Ezekiel 37:1-10, Matthew 28:1-10

“What if it were all true?”

You know, I’ve always wanted to start off an Easter Sermon with the words: “I bought me a chain saw last week.” No, really, I did. All last week I cut down some sizeable limbs on the trees in my yard. It really is no big deal, just an electric chain saw but it can do some damage and by the end of the day and of the week it made some tangible, physical progress. It is one of those things that I can say, come on over to my yard and let me show you what I did, and you could and you would believe it, because you could see it.

Today, we celebrate Easter, the most important Sunday of the year. Our faith as Christians is built around this Easter Event. I saw that Tim Tebow is speaking at a church in Texas today and they are expecting 30,000 people at the event. The pastor of the church called it the Super Bowl of Sundays. I just hope it becomes more about Jesus than about him. But even though the resurrection is the most important theological truth that we believe in, do we really believe it. I mean as a result of the resurrection of Jesus Christ do we live, think, and act as if it were really true?

Yesterday we had an Easter Egg Hunt at the church. Beth Neumann did an amazing job of organizing all of her minions to put it together. We had close to 200 people show up. For those 2 hours we had more kids that we could claim as our own than we’ve had in a long, long time. It was awesome. I mean we pulled out all the stops. Red Robin even stopped by and this one little girl was absolutely terrified of that bird so I said, what if the Easter Bunny came along would you like to see him? She said yes, so Steven Murphy, bless him, was dressed up as the Easter Bunny and she was fine. Now what if I had said to her, what if I got Jesus to come and be with you would that be okay, and I prayed over her, I’m not really sure that would have served the same purpose for her.

It doesn’t have to be true for people to show up, or to get excited, but what if it were all real? I mean all of it. Today after church I’m going to go home and watch the Master’s, play with my nieces and nephews, take a nap if they’ll let me, who am I kidding? How has the resurrection of Jesus made a difference in our daily lives, if it is true. You know even Jesus’ disciples struggled with this question. Remember Thomas, good old doubting Thomas, unless I see the holes in his hands and feet and the hole in his side I will not believe.

What we find in our Matthew Scripture is a resurrection account that is bookmarked by an attempt by the Roman Government of that time to discredit the resurrection and they created a scenario whereby it would have been impossible for the impossible to happen. They made sure that there was no way that not only could Jesus not rise from the dead, but people would not even be able to say that he rose from the dead. They had everything covered. But, the impossible happened. No, really it happened. And as a result we are challenged today to live our lives in a way that reflects that reality. Let’s read Matthew.

**READ**

As we were growing up every Easter we would go home to have lunch after church. In our family we read a Scripture before every dinner but on Easter, we always read this Matthew resurrection Scripture. That’s why I chose it for this year, it has some special memories for me. One of those memories was that as my dad was reading as he got to the section in the story that spoke about the earthquake he would say and there was a big earthquake, and all of us 4 brothers and my dad would shake that table to kingdom come. We lived in missionary housing and it was a bit embarrassing to have to tell them every year that we again broke the dining room table.

The look in my dad’s eyes as we shook that table, besides the childish delight you could see, you could see this passion and this intensity that I always understood as him saying without words, this really happened. The earthquake came and rolled the stone away and Jesus is alive. I knew he believe that it really happened.

Now, I hope you noticed that Matthew’s resurrection story is pretty different from the other ones. This is true mostly because of the bookends that I mentioned earlier. If you look at vs.27 you will find Pilate engaged in a conversation with the enemies of Jesus where they tell him that if they don’t keep an eye on the tomb then Jesus’ disciples will steal the body and tell everyone that he rose from the dead. And so Pilate responds by saying, almost like famous last words: Make it as secure as you can so he doesn’t escape.

Our most valiant efforts of keeping Jesus down just weren’t enough as we find in these first few verses in Matthew. Pilate tells the guards to make sure that the reality of the disciples and the believers is proven false. Isn’t that what the world is trying to tell us? You really don’t have to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, it is no big deal. You a Christian by name and by theology and belief, but it doesn’t really matter if you buy the whole thing or not, does it?

But what ends up happening is that not death, not the tomb, not even the soldiers of Pilate and the high priest were able to keep him down. When that is discovered Pilate goes into action, you see this after our reading, and a whole explanation is put forth on how the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body and that became the word of the day.

Matthew goes to a lot of trouble showing the lengths to which people tried to go to show that this never really happened. That none of this Jesus thing is true. But they couldn’t keep a good man down, could they? Let’s look at all of it and see what would happen if all of it were true. In vs. 1 we find Mary Magdalene, the one who was by the cross at the time of Jesus’ death, and the other Mary who is thought to be Jesus’ mom at this point.

The details that are contained here about that morning are precious. It was early that Easter morn, before dawn, Matthew tells us. It was the day after the Sabbath, which would have made it Sunday since Sunday is Monday for the Jews, even to this day. As they arrived at the tomb, we see the soldiers are there and a great earthquake takes place. Now, I want you to focus on the two different reactions of the people whom we know are present during that scene. An Angel comes down and the Scripture states that the soldiers who are seeing the same thing that the women see, are terrified. They are so afraid that as a result of their fear they shook and were like dead men, or paralyzed. Now, they know what they are seeing is real, but that is how they chose to respond to this reality that the world just had not prepared them for.

Now look at the women. They have the advantage in that the Angel speaks to them specifically and says what to them? Says what every preacher loves to preach on this Easter Sunday. How many sermons have you heard on Easter Sunday that focuses on Do Not Be Afraid? Well, today I say, be afraid, it is a great motivating factor in our lives to do the right thing. It is a great motivating factor in our lives to do something, and not be paralyzed like those soldiers.

Okay, I shouldn’t be going against the angel of God, I’ll lose that argument. But we can choose to encounter God, to come to church on Easter Sunday, to hear the good news as we hear it every other year and leave unchanged, and be paralyzed, and do nothing about it, or we can be motivated like the women are to go and do something about it.

Last week I was speaking with one of the youth that is going to be preaching next Sunday and I asked her are you nervous, and she said: Yeah! I said good, it means that it is something important, it means something to you, you care about it. You need to know that every Sunday before I step up to this pulpit I feel like I’m going to be sick. I don’t mean because of any of you individually, don’t get me wrong, but the responsibility of bringing God’s word to you is not lost on me.

So, both the soldiers and the women knew what was happening was real and they were filled with fear. Both of them. But somehow from verses 5-7 we find that the women still maintain their fear but it is accompanied by what as they make their way from the empty tomb? The leave the tomb with fear and Great Joy. There is nothing wrong with fear in our lives if it is accompanied with the Great Joy that is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You know, we don’t have to make a case for the reality of the resurrection, but rather the resurrection has to change our reality. I don’t know if I have ever experienced a Maundy Thursday service that was so real as the one that we celebrated last Thursday my dear family. It was real. God was present. The resurrected Jesus Christ showed up. So the question what if it were all true ought to be put in a different way. You see the Ezekiel Scripture tells us of a prophecy that was supposed to happen at the end times.

The resurrection of the dead as described in Ezekiel wasn’t supposed to happen here in this time and in this space, it was supposed to be reserved from when God’s kingdom came, or so we thought. But notice what happens once Jesus is raised from the dead. God back to Matthew 27:53. We are not talking about zombies here. The saints were given flesh and blood. The resurrection of Jesus Christ ushers in a new era and a new reality. We don’t have to wait to die to experience the resurrection, we can experience it right now, right here.

But, I know, that is such a hard concept to live out. If we truly believed it then every single moment of our lives would be sacred, and it would be filled with moments when we recognize that our primary state of mind has to be this great joy may have as part of it a fear that drives it forward. But that is okay.

Campolo tells of a funeral service that he went to for a friend named Clarence. During the eulogies people stood up and lamented and cried, Oh there was so much we should have told you. It was obviously not a celebration and Campolo could tell that the pastor was seeing the service getting away from the hope that we have in the resurrection not only of Jesus but also of all of us.

When the eulogies were over the pastor came down from the pulpit, tossed the flower spread onto the floor, opened the casket and said, Clarence, good night! The congregation thought he had lost it, Good night Clarence and then he slammed the casket shut, turned his back to the congregation and said to the casket, because I know that when you wake up you are going to have a great morning.

That was all he needed to say. Lamentations, 3:22-23 states the Steadfast love of the Lord endures forever his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness. Tomorrow morning when we wake up we will receive new mercies, Tuesday morning 100% brand spanking new mercies, Wednesday morning brand new mercies and Thursday, and Friday and Saturday and then we have to look forward to another week, month, year and life of new mercies every morning.

But only if we believe that this Jesus thing is true, otherwise we will find ourselves still paralyzed by fear. Did you notice how Jesus greets the Marys on the road out? He says what? Okay, our version makes it sound like he’s Mork in Mork and Mindy, but the literal Greek is Rejoice. Rejoice. It doesn’t mean that we are immune to the pains of life, but even in the midst of those our entire lives ought to be ones lived in fear and great joy.

Rejoice brothers and sisters, rejoice, and let all that you do and say reflect the fact that you believe all of this is true by living your life in great joy. Amen.