

EASTER MESSAGE – WHICH ONE?

Since I first sang as a choirboy at the age of nine, I have heard sixty years’ worth of Easter Sermons – and given quite a few, both when working in parishes and as a school chaplain.

The main message of Easter is sometimes missed.

The Three Messages

There are three main messages at Easter.

- The Tomb was Empty
- Christ the Lord is Risen
- Jesus is Alive

There does seem to be a tendency to stress the first at the expense of the second and third – the *then* rather than the *now*.

Among the reasons for this are:

1. For most loyal worshipping Christians, Eastertide is a long and glorious celebration until Ascension. So on it’s first day, Easter Day, one can spend time Easter Morning on the Empty Tomb, knowing that on the evening of Easter day and later Sundays there will be ample opportunity to reflect on the Scriptures relating to the Risen Christ.

2. Another cause for an emphasis on the Empty Tomb is strong among those whose ministry it is, often in academic communities, to commend the historical basis of Christianity. They will wish to give sound answers to the usual question. Was the Resurrection an historical event or just wish-fulfilment?

These two very different approaches can end up *missing* the main Easter message if they are not careful.

Although the Empty Tomb is important, **it is not the main message of Easter.**

The Empty Tomb played its part in preparing the Apostles for the astonishing fact that their dead Master was now the Risen Lord.

It was Christ who was the subject of the Resurrection. The Tomb was not resurrected – it was just an important pointer towards it. Indeed, one might almost say that the Empty Tomb is the one place where Christ is *not*! The stone needed to be rolled away more, I suspect, because the leading disciples needed to go **in**, than because it was necessary to let Christ **out**!

In many churches on Easter morning there will be folk who will not appear again until Christmas. It can be a mistake to preach in such a way that they assume that the central Christian message is the Empty Tomb of the 1st century, not the Risen Christ of the 21st!

This can make the Christian faith appear to them merely as a commemoration of past events – like Remembrance Sunday, and not the dynamic now-event affirmed in the amazing claim:

The Lord is here!

His Spirit is with us!

Two Opposite Approaches

In presenting the Easter message one may work from the past forward – or from the present back.

Working Forward

If working from the past *forward*, it is important that casual Easter worshippers are led from the impersonal and largely negative Empty Tomb to the personal, positive and present **Christ encounter**.

Mary’s Easter Day experience [John 20:1-18] consisted mainly of two things –

- **The Empty Tomb**
- **The Jesus Encounter**

When Mary told the disciples of her experience, it is summarised in the words:

I have seen the Lord.

After that, according to John’s Gospel, she told them what the Lord had said to her. The Empty Tomb is no longer mentioned in the narrative. It has been eclipsed by the Easter Christ and the Easter Message.

Other encounters are vivid depictions of the Easter Message –

- the Disciples at Emmaus [Luke 24:13-35],
- the Disciples in the Upper Room [John 20:19-23],
- Thomas’s ‘***My Lord and my God***’ [John 20:24-29].

These are best not thought of as ‘*after* Easter events’ – but events which put the Easter Message in sharp focus for us. In churches which normally consider these only in Sunday *after* Easter it is good idea – assuming they have visitors – to use such stories on Easter Day.

Working Back

In teaching, one can work *backwards* from the present to the past.

(This is based on the maxim ‘beginning where people are’. If the goal is Scripture this approach need not be suspect. It is only when it has no goal, or is too undisciplined to reach it, that it falls short of Christian preaching!)

In this approach, the Easter Message begins with NOW!

‘The Lord is here! His Spirit is with us!’

When the Easter message is delivered this way around, then the local Christian community is immediately presented as the most evident place of Resurrection – not first-century Jerusalem.

The local committed Christian is where the transforming power of Christ’s resurrection has taken root and is growing! He/she will be one of the main means whereby non-Christians can encounter the Risen Christ.

There is a simple chorus which points to the Resurrection with more power than the Empty Tomb of the first century. It runs –

**He lives! He lives!
Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me,
and talks with me,
along life’s narrow way.
He lives! He Lives!
Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know he lives ?
he lives within my heart.**

Its power lies not in its words, but in the millions and millions of Christians over twenty centuries for whom it has been/is true. Not least those who have faced martyrdom rather than deny it.

Resurrection is true because the local Christian community regularly experiences the Risen Christ

- being with those, as promised [Matthew 18:20], who meet together in his name and
- making himself known to us in the Breaking of the Bread [Luke 24:35].

The local worshipping Christian community is the focus of Resurrection, the meeting place with the Risen Christ, the place of New Life, of Sins Forgiven, of Victory over Death.

How can this be?

The Easter Message is to answer that question as Jesus himself did on the Road to Emmaus.

***Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them
The things about himself in all the Scriptures.***

Wonder of wonders ! Easter is NOW.
We need the THEN of Scripture to understand it.

~~The Lord was Risen~~
~~The Lord was Risen Indeed~~

The Lord IS Risen!
He IS Risen Indeed!

Alleluia !