

## THE BON AIR PULPIT

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Scripture: *1 Corinthians 15:29-32*

Sermon: *Imagine the World Without Easter*

The 15th Chapter of First Corinthians is the great resurrection chapter. It tells us about what happened to Jesus and then ends in a great hymn and celebration. In the middle of it Paul begins to argue with cynics to say people can't live after they die so he begins to talk about that and he begins to imagine a world where there is no Easter. As we read it this morning I want you to imagine a world without Easter. If it is preached that Christ has risen from the dead, how do some of you say there is no resurrection? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not raised. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that we have been found to be false witnesses about God for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But if He did not raise him, in fact the dead are not raised, for if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. If Christ is not raised, then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied above all men. Paul simply said if Christ isn't risen then you and I are communicating a message that is not true. We are talking about a faith that does not have forgiveness. We talk about death without hope. We talk about sacrifice without meaning. So in the middle of that he begins to use reverse logic. He said think for a moment about a world without Easter. Imagine a world without Easter. Jesus is still in the grave, and a few tourists go by and see a little marker that says, "Jesus of Nazareth, AD 34." No, it really wouldn't be AD34. Because

you see we measure all of our time by Jesus. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, then I suppose on that sign would be 3067 BCE, before common error, because nobody would have ever thought about changing the calendar. Nobody would ever have said our world is so different. We have to even measure time different because of Jesus. I suppose really the only people who would ever go by would be maybe a few tourists or maybe some archaeologists who were interested in this person they had heard about who had said some nice things. But you see the reason everything is different is because the Bible says that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead, and the whole basis of our faith rests upon this one event. It is only then that they began to understand what Christmas really meant. They began to understand that the little baby who was in the manger was really the Son of God. It was only then they began to understand the cross. The cross was not a common execution of a common criminal. It was a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. And when the resurrection came, it was then that they began to go with excitement and share with people about what Christ had done. The whole faith that you and I celebrate today is one grave that is empty, and that that empty grave had belonged to Jesus Christ.. If you imagine the world without Easter, you would have to think first of all about a world where truth does not exist for our questions.

There is a story in the Bible about Paul who went to the city of Athens. Athens was the cultural capital of the world. But Paul was not impressed by their culture. He was impressed by their confusion. He began to look around He said everywhere I look I see idols. It has been recorded in history that at that time the city of Athens had more idols per capita than anywhere else, so much so that they said you would never get out of the sight of an idol. They were afraid that perhaps they had left some god out, so in the middle they had put an idol to the "unknown god," just in case they left somebody out. They didn't want him to get mad. So Paul said I notice that around you, you have all kinds of opinions and all kinds of idols and all kinds of philosophies. Now I think you are aware that we have gone back to the Athens syndrome. We believe that we are in the kind of

world where everybody is searching for truth, that religion is man reaching up to God. And one thing we do not like to hear in our culture is anyone to speak with such authority because then we turn to them and say who are you to tell me what is right. You see, we believe that everybody determines that for himself, and what is good for you is all right. And everybody is on this big search.

I always become amazed that if you applied that right now to the rest of life. Suppose Virginia was playing Tech in basketball. The Virginia team came out and said we are not going to play with five men tonight. We decided we want to play with eight. And the fellows said all right. Everytime we shoot we get 5 points, and you still get 2. You understand that would not work.. How would you like to have been at the Atlanta Airport this morning, and the fellow in the tower said you pilots kind of work it out among yourselves. Good luck. Maybe they would give you a little certificate that said "frequent survival." You understand that you live in a world where you almost have to have some kind of rules, some kind of guidance, some kind of help. But many people want to have the Athens syndrome in which they say well, no, whatever anybody wants to believe is all right. I want to tell you. I don't want to live in that kind of world. I want to know that in the big issues of life I want to know what is right. I want to know what is wrong. I want to know where I can find guidance. I don't want to go through life with a bunch of educated guesses and nobody around to tell me where to go.

I love one of the commercials that is on television now. You have seen it. They have pictured it out in Yosemite Park. There is a lady there who is shaking all over because standing in front of her is this huge grizzly bear. Up walks this smart alec. He says hit him in the mouth. Somebody standing next to him asks are you a park ranger? He says no, I stayed at Holiday Inn last night and that ought to make me smart about something. I want to tell you. I don't want to hit bears in the mouth on his opinion. I don't want a bunch of sidewalk philosophers. I don't want your guesses. I don't want somebody else's ideas that really don't know

much about it to tell me this is the direction I want to go. Somehow I want a message that I know is authoritative and true, and I can build my life on it.

Several years ago I became ill. For some reason I couldn't get well. So a friend came up to me, and said maybe this will help. He said why don't you try this food supplement. So I have been taking it for two years. I went to the doctor the other day. The doctor checked me out, and asked if I ever take any food supplement. I said yes, I do. I told him what it was. He looked very puzzled, and he said why do you take that? So I told him when I got sick a couple of years ago a friend came to me, and I have just been taking it ever since. He reminded me of a story about a man who used to stand on a street corner and holler. Somebody went up to him and asked why are you hollering? He said I am trying to keep the elephants away. He said there are no elephants for 5,000 miles. He replied, "I'm doing a good job, aint't I?"

The doctor said if you think it does good, that's O.K., but I tell you the truth when I really get sick, I am going back and say what do you think? Because when the big issues of life come, I want to know what it is that I can really bank my life on. I want to know that somehow there is a word from God. Listen to what Easter is all about. We are not in a position of everybody reaching up, making their own rules to live by. What we are celebrating is that God reached down and told us about himself. And he said so that you will forever know whether you can build your life on Jesus Christ, I will give a sign that everybody will know. I will do something that is so unusual, so unexplainable, so miraculous that everybody will know we can trust Him. What I will do, I will let Him die, he will be buried, and then I will raise Him up. I just remind you today, that has never happened before, never happened since, and our whole faith is built upon the fact that it happened to Jesus Christ. The person who is often called the greatest Christian writer of the 20th century is C.

F. Lewis, the Oxford professor. He had a few lines one day about Jesus. He said a man who is merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said wouldn't be a good model teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level of a man who thinks he is a poached egg or else he is a devil from hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God or else he is a mad man or something worse, but don't come up with this patronizing nonsense that he is just another human teacher. He didn't leave that option open to us. He never intended it to be. If Jesus is not who He says, if you cannot build your life around Him, then all of us need to pack up our finery and go home. But if there is a word from God and He said here is the testimony by raising from the dead, then you can build your life on him. A man stood by my side two weeks ago, asking me about God. I realized he was crying. He turned to me and said, "I want to make sure. I don't want to make a mistake." I want to tell you in the deepest moments of your life all of you want to be sure. Nobody wants to make a mistake. Not about life. And I thought about it. I come today to stand in front of all of you and to turn and say you can build your life on Jesus Christ. Apart from Him there are no truths for life's questions. Without Easter there is not any power for life's difficulties.

I started going into prisons, speaking to prisoners, when I was just 25. I lived about an hour from one of those infamous prisons in America, Angola. So the opportunity came, and I used to go for years and speak there. The message that I often speak about in prison is the message of forgiveness. It is not that I offer men pardon, and not to say you haven't done something wrong, but what I say to them is the same thing I say to every person; that is, that if you spend all of your life mired in the past, then you never have any energy to move toward the future. The most wonderful news I can tell you is that there is a chance to begin again through Jesus Christ. One of the men happened to be in the service that night. I had learned that he had been a

professional athlete, and had gotten into trouble, and was in the penitentiary. After the service was over, I stood by him. He grabbed my hand. I realized it was almost like a basketball hand. He squeezed it so hard, and he looked at me in the face, and he said, "Is that for me?" I said, "Sir, if it is not for you, it is not for anybody." He squeezed me again, and said, "But you don't know what I have done." I replied again, "Sir, if God can't forgive, then I have no message for you."

I was coming down out of the baptistery, still had my wet robe on. I was surprised that the man standing in front of me said, "Would you say again what you said in the Baptistery?" I said, "What I said was I bury you in the water and you rise to walk in new life." And he said, "Is that really true? Can you really die to the old life and can you really start life over again?" I said, "That's what it is all about." He was military, an oak leaf on his shirt. He grabbed that wet robe and held onto my legs, saying "I need to begin again."

She was only 13. She had done enough already to be 21. And she looked at me and she said, "I listen to everybody, and I do what everybody says, and I am miserable. Is there anybody who can tell me somehow what is right?" I quoted to her a little poem by Joyce Kilmer that many of you know. "Because the way was steep and long and through a strange and lonely land, God put upon my lips a song. Put a lantern in my hand."

What do you say to people who have made mistakes so big they think there is no need for living? What do you say to people who things have so taken a hold of them that they wonder if there is any life out there at all? What do you say to young people who want to know what is a way to really live? Do you understand that what we proclaim is that there is a Christ who can change and transform life? If there is no Easter, then there is no hope. If there is no Easter, then there is no hope for life's perplexities.

One of the most famous religious speakers in America lives up in Philadelphia. His name is Dr. Tony Gotholo. He has one of the most famous sermons in America that he preaches on Good Friday. It has a wonderful title. "It is Friday, but Sunday's coming." In the sermon he talks about all

of the evils that gathered around the cross. Here was an innocent man who was put to death. And the Bible is very clear what led Him there. But Judas led Him there, a man who walked with Him but who betrayed Him. Betrayers and hypocrites always lead to the cross. There was Simon Peter who couldn't stand up when everybody else was going the other way. Spineless people always lead to the cross. There was religious power there that day, run amok. Religious power that was more interested in holding onto its power than helping people. There were corrupt politicians who wanted to please everybody and in the process pleased nobody. That always leads to the cross. There were military people who did not carry out their orders but who sought to make a fool out of their prisoner. Dr. Gontholo said when you put that together it is not a Jerusalem. You can slice it and say it is a Richmond or it is a Philadelphia. It is not 34. It is 99. It is any time, because they are the forces of evil. But this is the hope. The hope is when man does his worse, God will do His best. And regardless of how evil and broken our world is, ultimately God is going to have the final say. I love what the scripture says, the Bible says about Jesus Christ. He is the Alpha. That is the Greek for A. I am the Omega. That's the Greek for Z. I started it. I am going to end it, and I am going to end it on my terms. What we have come to celebrate today is a risen Lord who is in charge of everything. When you came up, there was a wooden cross outside. Many of you took flowers and put on it. It doesn't have a figure on it. The reason we don't keep a figure on the cross is because Jesus isn't back there on the cross. He is not down there in the grave. He is up there in charge, and the hope that we have is that ultimately whatever evil may come up and the dreams of the dictators of this world and the wars around their world, ultimately they that live by the sword, die by the sword, and God ultimately reigns.

As a little boy he liked to read. His Mother kept coming in and saying it is time to go to sleep, There is school tomorrow. He said, "Mother, I am right in the middle of this. I will go to sleep in just a minute." She came back in and said, "Son, you have got to go to sleep." He just couldn't wait, so he

turned over and read the end of the book. It was a book about a man who was breaking all the laws and all the rules. It looked like he was going to win. He read the end of the book, and he realized that the fellow lost, and the good triumphed. Mama came in, and said you have got to go to sleep. He put the cover up and got his flashlight. He turned back to where he was. He read, and he said the hero of the book said I am going to get you and I am going to win. The little boy couldn't help it. He said, "Oh, no, you are not! I've already read the end of the book."

I want to tell you. I have read the end of the book, too. I want to tell you what it says. The kingdoms of this world are going to become the kingdoms of our Lord, and He is going to reign forever and ever. The Christ isn't up there or back there. He is in charge, and the reason we have all gathered together and we sing in triumph is because we know ultimately He is the one who wins. No Easter? Then you don't have any proof for the questions of life. No Easter? You have no power for the difficulties of life. No Easter? You have no hope for the perplexities of life. Thank God there is an Easter. Some of you are here today, wondering around, wondering what life is about. It is about Jesus. More than anything else in this world you need to give your heart and your life to Him.