

“Believing in Easter in An Age of Unbelief”**(sixth in a series of six)****1 Corinthians 15:3-20, 50-58****First Sunday Morning of Easter – Easter Day, April 11, 2004**

I think you would agree that it is an age of unbelief. Skepticism thrives, doesn't it? It's not anything new. It merely has new forms of expression. On a somewhat trivial note, yet one that is very real, there are still some folks who do not believe that humans have walked on the moon's surface. I know someone in another state who does not believe that the earth is round.

On a more serious note, there are some parents who tell their children not to believe everything they learn in school. Some find it hard to believe President Bush. Some find it hard to believe Senator Kerry. Some find it hard to believe any politician. Some find it hard to believe Condoleezza Rice. Some find it hard to believe Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, and others in the media. Some find it hard to believe leaders in the religious community – locally and internationally. Still others find it hard to believe anyone but himself or herself. This generation is a generation of unbelief.

It is in the context of this age of unbelief that we celebrate Easter. Even when it comes to Easter, there are some who refuse to believe that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Maybe some of you are unbelievers. I pray you will become a believer before you leave. Others of you, who are believers, may be asking, “How can someone not believe in the resurrection? It is so simple and easy to believe.” Is it? It may be easier to believe that humans have walked on the moon and viewed an earth that is round than it is to believe that somebody has been raised from the dead.

Unbelief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ dates all the way back to the first Easter Sunday, April 9, A.D. 30. It is nothing new. Those first disciples had difficulty when it came to believing. The women, the first to arrive at the empty tomb, stood astonished. The scripture says they were afraid. According to Luke's narrative in Luke 24, an angel appeared and reminded them that Jesus would be raised on the third day. That enabled them to overcome their fears. Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Joanna went and told the others what had happened. Luke says the Apostles reacted like this: **“But these words appeared to them as an nonsense, and they would not believe them” (24:11)**. Even Peter ran to the tomb and saw it empty. But he went away wondering what had happened.

A few years ago, there was a mini-series on television during Holy Week entitled “Jesus of Nazareth.” It was an impressive portrayal of Jesus life. In the scene about the raising of Jairus' daughter, Thomas, who was portrayed as the servant of Jairus and not yet a disciple, was the one who declared that the girl was dead. He said, “She is dead. I saw her.” Jesus said she was not and of course raised her. Later, as Jairus throws a feast in honor of Jesus and his daughter, Thomas approached Jesus and apologized. He said, “But I saw her. She was dead. I saw her.” Jesus replied, “Thomas do you have to see everything in order to believe?”

Many of us are a lot like Thomas, aren't we? We have to see in order to believe. On that first Easter Thomas declared, **“Unless I see... I will not believe” (John 20:25)**. There are times when we make the same declaration. The women, Peter, Thomas, and all of them need not be condemned for they reflect you and me.

About 25 years after the very first Easter, the resurrection would be questioned in the churches. It was especially questioned in Corinth. Some of the Christians there could not accept the fact that there was a resurrection of the dead, even if Jesus had been raised from the dead.

The text Hayley read from First Corinthians 15:3-20 and 50-58 accentuates the significance of the Lord's resurrection and what it would do for someone in the midst of unbelief. First Corinthians 15 is the oldest word on resurrection in the New Testament. It has a contemporary word for us on this Easter Sunday, April 11, AD 2004. A purpose for you and us is believing in Easter in an age of unbelief.

Don't you just love the opening words in verses 3-8? These words formed what was probably an early confession that the church used on Easter Sunday. The resurrected Jesus made a number of appearances – appearances to various people including Cephas, better known as Peter, and The Twelve. *“After that”* verse 6 says, *“He appeared to more than five hundred...at one time, ...”* That one really speaks to me.

Part of what Mike McCoy, the Missionary Journeyman with whom I worked in Mozambique, and I did last August was show “The Jesus Film” in the bush, which has been translated into Maccua. The first night we were going to show it, we discovered that the projector would not work. So we had to go back to Nampula, an hour and a half away, to get another projector. When we returned, I couldn't believe the mass of people. I was utterly shocked. I said to Mike, “There must be over 500 people here.” He said, “I think you are right Pastor Jimmy.” Mike and Pastor Moouamoo had everybody sit down and we showed the film. As I was watching it, under the shelter of the majestic Mozambican night sky, I thought about Jesus appearing to the 500 during those days after His resurrection. Then I thought, “He's appearing to another 500 tonight!” It was an incredible moment for me. As I have reflected on that moment and think of it now, I am reminded that believing in Easter in an age of unbelief is a wonderful purpose for you and us.

Easter, you see, is our faith. Paul preached Jesus as *“raised from the dead...”(v. 12)*. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the very heart of Christianity. All four gospel writers testify to the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. None of them, though, sought to explain the resurrection other than it was by the power of God. Even though they did not attempt to explain resurrection, they shared a common belief that the resurrection explained them. They were resurrection people who were walking in the newness of life. The resurrection explains who we are and that which concerns our lives. We are God's adopted children and we are to be about the business of obeying our Heavenly Father. Easter explains us. It is not something that we tack on to our faith. Easter is our faith.

I can remember this as if it happened yesterday. On the Saturday before Easter in 1994, ten years ago, Emily and Nicholas were talking about Easter. Nicholas said, “Today is Easter.” Emily said, “No tomorrow is Easter.” Around lunch, the same conversation occurred. Jackie and Emily both told Nicholas that tomorrow was Easter. I'm smart and stay out of those kinds of family discussions. Nicholas, though, kept insisting that it was today. Of course Emily and Jackie were wanting him to understand that it was the next day, Sunday. But Nicholas, in a sense, was right too. Because Easter is our faith, every day is Easter.

Because every day is Easter, Paul could say to the Corinthians, *“...if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain” (v. 14)*. If God did not raise Jesus Christ on that first Easter morning, then what I do here in this spot Sunday-after-Sunday is worthless. Everything hinges on resurrection. Without it, Christianity is nothing. Can you imagine life without Resurrection? I can't.

Thank God. Jesus Christ has been raised up! Because of that none of what you and I do is in vain if we believe in an age of unbelief. Friday at the Good Friday Ecumenical Worship Service at Trinity Baptist, I sat at the table with Joe and Evalyn Parrish, dear Tabernacle members, and some others. Evalyn said that she heard a something earlier in the morning that made sense. She said it and I then said, “I'm using something like that in my sermon Sunday!” It's an observation made by Peter Marshall. He said, “The stone of Jesus' tomb was a mere pebble compared to the Rock of Ages inside! The stone was rolled away from the door not to permit Christ to come out, but to enable the disciples to go in.”

What a purpose for you and us! Believing in Easter in an age of unbelief allows us to go into those dark musty caves of unbelief and come out believers. So what are some of your unbeliefs today? Do you have trouble believing your loneliness will ever end? Do you have trouble believing your fears will ever be conquered? Do you have trouble believing that there is more to life than just getting out

of bed early five, six, or seven days a week and going to work for 8 or 9 hours and coming back home exhausted, frustrated, and maybe short-tempered? Do you have trouble believing that the sufferings of the present moment can't be compared to the future glory that awaits all of us who are believers? Do you have trouble believing that God is with you, even if you are walking through the darkest valley: the valley of death's shadow?

If you find yourself in one or all of these caves of unbelief, there is a word of good news for you. You can get out of those caves of unbelief if you will go into the cave known as the empty tomb. Go in and look. You'll come out believing that your loneliness will end because the great "I AM" is always with you. You'll come out believing that your fears have been conquered because the Lord says, "Peace be still!" You'll come out believing that there is more to life than just getting up and going to work everyday because He has come to give you life and give it abundantly. You'll come out believing that present sufferings cannot be compared to the future because this same Jesus who was taken from you will come again someday in just the same way. Jesus will return. And you'll come out believing that God will walk with you even through death because nothing – not even death – will ever separate you from Him. It takes faith and courage to come out of those caves of unbelief. It takes faith and courage to go into the empty tomb.

Our unbeliefs, whatever they may be, may be transformed into belief through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul never says that Jesus raised Himself. Neither Jesus, the disciples, nor the angels did it. Paul says God raised Him from the dead. God alone did it. Just as God raised up Christ, He'll raise us up right now so we can come safely out of those caves of unbelief into the sunlight of belief.

Paul helps us understand that belief in Easter in an age of unbelief is really easy. It is not clear why some of the Corinthians did not believe. Maybe they thought the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul was adequate and that any idea of the resurrection was an embarrassing Jewish handicap to the progress of the gospel in the Gentile world. Maybe some of them believed it was more important to focus on the present rather than the future. For some Corinthians, it may have been easier to be a non-believer in resurrection than a believer. The same is true for some people today. It is easier not to believe than it is to believe. Or is it?

A college professor once heard a student laugh at the mention of the resurrection. The professor threw a silver goblet into a jar of acid, which completely dissolved it. Then she threw in a substance, which precipitated the silver on the bottom of the jar. She later took the silver to a silver smith who made it into a goblet more beautiful than before. The professor then said to that college student, "If I, an ordinary scientist, can dissolve and remake a silver goblet, is it a thing incredible that God can raise the body from the dead?"

If you have experienced the death of someone dear to you, then you know that it is not an incredible thing that God can raise up a body from the grave. Paul said if Christ has not been raised up, ***"Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished"*** (v. 18). Christ's resurrection assures the believer that death really means life. Those who have died in Jesus Christ have not perished. We are not to be pitied if we believe. We are to be envied because we hope, not in this life, but in a life to come. Jesus Christ is alive. He is awake! ***"But now"***, says Paul, ***"Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep"*** (v. 20).

On Good Friday evening, Freida Vaughn died. The mother of Barbara Burson, this saintly lady graced her life in Tabernacle for years. As I visited with Barbara and John on Friday evening, both remarked what better day than Good Friday for Freida to go and be with Jesus. They are right. Those who die in Christ, go to be with Christ in Paradise. Freida is alive. She is awake.

Some people have difficulty waking up. I was visiting the hospital sometime ago and as I was walking down the hall toward the room I would visit, the closer I came to the room, the louder it

became. It was obviously coming from the room. It was the sound of snoring! This person, whom I'll not call by name, was snoring. I mean you've never heard snoring like this. Talk about waking the dead! I softly spoke this person's name. The snoring continued. I spoke it a bit louder. Still only snoring. I got up close to the person's ear and spoke directly into the ear just a bit louder than before. No response, except the snoring. I pulled out my fountain pen and wrote a note. I placed the note on the table by the phone, then placed the cap back on my pen. You know the sound. You can barely hear it. "Click." [hold the pen close to my microphone.] Just as soon as the pen "clicked," the person stopped snoring, opened those eyes and said, "Hey Jimmy. How are you doing?" The click of a pen woke that person up!

If a fountain pen can do that, think what a trumpet blast will do! I have confidence in what Paul said: *"...we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed"* (vv. 51b-52). Death's sting has been removed and our resurrection has been sealed. It has been guaranteed. It is protected by the power of God. John and Barbara are going to see Freida again. Rosie Carroll died last week. She'll be seen again. Linnie Redding, Wylene Dukes' and Katherine Walker's mother, died last week. She'll be seen again. Oh, if you genuinely believe in Easter, then the sting of death has been removed and resurrection is guaranteed and the joy of living in the fullness of resurrection life can be experienced right now. Yes! You can be awake and full right now.

Bob committed himself to vocational ministry late in life. While preparing his first Easter sermon, Mark, his eight year-old son, came into the study eating a box of animal crackers. Mark asked his dad what he was doing and Bob told him that he was working on his Easter sermon. Mark made the mistake of asking what it was about and Bob saw a chance to practice. Bob finished and asked Mark if he understood what Easter was about. Mark replied, "Yes Sir." Bob asked Mark to explain it back to him. Mark thought for a moment and said, "Well, it's like this box of animal crackers." Bob thought his son had missed the whole point of the sermon. But when he asked him to explain what he meant by that, Mark gave this reply: "In just a minute, this box is going to be empty, but I am going to be full."

That is the message of Easter in an age of unbelief. The tomb is empty and because of it, you can be full. What a purpose for you and us. We can be full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can be full of the confidence in knowing that death is not the end. We can be full of realizing that the sting has literally been taken out of death. We can be full of knowing that the victory has been given to us through Jesus Christ if we will only believe. We can be full of the desire to serve Him faithfully, knowing that our service is not in vain. Thanks be to God! The tomb is empty. Allow God's purpose in the Empty Tomb to grab you. Believe in Easter in this skeptical age of unbelief and you will be full. I guarantee it. You will be full! So what do you believe this Easter Day?

Prayer

For the joy of believing in Easter in an age of unbelief, we give thanks, O God. Help us in those times when we are tempted not to believe. May this purpose for each of us individually and all of us collectively, inspire us to look forward to the future with hope. May we live with joy and purpose in our lives as we await the day when the Lord's trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will be raised. As we wait, empower us to labor for you as we journey through life. Thank you for the promise that one day all of earthy life will be over and we'll be transported from this life to the next and hear our names called from the roll of the saints of the ages. Through Jesus Christ, our Resurrected Lord... Amen.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
Tabernacle Baptist Church
Carrollton, GA**

All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.