

Around the turn of the twentieth century there lived a man named Reuben Smith. Smith was fond of the comforts of life. Since he had lived a comfortable existence in this world, he thought it only proper to be prepared for a comfortable existence in the next world as well. Thus, at his death he left detailed instructions concerning his burial. He was to be buried in a new recliner chair of plush, upholstered leather and was to be placed in a sitting position. On his lap was to be placed a checkerboard. A practical man, Smith also ordered that he be dressed in a hat and coat, and that a **KEY TO THE TOMB** be placed in his coat pocket. **That was an interesting final touch--a key to the tomb.** *As far as is known, the key was never used. I wonder why?*

At the death of Nikita Khrushchev, the former leader of the Soviet Union many years ago, a humorous story circulated in political circles. The Communist party that had cast Mr. Khrushchev aside was uncomfortable with the idea of burying his body on Soviet soil. They first called the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, and asked if the U.S. would take Khrushchev's corpse. Nixon had his own problems at the time and declined. Then the Soviet leaders tried Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel. Mrs. Meir was agreeable but she added, **"I must warn you that this country has the world's highest resurrection rate."**

Well, she was right--Israel does have the world's highest resurrection rate. **In case you're curious the world's highest resurrection rate is one. And that is why YOU AND I ARE HERE TODAY!!**

IMAGINE WITH ME...A Sunday morning just before dawn. The setting--a garden not too far from the place where Jesus had been cruelly crucified. In the garden was a tomb--freshly hewn from rock. A giant stone once sealed the entrance, but that morning it had been rolled aside. Some grief stricken women made their way to that lonely spot. Of these women John's Gospel identifies only Mary Magdalene. Among the names included in the other Gospels are Mary, the mother of James, Joanna and Salome. Undoubtedly the silence of the night and the solemnness of the occasion caused them to move quietly toward the place where their Lord's body had lain. They brought spices with which to anoint him. **THEY WONDERED HOW THEY WOULD GET IN THE TOMB...THEY DIDN'T HAVE A KEY...**

It must have been frightening to discover the stone already rolled away from the tomb and the tomb empty. He was not there. What did it mean? Had his final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Did his enemies fear and despise him so much that they had seized his broken body? The women quickly scattered to tell their families and friends of this disturbing event. **Mary rushed to inform Peter and John.** They hurried back to the tomb with her but they were as mystified as she. They returned to the safety and seclusion of their homes. Mary was alone now with her grief. She stood weeping quietly just outside the door of the tomb.

In vain desperation she stooped and allowed herself one last look down inside...

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb. Imagine her dismay when she saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, **"Woman, why are you crying?"** "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." **At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.**

He asked her, **"Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"** Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Whether the sun was just beginning to peep sleepily over some nearby Judean hillside at this precise moment we do not know. Tear swollen eyes combined with pre-dawn darkness could explain Mary's failure to recognize Jesus immediately.

Undoubtedly, however, when he called her name, there was a sunrise in Mary's heart. "Rab-boni!" With a sudden surge of emotion she sought to embrace him. It was the natural response of deep and grateful love. ***It was Jesus who had made a new woman of Mary Magdalene.***

Tradition has painted her to be a woman of the streets. Whether this is so is a matter of speculation. What is not a matter of speculation, however, was Mary's devotion to this humble Jewish rabbi. Impulsively she reached for him. Jesus stopped her, however, with the explanation that he had not yet ascended to the Father. Mary Magdalene will have to be content to hold him in her heart. That is exactly what she did. Later she would testify to his disciples, **"I have seen the Lord."**

What does Mary Magdalene's experience on that first Easter Sunday have to do with your life and mine?

We all experience TOMBS IN OUR LIVES...Tombs which leave us in a sense of helplessness and despair—

TOMBS WHERE WE THINK THE ONLY WAY OUT IS A KEY WE DON'T HAVE.

HAVE YOU BEEN THROUGH A CRISIS OF DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY ---WHICH LED YOU TO TRIUMPH AND ABLE TO PROCLAIM, **"I have seen the Lord."**

We should note, first of all, the sense of hopelessness that had enshrouded ALL THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AFTER HIS CRUCIFIXION... If actions speak louder than words, ***those first disciples made it abundantly clear that they no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world.*** Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship for us.

We cannot appreciate the Easter message, however, ***if we cannot understand that the first Easter was born in total darkness.***

His disciples had believed that Jesus was the Messiah who had come to deliver Israel, but now he lay in a borrowed grave--his side with a deep gash from a spear, his hands and feet disfigured with the mark of nails, his brow a tangled mess of hair and blood where the crown of thorns once mocked his supposed kingship, his back a terrifying grid of open wounds from the 39 lashes.

One would not want to see a dog die like Jesus died, much less a human being. There was no dignity in it at all. He hung there naked while soldiers jeered him and spat upon him.

--Where were the 10,000 angels who could come at his beck and call? -

--His followers cowered now behind closed doors--their emotions, a mixture of cynicism and despair.

Perhaps you have been there. Maybe you have lived for a while behind closed doors. Many good people have.

I read a story about a young lawyer who plunged into the valley of deep depression. Things were going so poorly for him that his friends thought it best to keep all knives and razors away from him for fear of a suicide attempt. In fact, during this time he wrote in his memoirs, ***"I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I fear I shall not."*** Who was this young lawyer who unleashed these desperate feelings of utter hopelessness? His name was Abraham Lincoln.

The two nights following Jesus' crucifixion were the longest nights that those who loved him would ever endure. Perhaps you have gone through your own long night. The words of a doctor, "I'm sorry, it is malignant. There is nothing we can do." A phone call in the night, "Mrs. Jones, there has been an accident. Could you come to the hospital?" The words of your accountant, "Bill, if you sell your assets now, you might be able to recoup part of your investment. Otherwise you stand to lose everything." A parent to a young child: "You know, dear, Mommy and Daddy have not been getting along lately. We have decided to try living apart for a while." We have all been a part of the news of school shootings around our country...or the current news of a war that is active in Iran and its impact on the people there and the impact on the people in our own country. **YES, THERE ARE MANY LONG DARK NIGHTS....Many of you have had your own dark night. Easter was not born in the brightness of the day. The women came to the tomb while it was still dark.**

But listen. We need to know that help is closer than we think. The darkness of the moment and our tear-swollen eyes may blind us to a friend who is standing quietly in the shadows nearby. Softly, he asks, *“Woman, why are you weeping? Sir, why are you in such despair?”* ***After listening to our complaint, he whispers our name, “Mary, Jack, John, Cindy.” And we recognize that he has been there all the time. He is not dead, he is alive!***

Christ is alive and because he is alive we discover that the sun rises again and birds sing and joy begins to creep back into our life. **YES, LIKE MARY WE ARE ABLE AGAIN TO SAY....“I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!!!”**

YES, NO MATTER HOW DARK YOUR LIFE MAY SOME TIMES BE, THE RESURRECTED LORD SHINES LIGHT AND PROMISES BOTH YOU AND ME “HOPE.”

In the early part of World War II, a Navy submarine was stuck on the bottom of the harbor in New York City. It seemed that all was lost. There was no electricity and the oxygen was quickly running out. In one last attempt to rescue the sailors from the steel coffin, the U.S. Navy sent a ship equipped with Navy divers to the spot on the surface, directly above the wounded submarine. A Navy diver went over the side of the ship to the dangerous depths in one last rescue attempt. The trapped sailors heard the metal boots of the diver land on the exterior surface, and they moved to where they thought the rescuer would be. In the darkness they tapped in Morse code, **“Is there any hope?”** The diver on the outside, recognizing the message, signaled by tapping on the exterior of the sub, **“Yes, there is hope.”**

This brings us to the final thing we need to say on this Easter Sunday morning. **The victory of Easter is a gift available to anyone who will receive it.**

The New Testament was not written by Greeks who believed in the immortality of the soul. It was written by Jews who believed that when a person dies, he or she really dies. But because of their experience with the risen Christ these first Christians knew that a gracious, loving God grants new life--eternal life--to all who will receive it—**AND GUESS WHAT, NO KEY IS NECESSARY FOR ENTRANCE.**

One Sunday a pastor was standing at the door of his church after Easter Worship. “I’ve never seen such a crowd in church,” a woman exclaimed.

The pastor didn’t know her, but apparently she was impressed by the number of people at church for Easter worship. Then, as she was shaking his hand and moving toward the outside of the church, she added, **“Do you suppose it will make any difference?”** He held on to her hand so she couldn’t get away, *“What do you mean?”* he asked. *“Will what make a difference?”* *“Easter,”* she shot back. *“Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?”*

It certainly made a difference in the lives of those first disciples. They knew that Christ had conquered death and that caused them to give everything they had, including their own lives, to get the word out to others.

HAS “EASTER” made a difference in your life? Wouldn’t you like to have the kind of confidence in the power and purpose of God that those early followers had? You can, you know. **It is FREE GIFT from God!!**

IT IS TIME FOR ALL OF US TO PEER INTO THE EMPTY TOMB THIS MORNING...NO KEY IS NECESSARY! All you need is **FAITH---THAT HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD FOR YOU!** He is closer than you think. He is calling your name.

JESUS is offering you a GIFT--A gift THAT HE WILL BE WITH YOU in the Darkness of this Life and Light your way to ETERNAL LIFE.

Let it be PART OF THIS DAY, AND THE NEXT, AND THE NEXT, AND THE NEXT....TILL HE GREET'S YOU ON YOUR FINAL DAY. Amen.