

Assurance in the Days of Uncertainty

John 20:1-18

April 12, 2020

In March 1992, the Department of Social Services of Greenville County, South Carolina sent out a letter to a dead person informing him that his food stamps would be stopped immediately. The letter states:

“Your food stamps will be stopped effective immediately because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.”¹

We chuckle as we read this little story. Knowing that they wrote this letter to a dead person, I wonder if they truly believed in the resurrection of the dead. The only person I know who has ever had this kind of “change of circumstances” was Jesus.

Some years ago, there was a report that archaeologists in the Holy Land had discovered the tomb of the High Priest Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the one who directed and steered the plot to arrest, convict, and crucify Jesus. And he was successful in doing that. The interesting thing, however, is that the archaeologists found Caiaphas’ corpse but no one has ever found Jesus’ body. Caiaphas died but Jesus lives.

On the first Easter morning, Caiaphas received incredible news from the guards who were guarding Jesus’ tomb. They reported that there was an earthquake that shook the ground violently and the stone that blocked the entrance of the tomb rolled away. When they looked inside, it was empty. Hearing this, Caiaphas called an emergency meeting with other religious leaders and came up with a story to hide the fact that Jesus might have actually risen from the dead. These religious leaders met with the guards and gave them a large sum of money, telling them, “Say that his disciples came during the night and stole the body away while you were asleep.”²

While this was happening, several women took the spices they prepared and went to the tomb. They never expected that Jesus would rise from the dead. Rising from a peaceful death was unimaginable let alone from crucifixion.

¹ [http://www.anvari.org/fortune/Quotations - Stupid/106_your-food-stamps-will-be-stopped-effective-march-1992-because-we-received-notice-that-you-passed-away.html](http://www.anvari.org/fortune/Quotations_-_Stupid/106_your-food-stamps-will-be-stopped-effective-march-1992-because-we-received-notice-that-you-passed-away.html)

² Matthew 28:11-13.

As they walked to the tomb, they were preoccupied with one problem: “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”³ They did not go to the tomb to meet the risen Christ. They went there to complete the final acts of love and respect for their dead teacher, but what they saw in the tomb was not the dead body of Jesus. They encountered a young man dressed in white robe who told them: “Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. Look, this is the place where he laid. He is not here. He has risen. Go and tell his disciples.”⁴ This is how the Gospel of Mark recorded it.

John’s Gospel is a little different in its description. Mary Magdalene and possibly a few others went to the tomb while it was still dark. They saw the tomb opened. The body was missing. They went back home. But Mary Magdalene went to Peter and another disciple, possibly John, and told them that Jesus body had disappeared.⁵ Mary, Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb and found it empty. Peter and the other disciple went back to their homes, but Mary stayed at the tomb.

Mary stayed perhaps because she was exhausted with grief, pain and despair. She wept in frustration and anger. There she encountered two angels who asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “Because they have taken my Lord away,” she said. Then she heard a voice that was very familiar to her. The tone, the gentleness. She heard a name, her own name, “Mary.”

Then the whole world changed for her. She probably did not understand “how” Jesus was standing there. But “how” was not important to her. What was important to her was the fact that her Lord was right there in place of her grief and despair, not just in spirit but in flesh. By the power of God Almighty, Christ had risen. His resurrection healed all of her agony and pain.

What Mary experienced gives us an assurance that the Lord lives, and his resurrection brings us the promise of eternal life. “Everyone who believes in him, (believes in the one who has defeated the power of death,) shall not perish but have everlasting life.”⁶ This is the message of Easter.

As the Coronavirus pandemic still threatens our lives, we realize that life does not go on forever. There is death for everyone. Every person faces mortality. There is no technology or medical advancement that will guarantee everlasting

³ Mark 16:1-3

⁴ Mark 16:4-7

⁵ John 20:1-2

⁶ John 3:16

physical existence. We will all die. However, because of Christ's resurrection and his promise of eternal life, we have the hope of our own resurrection. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."⁷

When life brings hardships, suffering, and adversities, we often wonder if there is hope, if there is new life, if there is reason for joy.

Consider the disciples for a moment. The most powerful evidence of Jesus' resurrection is not the empty tomb. It is the transformation of the disciples. Their despair and disappointment changed to invigorating joy. Their fear changed to boldness. Soon after Jesus died, they hid themselves behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. But in less than two months they went from terrified cowards to courageous apostles who stood in front of thousands of people proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. This change in their boldness, this transformation is the most powerful proof that Jesus resurrected.

All of Jesus' disciples, except John, were martyred. They all had a horrible deaths. Do you think they would give up their lives to perpetuate a lie or to promote a hoax? I think not!

Because of this, we know there is hope! Yes, there is reason for joy! It is all because our Lord lives!

Christ's resurrection is the very foundation of our faith. Without it we have nothing. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised from the dead then your faith is in vain and our preaching is in vain. Not only that, we have been found to be misrepresenting God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."⁸

Because of the resurrection, because we believe our Lord lives, we can have positive attitude in life. From the beginning to the end of Jesus' life story, God's message for the believers was consistent. That message was "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid no matter what we face. Before Jesus was born, the angel Gabriel came to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and said: "Do not be afraid." An angel also appeared to Joseph, Mary's husband, and said, "Do not be afraid." When Jesus was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds in the field and said: "Do

⁷ John 11:25-26

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:14-15a.

not be afraid.” When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, the message was “Do not be afraid.”

God’s message to the believers has always been consistent: “Do not be afraid” no matter what you face. Our Lord said to his disciples, “Because I live, you will also live.”⁹

“Call upon me in the days of your trouble, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me.”¹⁰ No matter how difficult life may be, no matter how uncertain it may be, we need to trust the Lord and keep the positive attitude.

Psychologist Lee Salk once shared about his mother, Dora. As a young girl in Russia, Dora was driven from her home by Cossacks who burned her entire village to the ground. She fled for her life, hiding in a hay wagon and huddling in ditches. It was a terrifying experience.

Eventually, she crossed the sea to America in a crowded ship. She was only 12 years old when she arrived in New York City in 1901. As soon as she arrived in New York, she went to work – 16 hours a day in a sweatshop. After long hours of work, she tried to go to school at night, but kept falling asleep over her books. She could not keep up with her studies. Her life in New York was very hard, but she never lost hope.

Life was still hard even after she married and had three sons,. But she never allowed her family to despair, especially her children. She urged Lee and his brothers to think about what they had, not what they did not have. She taught them that in hardship you develop an ability to appreciate the beauty that exists in the simplest elements of life. The attitude that she conveyed to her children was: “When it gets dark enough, you can see the stars.”¹¹

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark but the darkness was soon overcome with light. That is the message of Easter. Whatever darkness we may face in life, whether that is a family concern, health concern, economic concern, Easter promises us more than the stars in our darkness. Easter promises us that in the midst of our darkness and uncertainty, the Son rises to dispel the darkness forever.

⁹ John 14:19

¹⁰ Psalm 50:15

¹¹ From King Duncan’s sermon, “*While It Was Still Dark*”, www.esermons.com.