

Is It Too Good To Be True?

Luke 24:1-9, Easter Sunday

April 16, 2006

Beloved of the Lord....Friday evening, shortly before 6:00 P.M., the faithful women who believed in Jesus, visited the tomb where Jesus was laid to rest. They "beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments." Early Sunday morning, just around dawn, these women returned to the tomb. As a final act of love, they would finish preparing Jesus' body. As they came into the cemetery, they realized they had no one to roll the stone away. They had no way of getting into the tomb!

As it turned out, there was no need. Much to their surprise, "they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre." What had happened here? Walking into the tomb they could not find the body of Jesus! As they stood there in shock, much perplexed and puzzled, two men suddenly appeared in brilliant white clothing which blinded their eyes! These were angels from God! Now the women are frightened! They bow their faces down to the ground before the angels! They tremble inside. What are angels doing here? What is happening! The angels ask the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen." Go and tell the disciples that Jesus rose from the dead!

This news was just too good to be true! Could it really be that Jesus had risen from the dead? In the minds of the women there was now a flurry of emotions. They ran away from the tomb in fear and amazement. Did it really happen as the angels said?

Often in our own lives when we are told something absolutely wonderful we wonder, "Can this really be true? Perhaps there is a mistake?" Sometimes the news we receive is so good, that we don't want to believe it until we know for certain it is true. Perhaps we live in fear and disbelief until the truth is proven to us beyond all doubt.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is indeed good news. For His conquering of sin and death gives us life, true spiritual life, which leads to life everlasting in heaven. Yet this Gospel news is so wonderful, that many don't believe it today. Many sit in disbelief, in the prison cell of unbelief, and the wonderful gift of salvation which is presented to them is rejected as if it is not real or genuine. Let us therefore devote all of our attention this glorious Easter morning, to learn the meaning behind the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed it is good news, and it is true news!

I. The prison cell of unbelief. The theme for our sermon today is a question, namely "Is it too good to be true?" Consider a criminal who has been caught and now sits in prison. He is a thief, a murderer, who has been imprisoned for his crimes. Day after day, year after year he sits there in utter misery. One day the jailer comes to him, takes out the key to his cell, unlocks and opens the cell door. The jailer

then says, "The judge has set you free. You are acquitted of all crimes. Get out of here, and enjoy your freedom."

Perhaps in the mind of the criminal, he is thinking this is too good to be true! Perhaps this is a setup and they are going to kill me as soon as I get out? Perhaps I am better off in this cell? And then for his own reasons, he stays in his cell. After several minutes of trying to convince the criminal he is free, the jailer gives up and walks away. He leaves the cell door wide open, but the criminal stays inside. He will not leave his prison because he does not believe the news. This news is too good to be true, and so it must not be true. So he stays and continues in his misery.

II. The resurrection of Christ sets the world free from sin.

This picture of the criminal and his open cell door has spiritual meaning. It is a picture of spiritual unbelief. But to properly understand it, we must understand who these criminals are and why they are in prison. First, the criminal of our picture is the sinner. You and I are criminals. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, all people are born into the slavery of sin. Sin imprisons and binds us all. The Bible says, "When we were children, [we] were in bondage under the elements of the world." Gal. 4:3 Sin brings spiritual bondage to our soul. We become servants to sin. Jesus said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." Jn 8:34 This spiritual bondage brings death and damnation. Because of sin we will die. And if God is to be just and upright, He must and will punish all who transgress His commandments. Therefore by nature, by birth, we are worthy of the imprisonment of death and even hell. In this world we are spiritual prisoners on death row! Jesus said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Lk 13:3

But not far from our prison cell something glorious takes place. God sends His own Son to this earth, who volunteers to take the place of the criminal! Jesus Christ is the Hero of the day! He is the Champion, the Mighty Redeemer, a Friend of sinners! Holy, Holy, Holy is the King of kings, and Lord of lords! Christ leaves His heavenly throne on high, becomes a man, suffers and dies on the cross! Lifted up between heaven and earth on that cross, Jesus hangs before the angry Judge and says "I will take all their punishment upon myself! I will pay their price so they can go free!" The cross brought Him death, but it gave us life!

By doing so, Jesus leads captivity captive. Of Jesus the Bible says, "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, *for* the rebellious also, that the LORD God might dwell *among them*." Ps. 68:18 Jesus led captivity captive by purchasing for us the remission of sins with His own body on the cross. Though we were captive by way of our own sins, He took these sins upon Himself, paying for them with His own blood. In this way Jesus purchased for us our freedom, and opened the gates of paradise before us! Jesus became God's gift to man, and by His death we are set free!

The proof of our freedom is best seen in the glorious resurrection of our Lord on that first Easter Sunday! For if Jesus had not paid for the sins of all men, then He would not

have risen from the dead! But HE DID PAY FOR THE SINS OF ALL MEN, and so it was a complete and perfect sacrifice! This is why Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished." The work of atonement for the WHOLE WORLD was finished! Our Jesus then is the Savior of all men, all criminals, all the ungodly. On the third day He rose again, as living proof, proof positive, that the Father was now reconciled with a world of sinners. Most importantly, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead proves that God has saved the whole world from sin! "God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Likewise, the Bible says "He died for all". God leaves nobody out of this picture. All criminals have been acquitted of their crimes and set free. It is like a prison hall at lunch time. All the doors are electronically unlocked and open automatically. All are allowed to leave their cells and head for the chow hall. The only difference is that the freedom that Christ has purchased for us means we are now dead to sin, and free to serve our Savior in perfect freedom and love. If we love Him we will keep His commandments.

It is thus true and right to say that the Gospel news is old but true news. Jesus died and paid for your sins before you were even born. God has already proclaimed the whole world forgiven of all sin roughly 2000 years ago. This Gospel Word is a world-wide message, to be joyfully received by all. This message was already active and in place before we were born. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross, is now a part of history, yet it is for all time. It is a living history, for God the Holy Spirit is continually calling sinners to repentance. He is calling you to repentance this day! Our repentance is complete when we know and believe that through Christ Jesus, we have been freed from our sin!

III. Since you are freed, do not stay in prison any longer! This then brings us back to the prisoner who sits in his cell. Is this Gospel news from the jailer too good to be true? Will we believe it and walk free out of that cell? Sad to say many do not believe this glorious news. Many hear God's Word, they hear of Christ, they hear He died for all, they hear that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses them of all sin, YET THEY REMAIN IN THEIR PRISON CELL! Perhaps in our own minds we wonder about these things. Is it really true that God has already, in the past, absolved all men? even the ungodly? even the worst criminals? Are even they forgiven? Who could believe such a thing! Yet all of this is true because God's Word tells us so! The whole world is indeed cleansed and forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ.

But then why doesn't everybody go to heaven? If all are forgiven, if all are absolved, if Christ died for all, then why don't all go to heaven? The answer is unbelief! Because of unbelief, many reject the priceless treasure of Jesus, and so they justly lose the benefit of heaven. Many are like the criminal who remains in his prison cell, though the jailer has opened wide the door to freedom! Many when they hear the Gospel Word, sit in unbelief and remain in their slavery to sin. Often they are crippled with the idea

that they must still somehow earn their own freedom by good behavior. Others stay because they do not even realize they are in prison. Some in prison continue to declare their innocence, though they know they are guilty. Some think they can work the legal system, or find a loophole in God's laws, or perhaps a secret passage which no one knows about. And finally some are so blinded by their hatred for God and man, that they are prisoners of anger. Blinded by sin, they refuse to see the Gospel light of Jesus Christ!

May God mercifully guide us to His truth! Let us repent of our sins and evil ways, and look to Him in hope and faith. When God tells us "Thy sins be forgiven Thee", we are to believe that God always tells us the truth. For whether we believe it or not, whether the criminal in the cell believes it or not, God's Word is true, and therefore His Gospel Word of forgiveness is true too. Our unbelief, or that of others will not change the truth of God's Word. But if we refuse to believe in the forgiveness of sins purchased by Christ, rest assured we will lose the benefits of that forgiveness. Jesus said "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." Jn. 3:36 Unbelief spurns the free gift of God. It doesn't believe the Gospel message, and so the prisoner remains in the cell of unbelief. Faith on the other hand joyfully accepts the free gift of salvation from God. It trusts in Jesus and so leads to everlasting life. Faith accepts the pardoning hand which the Lord reaches out to you.

Therefore beloved of the Lord, let us break forth from these chains of sin and death, and let us victoriously rise up in the faith and hope of Christ Jesus. Cast aside the works of darkness and go and sin no more! Indeed our Lord Jesus on the first Easter morning broke the bands of death, and came forth from that grave very much alive, absolutely victorious! Christ Jesus has broken the bands of death for us, He has conquered that old evil foe - the devil, and we need no longer remain in our prison cell! Christ has flung the door wide open, and heaven is our home! He is risen! He is risen! Christ Jesus our Lord! Cast off those fetters of sin and unbelief and walk boldly in the freedom wherewith Christ hath made you free! Behold now is the day of your salvation! Now is the time to see the pardoning hand of God reach out toward you, showing His complete and perfect reconciliation with you! Accept the good and gracious hand of the Lord, for He will pull you out of that prison cell, into the glorious liberty of His grace! Break forth from that prison cell my beloved, live in joyful faith on the side of life, where there is eternal peace, love, and hope. Though sin has always been our enemy, Christ has conquered our enemy for us! Go forth and serve Him this glorious day of Easter. And may the light of God's grace continually shine upon your path, as you go forth in freedom as a new man, a new creature. Though the Gospel message of Jesus Christ sounds too good to be true, it is true indeed! May God help us to know it! Amen