

Risen from the Ashes!

Acts 10:34-43

Luke 24:1-12

Good morning and Happy Easter! What a wonderful, beautiful and blessed day this is!

There is so much I would love to tell you about, remind you about that centers on this day. This is the first day of a new, God-related life for every believer. It is because of this day that our values, our lives and our very world has changed.

You know the details of that first Easter Sunday. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and the other women came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. They were greeted by two men in dazzling clothes, asking then, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen."

Returning from the tomb they told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home amazed at what had happened.

This is our first critical point for this morning: Easter is about people having their lives changed. One of the best proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the change it made in the people who experienced it. None of the disciples had shown themselves to be particularly courageous before Christ's resurrection. They hid from the Roman authorities. They cowered in fear. But after his resurrection, they became excited, fearless witnesses willing to give up their lives to testify that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead.

That's what happens when Easter is real in people's hearts. That's why the tradition developed of people adorning themselves with new clothes on Easter Sunday. It wasn't so they could join the fashion parade. It was to signify that the resurrected life is possible for all persons who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord. Easter is about changed lives.

Certainly Simon Peter had his life radically changed. Once he had denied Christ, but now he is boldly preaching Christ raised from the dead. Listen to his testimony as recorded in Acts. These are words taken from his sermon.

He said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power . . . he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

That's Peter's testimony. He was there. He witnessed it. Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried, but on the third day, God raised him from the dead and he lives forever. That is Simon Peter's testimony, and we know it is true, not just because he said it, but because he lived it, and one day, according to tradition, he died for it. That is why we are here in this place on this day. The risen Christ changes lives.

And those changes impact how we see the world and how we interact with the world around us. Let me give you an example:

We all know about the recent tragic fire at Notre Dame de Paris. A grand cathedral, more than 850 years old partially destroyed by a tragic fire, most likely caused (they now say) by an electrical short circuit.

I suspect many, if not most of you have visited there. I have been there on several occasions, once for a very special Advent service. It was and is a magnificent bit of architecture. When the news of the fire broke, one of my first thoughts was, "Will they rebuild? I could donate to that." Almost immediately individual philanthropists began to commit huge sums...1 million euros, 10 million euros, 100 million euros, 200 million euros. As of yesterday, nearly a billion euros have been committed.

And I realized I had little to contribute. More than that, on second thought, I started to wonder if some of these million-euro donations were a bit like Jesus' story of the widow's mite. Don't get me wrong, I think it is a great thing that some of the multi-millionaires and billionaires are putting their money into this project! I hope, someday, to see the fruit of their generosity.

However, at the same time, I am mindful of the burning of three historic black churches in Louisiana in the US. Not as the result of a tragic electrical accident, but the direct result of racist hate crime.

Not a project that will take billions to rebuild, but a total of \$1.5 million for all three churches. Not something that will catch the world's attention, but it could be argued that it has been every bit as devastating, if not more so, to the faith families that worship there.

So how should I respond? Should I do something, make a contribution? To whom should I donate my "widow's mite"? The great, historic cathedral the has caught the world's attention, partially destroyed by accident? Or to a group of three little churches in the US totally ruined by the actions of white racist?

To me, the answer is clear. While the world will stand by the architecture, I must stand by the people of faith. Is that a "big deal"? Hardly. It's a matter of deciding if, how and where I will donate some of my income. And I can assure you, the amount I donate will not make a difference in either campaign. At least not to the campaign, but it will to me.

Why? Because part of my understanding of "new creature in Christ" means an awareness of the world of faith around me. It calls for the boldness of a Simon Peter to make a testimony a part of my life.

Friends, I am well aware that I will never be the most powerful preacher, and my donations will never amount to the gifts of the millionaires (but perhaps not bad for a "thousandaire"). But that's not the point.

The point is to witness to Christ's resurrection in every way I can. To put on new clothes to let the world see that the resurrected life is possible for all persons who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord. Easter is about changed lives.

And first and foremost, it is a reminder to me...and to you...of the power of a changed life in Christ.

So, what does that mean in a practical sense? It means we, as persons of faith, can no longer be complacent in our lives, we must become both hearers AND doers of the word.

We must constantly challenge ourselves to become more mindful of the world around us, speaking out against hatred, bigotry, prejudice, evil in any form.

We must constantly proclaim, in thought, word and deed, the acceptance and glory of the Risen Christ. We must constantly be growing in our own faith lives so that when others see us, they gain a small glimpse of Christ.

You see, Easter is so much more than a nice holiday, a time off from school, colored eggs and chocolate bunnies. Easter is all about beginnings, OUR beginnings.

I think I can summarize this best by telling you the story of the funeral of Clarence W. Jordan.

A few of you will recognize the name of Clarence Jordan. He died in 1969 after a lifetime of sharing the gospel with others. He will probably be remembered most for his homespun translations of the Scriptures, which he titled *The Cottonpatch Version*. His other significant contribution was his influence on Millard Fuller, the man who started "Habitat for Humanity".

When Clarence Jordan died, many of his friends reminisced about the vibrant qualities of his life—his strength and gentleness, his commitment and sense of humor, his simple life and eloquent words, and his ability to be at ease with people from all walks of life.

Clarence Jordan was buried in a hillside that is part of Koinonia Farms, the bold faith community that he and his wife founded. At his funeral, a beautiful thing happened.

People were sobbing, moaning, and grieving as men shoveled the soil of Georgia on top of his cedar casket. But just then a little two-year-old girl, who lived on the farm, unprompted and spontaneously stepped up to the grave and sang her favorite song. She had sensed that this was a special day for her friend Clarence. So, boldly in her little two-year-old voice, she sang this song for him: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, Happy birthday, Dear Clarence, happy birthday to you."

Do you understand that while Christmas is Jesus' birthday, Easter is ours? By His death and resurrection Christ has made it possible for you and me to experience new life. Why shouldn't we wear new clothes for Easter? We are new people. Easter people.

Like the churches, both in Paris and Louisiana that will, with the help of people who care, rise from the ashes, we have been invited to rise from the grave of the everyday, from the tomb of complacency, from the catacombs of worldly life.

Easter is about changed lives--lives that have been renewed and redeemed by the power of the presence of the risen Christ. He lives. Alleluia. Amen.