to conclude that no one loved our Lord as much as Mary. No one felt that they owed Him so much. It is Mary that we see last at the Cross, and first at the tomb.

When we consider Mary’s daily walk with Christ, the first striking truth that must be acknowledged is her grateful love. From the beginning, Mary’s example causes us to think about the price Jesus paid to rescue us from the most miserable existence, and it makes me wonder, could the failure to recognize how much we owe Him be one of the reasons why, for so many Christians, Easter becomes an island that is disconnected and irrelevant to daily life? It can certainly be said that if a person feels no gratitude for what Christ has done, they will find no reason to respond, and if someone has some measure of thankfulness, they might muster up a small response, but if we, like Mary, are deeply and intensely aware of what Christ has done for us, our grateful love for Him will have no limits. We will be those who spend, and are willing to be spent, in 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 Him as a living sacrifice, a life of service devoted to God’s use. It is this sacrificial devotion that leads 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 Jesus just days before, who were now calling for His crucifixion. When the crowd rejected Jesus and His message, strong men betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him, but 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, Jesus. 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. She 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 the disciples. She had a message for them, and today, by her example, the Apostle to the Apostles 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. In Mary's example we discover a way to make this truth a daily reality, relevant in every moment of our life. She shows us that it all begins with a grateful love of what Christ has done for you. When your heart is filled with loving gratitude, you will devote your life (on a daily basis) to the One who saved you, and in His perfect example, what you will find is that devotion means sacrifice, laying down your life for the One you love.

Here's a closing thought: As I prepared these words to share with you today, I often thought of Easter Island, but now that this sermon has been delivered, Easter Island probably won't cross my mind. It's just not a relevant part of my daily life. I've never been there, have no plans to visit, and soon I probably won't even be able to find the remote island on a map. However, I am well aware of something I could do to change that: I could choose to go there. I could make the choice to encounter Easter Island. If I made that decision, if I had lunch on the beach, touched the giant stone figures, and made friends with the people, then I would discover the truth that Easter Island is so much more than a sermon intro or an image on the screen of my computer. The truth is: Easter Island exists whether I choose to go there or not, but by visiting the island, I would move from simply knowing that Easter Island exists, to experiencing it personally. It is only through personal experience that I will begin to understand its relevance to my daily life.

I believe the same can be said about Easter Day, and the Resurrection of our Lord. God exists, and Jesus Christ rose from the dead whether we choose to "go there" or not, but when we make the decision to have a personal encounter with Him, then we discover His relevance in every moment of every day. So, my prayer for all of us this morning, is that we would make the choice to encounter the living God, Jesus Christ, who rose on Easter Day.

May we, like Mary Magdalene, walk with Him and remain faithful in the midst of our changing culture. May we, like Mary, kneel at the Cross in the evening and seek Him early in the morning, and by the grace of God, may we, like Mary, have our faithfulness rewarded when the Son of God greets us, and calls us by name.