**WHERE IS HE? EASTER, MT. 28:1-15, JN. 20:1-9, MARCH 31/24.**

 It has been a busy week On Friday we struggled through Jesus’ betrayal & arrest, followed by the gruesome events at & around the cross, culminating in Jesus’ death. But that was Friday, & Sunday’s not only ‘acomin’ but it’s here! Is there anything better than celebrating our risen Lord together?

 We’ve been preparing ourselves throughout the Lenten period of 40 days, trying to imitate Jesus readying Himself after His baptism, when He was sent into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where He faced the devil head-on. He resisted all of the evil one’s temptations, relying on the love of God the Father & the truth of the Scriptures for a sure defence. We’ve considered a lot over these past weeks, but before moving on, it’s appropriate once more to remember the woman—Mary—who poured the alabaster oil over Him, anointing Jesus for His impending burial, with an extravagant love. On Friday we noted how isolated &alone Jesus was throughout this time. Not only was He dealing with the hatred of the religious leaders & the injustices that they perpetrated, using Rome to enable their wickedness, but even Peter—with all his impetuous ways, culminating with his emphatic promise that he would never deny Jesus; even if everyone else did—even Peter abandoned Jesus in His time of need. Peter had said he was ready to die with & for Jesus.

 But Jesus knew, & He had already prayed for Peter when Satan asked to sift the disciples like wheat. He was already about restoring Peter even before he denied knowing Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest. Listen to Jesus: “And when you have turned back [Peter], strengthen your brothers.” Isn’t that amazing, transforming grace! You’re never beyond the forgiving & redemptive reach of Jesus, no matter how ugly your sin or your denial has been. “Feed My sheep,” Jesus tells Peter. Like Peter, God has a Kingdom assignment for each of us.

 Caiaphas was desperate to kill Jesus. He wanted to expose Jesus as a rebel & a threat to Rome or as a heretic so that the Jews would distance themselves from a blasphemer. When neither of those tactics worked they trumped up charges saying that Jesus claimed to be a king, & therefore that He opposed Caesar—an act of sedition.

 Through all of this, Jesus never tried to escape; He even helped Annas out by saying that He was the Christ, giving Annas the evidence he was looking for to take Him to Pilate for execution. Every rule in the code of justice was broken, trampled on to get a guilty verdict. And Pilate, the only man alive who had the power to execute Jesus, found Him innocent; but he didn’t have the strength of character to stand against the wrath of the Sanhedrin, & so the order was given to crucify Jesus, even after Herod also found Jesus innocent. And if we were to pause there and ask ourselves, “Are we not like that too?” we would acknowledge that we also fail to stand for Jesus in the face of opposition & pressure to deny Him. Lord, give us strength of character to stand with You & to live life in You!

 And the question of the day came from Pilate. “I find no basis for any charges against Jesus. What, then, shall I do with the 1 you call Christ?” It’s the very question every 1 of us must answer for ourselves. What will you do with the 1 called Christ? Will you set Him aside, & consider Him some other time when you’re not busy or preoccupied? Will you simply refuse to acknowledge that He is who He says He is—the Christ, the Messiah? Or will you come to Him, setting aside all distractions, all else, & worship Him & celebrate Him as the 1 who saves us from our sins? We’re all capable of falling to temptation in every way like Pilate. We are fully capable of crucifying Jesus by our attitudes & actions—or inactions every day.

If Jesus never did anything for us ever again, the fact that He came & died for our sins is more than we could ever give thanks enough for. That’s awesome theology! So we find ourselves, not at the foot of the cross this morning, grieving, not staring at a Jesus languishing on that cross, lifeless, but looking in a tomb, along with Mary & Peter & John, dumbfounded, flabbergasted, speechless, at a loss to understand. Where is He? Who took His body? Why would anyone, how could anyone stoop so low as to do such a thing? It was an enigma, wrapped in-side a conundrum. Let’s unwrap this.

Caiaphas broke the Mosaic Law when he went to Pilate on Saturday, on the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus was for sure dead. The soldier that speared Him in the side let us know that, for John testified that water & blood flowed from Jesus’ side. The plasma separated, a sure sign of death. But Caiaphas wasn’t satisfied so he asked Pilate to make the grave site secure. A guard or guards were posted. The tomb, which already had about a 2 ton rock rolled in place in front of the opening was already there & it was subsequently sealed. Quite inadvertently, Caiaphas did God a great service that day, making the Resurrection an indisputable fact.

So consider the possibilities. Any follower of Jesus was already heartbroken, hopes dashed that the 1 they loved, the Messiah was dead. They were no power to be reckoned with, certainly no match for Roman soldiers. And if they dared to take the body, they themselves would be tried & killed. No followers were looking for Jesus’ body. The women had waited patiently for the Sabbath to end so they could anoint Jesus’ body as was custom. They were looking for the body to be where they had last seen it—in the tomb. The disciples didn’t even have the spirit to go to the graveside with the women. They were grieving desperately & frightened for their own welfare. Even when Mary & the other women came to them, they mocked the women for talking such nonsense about Jesus’ body not being there. Only Peter & John had the courage & the belief to check out what they said. No, no Christ-followers, even had it on their minds to steal Jesus’ body. But that’s exactly what the Sanhedrin tried to sell as the real deal.

Well what about the Jewish leaders? Absolutely no way, Jose! They needed Jesus’ body to prove He was just another false claimer of being Messiah. And the Romans, you can be sure had no interest whatsoever in riling the Jews further. There’d been enough disturbance already.

Then you have those who want to argue that Jesus never really died in the 1st place. He fainted, He swooned, He lost consciousness, regained strength & escaped the tomb. Really? He was beaten to a pulp. Even before the crucifixion He was unable even to carry the cross-piece to Golgotha, let alone roll a 2 ton rock uphill. And then there’s that reminder once again about the blood & water separating from His spleen. He was dead.

So where is He? If you go today you could find the body remains of Buddha. If you go today you could find the body remains of Mohammad. If you go today you could find the body remains of Confucius. If you go today you could find the body remains of Joseph Smith or Charles Russell. But if you go to Jerusalem today, nobody, in spite of intense efforts on behalf of so many, can find any body remains of Jesus Christ.

The angel at the entrance to the tomb has the last word: “Why do you look for the living

among the dead? He is not here; He has risen.” Or maybe the last word goes to the disciple John:

 “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at & our hands have touched—this we proclaim to you concerning the Word of Life. The life appeared; we have seen it & testify to it, & we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father & has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen & heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father & with His Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make your joy complete.”

Or maybe the last word goes to Thomas, who, when He missed the resurrected Jesus returning to see the disciples, said He wouldn’t believe unless he saw Jesus with his own eyes & touched Him. Jesus returned a week later just for Thomas, who declared, “My Lord & my God.”

Where is He? He’s not in the grave. He has risen. He has overcome your & my sin, your & my death. He’s defeated Satan. He’s defeated hell. You can’t outlive Him & You can’t live without Him. Pilate couldn’t stop Him. Herod couldn’t kill Him, death couldn’t handle Him, & praise God, the grave couldn’t hold Him! He sits at the right hand of God the Father. And after all that, if you invite Him to, He will live right in your heart, guiding you every minute of every day that you give yourself to Him & His way. He lives, He rules, He loves. That’s just His nature. Do you remember the old American Express card ad, “Don’t leave home without it” & member-ship has its advantages?” May I urge you today, don’t leave here without Christ! Now I certainly wouldn’t speak of the life with Christ as “membership”, but I would certainly urge you to belong to Him wholeheartedly & promise you that neither you nor life will ever again be the same! Share Him & that truth with others today & every day!