

**Easter Sunday,  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church,  
Houston, Texas**

**12 April 2020**

**Matthew 28:1-10**

Welcome to Saint Dunstan's on this incredible morning. I am glad you are here today to join us as we celebrate the central feast of our Christian faith in our new virtual and temporary home. I have been an Episcopal Priest for 13 years, which means that I have preached at least 13 Easter sermons. I have spent some time this week reading those sermons, not just looking for inspiration, but also trying to do an assessment of what has been on my mind over the years. Easter and Christmas sermons most accurately reflect the theology, faith, fears, and aspirations of a preacher. Knowing that so many of our parishioners come home for Christmas and Easter, preachers make their sermons a bit extra special on these events. I know that, other than the occasional funeral, this may be the only opportunity to tell you what really matters to me. I often ask myself a question during the week leading to Easter, "If I had only one sermon to preach, what would I say?"

After reviewing all these sermons, I have identified certain patterns: I have always preached the victory of Christ over death, and I have affirmed that his death and resurrection mean salvation, forgiveness, restoration, and new life for all of us. I have framed this truth within carefully crafted stories, humor, vivid Biblical illustrations, passionate pleas, and I have even used props. Today, I want to tell you a silly joke, and then I want to talk simply and directly about what the empty cross of Christ means for all of us.

Mr. Smith and his family had attended the same non-denominational church for many years, but the pastor had not seen them in almost two months. After Palm Sunday one year, the Pastor drove to the house to check on the family. Seeing that everyone was healthy, he asked the family why they hadn't been to church in awhile. Mr. Smith responded, "To tell you the truth pastor, I was laid off a while back and we have no money to buy clothes and shoes for the little ones. We're just embarrassed to look disheveled in church." Moved with compassion for the family, the pastor came back home and organized a wonderful drive. Tuesday that week, the pastor dropped off beautiful dresses for the girls, suits for the boys, and brand new shoes for anyone. "I want you all in church for Easter Sunday," he said as he left the humble home. When the pastor noticed the family was not in church on Easter Sunday, he drove back out to the home. "What happened?" he inquired, somewhat annoyed. Mr. Smith became very uncomfortable as he replied, "Well, pastor, the family looked so beautiful in their new clothes and shoes that we decided to go to the Episcopal Church."

Okay, enough silliness. Let us talk about the empty cross of Christ. I believe this empty cross is the only solution to what afflicts the human race. It is the greatest treasure available to God's church, the antidote to our denominational divisions, and the most powerful tool in the preacher's tool kit. It is the cure for our doubts, the spiritual energy for those who feel empty, and the greatest affirmation of God's love for those who feel isolated. It is the corrective against the type of moralism that drives young people away from churches, because they feel judged by God and other Christians.

The empty cross of Christ means that even if evil can stay the night, only God lasts forever, and hope always comes in the morning. Even if tyrants can take the center stage, they are here but for a season, and then they will be gone forever. The empty cross of Christ tells us that life, salvation, health, and eternity are not things we create, we earn, we somehow make happen through our devotion, our piety, our works of charity, or our futile attempts to score points with God. The empty cross tells us that God is in the salvation business, and it is not our duty to save ourselves. This is his job and he will go through any extent to save his wayward children. The empty cross of Christ tells us that hope wins at the end regardless of what may be afflicting us today. God wins at the end, the tomb will forever remain empty, and Christ will reign supreme.

The empty cross of Christ tells us that this life will not have the last say. There is a future that awaits those who surrender to God's loving embrace. Today, an angel of the Lord rolls back the stone, and a man dressed in lightning invites us all to courage and endurance. He says to us today, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised." Stop looking for Jesus among the dead and start looking for him among the living.

Because of the empty cross we know that Christ has taken residence among us and now the dwelling of God is among mortals. Because of the empty cross of Christ we know that God has not left us as orphan children, but has chosen to remain with us to the end of the ages. He now dwells in the face of brothers and sisters around the world. He now dwells inside our own hearts, illuminating the darkness of our lives, helping us find our way home. He now dwells in darkness and silence, and meets us in darkness and silence every time we enter his sacred space in prayer and meditation. He now dwells in his church and meets us week after week as we gather together in thanksgiving. He has become bread and wine, and we will partake of this bread and wine once again soon. He will nurture us from the inside out becoming food and drink for us and in us. He has always fed us with the banquet of his Word, and he will continue to feed us with this forever. Christ is alive and he now lives among the poor, the disenfranchised, the lonely, the addicted, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst for justice. He now lives in the gutters, the highways and byways, main street, market street, and wall street.

Without the empty cross of Christ no preacher has anything of value to offer his people, no matter how clever he becomes, how charming or charismatic, how engaging and culturally relevant, or how passionate and well spoken. Without the empty cross we are nothing more than entertainers and charlatans. The empty cross of Christ speaks of love without borders and without regards for color of skin, gender, or social class. The empty cross of Christ is God's equalizer symbol. When we stand before that empty cross we are no longer Americans or Chinese, we are no longer male or female, we are no longer addicted or non-addicted, poor or rich, incarcerated or free. Before the empty cross of Christ all divisions disappear, all despair is put to flight, all futile attempts at saving ourselves are revealed as worthless, desperate, and unnecessary.

The Savior is risen. Death could not contain him. Hatred and evil did not win the last victory. The Savior walks among us and he speaks to us. He promises the disciples today, "You will see me in Galilee!" And the readings for the next few weeks will in fact show us

those occasions when they saw him, touched him, and listened to him. Because the cross is empty we know Christ will send us his own Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth and give us the courage to remain faithful in these scary and anxiety-filled days of Covid-19. The Spirit will help us rediscover the truth buried deep within ourselves and that truth is none other than Christ himself. We often feel alone in the universe, but the Spirit will remind us that Christ is with us and in us. We often feel as though God has left us to our own devices, but the Spirit will remind us that the darkness of evil will never have the last word. Christ has conquered all evil, he is alive and his cross is empty. Therefore we have nothing to fear. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This truth is worthy of repeating. This truth needs to be repeated. We must be reminded daily that God is on the side of sinners. This is the message of the empty cross!

I know many of us feel beaten down and exhausted this day. I have spoken to some of you these last two weeks, as I get to know you in ZOOM meetings. I know of your fears, your anxieties, your relational problems, and your concerns about the direction of our state and country during this pandemic. I share some of these fears and concerns. I know how fearful many of us are about our physical and financial health. It is often hard to muster up the strength needed to pray and to believe in something beyond our pain and our loneliness. But, I am here to remind you that the cross is empty, and if Jesus is no longer on that cross, then he must be here, around us. He sees us in our suffering. He sees our doubts and our fears. He hears our laments and our cries. We are not alone, the cross is empty!

The empty cross is an invitation to give yourself a break, to stop obsessing about what you can't change, to stop shaming yourself as though you are the worse sinner that ever lived. Even if this were true, and it isn't, Christ has died, he has risen, and he will come again. Your sin is forgiven and your debt has been paid. You are free to live a life filled with hope and joy. Stop looking for Jesus among the dead. Stop thinking your best days are in the past. Stop dwelling among those who have given up on life. Today is a day for joy and resurrection. Today is a day to reconnect with the living, to forgive, to let go, and to give God a chance to change your life. Return to him today because no one can ever love you as much as he loves you. The empty cross is clearest symbol of that great love!

I am glad you are here today. Please remember that the cross is empty and that all judgement and all condemnation has been swallowed up by forgiveness and by life. You are forgiven and you are loved.

Happy Easter. Let us now end with our traditional Easter acclamation:

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!