

April 4, 2010  
United Church of Northfield  
Luke 24: 1-12, Acts 10: 34-43

If Jesus Had Not Risen....  
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### Introduction

In the story we know so well, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb where Jesus lay the day after the Sabbath to prepare the body for burial. She is greeted by two angels in the empty tomb. Shortly thereafter Jesus appears to her and charges her to go quickly to tell the other disciples. Later, Jesus appears to the disciples in several places and to over 500 others. These many witnesses spread the word. Even the Apostle Paul, who never saw Jesus, sees him in a vision.

So powerful is this story that it appears 70 years later written down in all four Gospels. Ten or fifteen years later, the Apostle Paul plants churches around the Mediterranean Sea, and the Christian Church begins to take shape. In a powerful domino effect that reaches through the pages of history, Easter becomes the ultimate Spring church holiday, and so we are here today celebrating the coming of Spring and the joy of our Christian faith.

### But What If

But what if the women came to the tomb and things were very different? What if they arrived to find the stone still covering the tomb? Mary might call some bystander to roll it aside for her. She and Peter would enter that dark and damp chamber only to sadly find the very dead body of Jesus laying where it had been placed two days before. They would amid great and overwhelming grief, prepare the body for burial. Then, then they would seek out the rest of the disciples for mutual consolation. Then what? Can you imagine what the world would be like if Jesus was NOT raised from the dead? Think about it. What would your life be like today if God did not raise Jesus from the dead? -p-  
History- Present\

Personally, I am an ardent student of history. In fact, it is my conviction that the history of Western Civilization was entirely directed in its course by the Christian Church and those who sought to improve the Christian Church. My personal definition of Western Civilization, includes Russia and the European countries to the west, as well as America after the arrival of the colonists, and in South America after the arrival of the conquistadors.

Now 2000 years is a lot of history to review in a 20 minute sermon. However, let us imagine some history after Jesus died, some recent history and our personal experience in our church culture.

### The Early Church w/o Risen Christ

What might have followed Jesus life if he were not raised from the dead? Perhaps his followers would have written down his life and teachings. They are wonderful teachings, but would they carry the same weight as when you know it was God's son doing the teaching? Given the horrible event of the crucifixion, the disciples might have been so discouraged that they might have gone back to fishing and give up being disciples. I think the Jewish faith would continue to the present day. So if Jesus were not raised from the dead, you might be Jewish today, attending synagogue instead of church and celebrating the Passover this week?

If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, and Christianity died away, perhaps you would be a Moslem, attending a mosque in Burlington? For Islamic countries

border on those in Europe, and without Christianity to push it back, Islam might have come into Europe. Indeed, there was a period in the history of Catholic Spain when Islam dominated part of that country. For a student of western civilization, this issue poses fascinating questions that are beyond the scope of this sermon.

It is quite possible, that if Jesus were not raised from the dead, that you would be pagan or someone who believed in God but did nothing more. This is not such a good thing as being a committed Christian!

#### The Middle Ages

The Christian church had a great influence on the politics and history of Europe into the Middle Ages. Some of that influence was good and some of it was not so good. One of the good things were the Monasteries, where the monks copied and preserved the Bible, were a seat of learning, and provided models of Christian community that are still important today. Now let us jump ahead to the Reformation and America.

#### Impact of Christianity on America

The influence of Christianity is powerfully felt in our own country. For you see the driving forces in early Colonial America were Christian. Thanksgiving would not exist on the holiday calendar for the Pilgrims would not have arrived. You wouldn't find a congregational church sitting proudly in the middle of almost every town in Vermont. In fact, this beautiful church would be missing from the Northfield!!

So you can see that history would be very different if Jesus were not raised from the dead. But your life would be changed and very different too. --p--

#### The Change in Our Life

If our own Northfield Church did not come to be, consider what would be missing from our life. There would be no wonderful choir to inspire you every Sunday! There would be no church suppers! In most churches, there would be no Bible Study group. And our bible study group also provides some wonderful and caring fellowship. So, without Bible study, you would just have to join a great books discussion group at the library. -p-

#### I Will Follow Jesus....

Several days before Easter last year, I went to visit my 90 year old mother who live at a nursing home several blocks from my house. When I arrived, the McDonald Family gospel singing group was just beginning their concert. My mother was asleep, but I woke her up and took her to the concert. (The dining room where the singers performed was packed with residents and family and friends. So we sat just outside the doorway to the dining room.) There are 9 family members in the group ranging in age from about age 10 to adult.) Some of them sing, and all of them play instruments. They play lively energetic music that I'd call "bluegrass gospel". But I love this group, and I often play their CD to wake me up in the morning.

Their final song was called, "I Will Follow Jesus." --p-- I thought, how appropriate for this Easter weekend. Jesus has indeed risen from the grave, and full of faith and conviction we too can sing that song, "I Will Follow Jesus!"

Once again, if Jesus had not risen, my mother and many others would miss out on the comfort of faith and the joy of Christian music!

#### Importance of Weddings and Funerals

So, you say, I can find some other fellowship besides the church. But, can you find any hope as comforting as the promise of eternal life. Can you find any claim on your life as great as serving the risen Christ? Consider the great rites of passage celebrations of the Christian faith - baptism, marriage and funerals. There is power and purpose and meaning expressed through the liturgy of these services of baptism,

marriage and funerals. Without baptism, you could dedicate your child, but where and to whom? And to whom without God? You could get married by a Justice of the Peace, but it's not the same as a church wedding. For in a Christian wedding, we proclaim the presence of God in the midst of the life of the married couple. We proclaim that their purpose in living together is to serve God.

If Jesus were not raised from the dead, so making known to us all God's power over death, and the promise of eternal life, all we could expect on our death is a great THUD! It's over. That's it. When your loved one dies, who does the funeral if the clergy don't exist? Perhaps that's the job of the Justice of Peace?? So, you could have some celebration for your loved one, but a celebration without hope in the life to come. It is one thing to say that Uncle Joe lived a good life. It is another to proclaim that he lived a great life for God and served God in the church. To proclaim that Uncle Joe goes to Heaven to live again is a great comfort. What hope and joy to know this!

Yes, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, if the tomb were not empty, the joys and hopes and comfort we would know through the Christian faith would not be here today!

#### World of Possibility

However, the faith of millions and billions of people for almost two centuries has propelled the course of civilization by the power of the risen Christ in ways which have changed the course of history. In every dark time in history, out of every disaster of human stupidity and frailty, new life, new perspective and a new world would emerge century after century. The Emperor Charlemagne, moved by miraculous forces of God, adopted Christianity as his religion and proclaimed Christianity to be approved by the Roman state, beginning the transformation of a pagan nation into a Christian nation. When Europe was slumbering in the Dark Ages, the monasteries kept the faith alive and preserved the wisdom of the centuries. Then Martin Luther came along and the rise of Protestant Christianity pushed western civilization in the direction that created democracy and the modern world.

Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God and the possibility of the heavenly kingdom on Earth. Our hope and faith in the possibility of a better way and a better world, of light where there is darkness, has created a push toward progress since the Middle Ages. Yes, God did not create a perfect world for us to live in, but he gave us a world of possibility for new life.

#### Regarding the World Today

When I survey our world today I am frankly disturbed and puzzled by the terrible acts of terror and the unending conflicts in countries like Israel and Iraq, I am at first very discouraged about the future. However, my travels around the world have shown me that the world is full of very good people. Furthermore, I know the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can overcome the powers of evil and transform a crazy world into a humane world. As the Gospel of John says, the light of Christ overcomes the darkness. So, in the midst of these challenging and puzzling times, I'm convinced that with God's help, we can find a way to heal a broken world.

In our famous Easter story, three things happened as the story comes to a close. Those people who encountered Jesus came to believe in a much more powerful way. They moved from faith to absolute belief. With eager joy, they dashed off to SHARE the good news of the Risen Christ. Thirdly, went forth REJOICING. The empty tomb becomes a sign of hope. Death becomes a sign of NEW LIFE. In an instant, the world is transformed into a society where God's Holy Kingdom may grow and prosper.

Conclusion

So this morning we affirm our belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. The tomb was empty, yet our hearts and lives now can be filled with the joy of a living loving God. We are blessed with the great promises of God:

- The promise of life everlasting
- The promise of the caring fellowship of the Christian Church.
- The promise of those who will fight evil and do justice in a broken world.

So, I urge you to go forth this day proclaiming the risen Christ. Go forth a thankful people full of hope and joy! Amen.