

THE CALL OF EASTER

A sermon by James R Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, California
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Text: Matthew 28:1-10

A certain Sunday school teacher asked her first grade class: "What is Easter?" Hands went up. "Easter is when the Easter bunny comes!" said one. "Well, that's not quite our meaning of Easter," said the teacher. "It's Easter egg hunts!" spouted another. "No that's not it either," said the teacher, now feeling a bit uneasy about God-only-knows what other answer might come. "What do you say, Ethan?" she said. "Well Easter is when Jesus comes out of the tomb." "Right!" said the teacher, with a breath of relief ... until Ethan continued: "and if he sees his shadow, it's another three months of winter."

Actually, it's not just children who are confused about Easter. Adults are too. I mean, really, have you ever wondered what possible connection eggs and bunnies have to Jesus and the empty tomb?

The roots of this confusion go all the way back to the fourth century, when Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and that became the official religion of the empire. Whole peoples and tribes were baptized into the new state religion. Not wanting to surrender their old pagan festivals, they brought them along into their Christian faith, filling them with a new Christianized meaning.

The word *Easter* comes from the name *Oestre*, Teutonic goddess of fertility. The festival of *Oestre* was originally a springtime fertility rite which, at planting time, called down a blessing on the year's crop. The egg and rabbit? *Symbols* of fertility!

So now, across all these centuries, we have the dual meanings and symbolisms of Easter: The Christian meanings on the one hand, and the remnants of long-since-forgotten pagan rituals on the other.

I want to talk to you this morning about the meaning of Easter from its Christian perspective. No other day is more vital to the understanding of Christianity than the day Jesus rose from the dead. Take that day out of the Christian calendar, and you no longer have Christianity. "If Christ be not raised from the dead," declared Paul, "your faith is vain."

The story of the empty tomb is the heart and root of our Christian faith. And what do we note about this story?

This, first of all: that the first ears that ever heard it, the first eyes that beheld its evidence, and the first mouths that ever proclaimed its wonder, were those of women. "You're looking for the crucified one?" said the angel to the women, "He is not here. He is risen."

Now note the kind of response the angel called the terrified women to make to this amazing message: "Come and see where he lay, and go quickly to tell his disciples." Enclosed in this encounter are four imperatives that all across the centuries have been the essential call of the Gospel message.

Come. See. Go. Tell.

Let us examine each of these four imperatives, to see what they suggest to us this morning about **our** fitting response to the Easter of the empty tomb.

I. COME

What a warm and charming word that is! An inclusive word. A welcoming word. An inviting word. Come!

It was the first word of invitation spoken to those terrified women at the empty tomb. And it has ever since been the core of the Christian message.

Not, first of all, a word of censure.

Not, first of all, a word of demand.

Not, first of all, a verdict or criticism.

But a word of welcome. That is God's approach to us!

You find it across the Scriptures:

"**Come**, behold the works of the LORD." (Ps. 46:8)

"*Come* and see what God has done: awesome in deeds among mortals (Ps. 66:5)

"*Come* let us reason together," says the Lord, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool." (Is 1:18)

"Everyone who thirsts, *come* to the waters." (Is 54:14)

"**Come** and pray to me, and I will hear you." (Jer. 29:12)

"**Come**, let us return to the LORD ... he will heal us" (Hos. 6:1)

"**Come** to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," said Jesus, "and I will give you rest." Mt. 11:28

"**Come**, follow me" he said to his disciples. (Mt. 19:21)

"Whoever comes to me, I will never cast out." (Jn. 6:37)

Here is a God, says the Bible, who dwells in unapproachable light; a God who is exalted above the heavens; a God who is splendid in power and breathtaking in holiness. In Jesus Christ, this God steps into the turmoil of our world, preaches a message of welcome, swings open the front door, turns on the porch light, puts out the welcome mat, and says "Come."

And to whom is this invitation extended? Not just to the religious and pious. But to the lowly and lost, the bewildered and beleaguered, the deprived and the discarded." Go out into the alleys and byways, said the King to his servants in Jesus' parable, and gather them to my banquet—the poor, the lame and the blind. "Whosoever will."

It doesn't matter where you've been, or what you've done. It doesn't matter whether you're theologically astute or confused, whether your heritage is Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or Agnostic; whether you're American, Palestinian, Jewish, Asian or African. The invitation is for all.

"*Come*," said the angel to the women. Then ...

II. SEE

There are two different words in the original Greek of the New Testament translated into the one English word *see*. There is the seeing you do with your eyes. And there is the seeing you do with your mind, much like in the English when someone explains something to us and we say, "I see."

The *see* of the angel's invitation in this passage is the latter: not just to cast a glance, but to study, to peruse, to comprehend, to observe.

“He is not here,” says the angel. “He is risen! But don’t just take my word for it, Come and *see* for yourself, come and investigate the evidence, and take it in, that the tomb is empty.”

All through the Scriptures, we find this same open approach to the Christian faith. Not a religion of secret rooms and riddles or rituals; not a religion of buried books and hidden meanings that only a few enlightened souls are allowed to understand. But a faith that openly appeals to eyewitness testimony, that invites the inquirer, the doubter, the skeptic to come investigate the evidence.

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,” wrote Peter, “because we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.”

“That which was from the beginning,” wrote John, “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands ... this we proclaim to you.”

Sometimes I think the church is afraid of folks who want to cross examine our beliefs. We build a fortress around our faith and cast a suspicious eye on any who would dare question it. As if honest inquiry could ever throw the truth into question. As if any rumbling of cynicism or skepticism could make the temple of truth totter and fall.

Years ago, I had a friend whose son quit going to confirmation class. She couldn’t get him to go back. He wanted nothing more to do with the church. And she couldn’t get him to talk about it. So she contacted the pastor who was teaching the class and asked what had happened. Here’s what the pastor said: “He asks too many questions.”

Nowhere do you find this spirit in the New Testament. Never do you see Jesus turning away an honest skeptic.

The disciples who heard about the empty tomb from the women that morning, they were all skeptics. Here came the women saying, “The tomb is empty! He is risen!” The disciples thought the women had lost their senses, that their grief had driven them to hysteria. But the disciples went to investigate for themselves, and they came away believers. Not despite the evidence, you see, but in view of it.

So the invitation of the Christian faith has always been *come and see*. Come and examine. Come and check it out for yourself.

Why do you suppose the stone was rolled back from the tomb? To let Jesus out? Jesus was already gone. No, it was to let the world see in.

The tomb is empty. Christ is risen! Come and see.

Now note the next imperative.

III. Go

Here is a dynamic that pervades all of the Christian faith. *Come and see*. But don’t hang around and build a shrine. *Go*.

This is not a religion that gets stuck in contemplation. Not a religion that lingers at holy places trying to get a magical blessing. Not a religion that squats behind monastery walls. No, it is a religion of initiative and action and transformation and change.

But you’d never know it, looking at a lot of the Church in history: Cloistered societies, satisfied to nourish their tidy traditions and friendship circles behind church walls, satisfied to attend worship once in a while on Sundays, but doing little to put their religion to work to change the world around.

Jesus never commanded the world to go to church. He commanded the Church to go to the world.

“Go” said the angel to the women. Go do what?

IV. Tell.

This completes the cycle of the dynamic Christian faith. We come to Christ. We see what Christ has done and can do. Then we go and tell what we’ve seen.

Good News is what this message is called. Good News is for telling!

When I was a kid, I saw a TV ad that has stuck in my mind all across the years.

Here’s this guy sitting in a train terminal. Suddenly he is approached by a stranger who hands him a check for a million dollars and says, “This check is yours to keep and to cash, on one condition: that you tell no one, not a soul, not a word, about it.” Then the stranger walks away. The man sits stunned, eyes bulging as he studies this incredible check.

Moments later, another man sits down beside him. Unable to contain himself any longer, the man with the check leans over and says, “You’ll never believe what just happened to me. A total stranger just handed me this check for a million dollars!” At that moment the donor appears out of nowhere, snatches the check from his hand and tears it in half.”

What’s the message? Good news is just too good to keep yourself. Next time something wonderful happens to you, just try not telling anyone about it. Try keeping it to yourself. You can’t do it.

That was the spirit of the first century Christians. They *went* everywhere proclaiming “Christ is risen! Our sins are forgiven! Our hope is restored!” And they turned the world upside down in the simple telling of their stories.

You may not be able to spout theology. You may not be able to quote particular verses of the Bible. But you can tell what Jesus has done for you! How Jesus has touched you, how Jesus has healed you, how Jesus has provided for you, how Jesus has been your companion in sorrow and your strength in weakness. Tell that! And if you have nothing to tell, it is doubtful whether you have ever known him. For it would be impossible to know such a magnificent personage and have nothing to tell of it.

Come. See. Go. Tell.

Which of these imperatives most relates to you in your present journey?

Come. Maybe you’ve grown distant from God. Your flaws or failings have made you feel cut off from hope. “Come let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. *Come.*”

Maybe you’ve been overburdened and overscheduled and overwrought. You’ve carried the world on your shoulders. “Come to me all who are weary and burdened,” said Jesus,” and I will give you rest for your soul. *Come.*”

Maybe in one way or another, you’ve wandered far from God and you think you’ve drifted too far to come back. “Come to me all the *ends of the earth.*” *Come.*

See. Are you a skeptic? A doubter? A cynic when it comes to God and Christianity? And you've felt no place for your questions? *Come and see!* Come and investigate. Question. Cross examine. The truth will stand up to your scrutiny.

Come and *See*. And then:

Go and tell. Perhaps you have come and you *have* seen. You know what God can do. You've seen God work. You've seen God answer prayer. You've seen God heal the sick. You've seen God provide in times of need. You've *seen*, and now your challenge is to *go and tell*.

There someone in your life who feels lost or hopeless or sick or discouraged. Perhaps need to hear this Easter message: how the risen Christ can change despair to hope. Perhaps they need to hear the story of what the Risen One has done for you.

God of life,

We give you thanks for this Day when we remember with wonder the empty tomb: a day of new beginnings, of life's triumph over death, of light's power over darkness, of hope's ascendancy above despair.

Not only in this hour and on this day, but through all the hours and days of the year, help us to walk in the spirit of the One who showed us the way of healing rather than harm, of self giving rather than self serving, of forgiveness rather than judgment, of kindness rather than criticism.

May we be touched by your redeeming graces. And then may we in turn become messengers of grace. Like the disciples of old, may we so walk in the spirit of Christ, so infect the world with his love, that the world may be transformed by its power in our generation even as it was in theirs. Amen.