

No Greater Love † In Life ²

† Unexpected Easter for Peter and John (vv.1-5) † Enlightenment to come (vv.6-10)

In the Name of Jesus, our surprising Friend, the world's great Light, dear loved ones in the Lord:

Sometimes you just don't feel like Easter. Early morning Easter Dawn you wish you had time to clear the sleep from your eyes. A long Lenten season for pastors can make it hard to crank up the energy for Easter, much less the joy. Aren't you glad it's not about us – or up to us?

A young boy faced Easter in Russia at the height of the Marxist campaign against religion. Instead of Easter worship the Communists requested everyone to attend a sunrise rally including teenagers. 10,000 people crowded into the arena. As it was ending, the speaker asked if anyone had anything to add. The place went silent. Then the student stepped forward. Near the microphone, he was ordered, "You must only tell the truth." You know what that means for atheists. Soldiers with rifles stood ready to enforce "free speech" the Soviet way. The boy waited a moment, stood up tall, took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs, "**Christ is risen!**" Rifle shots shattered the morning as the boy collapsed. But 10,000 people shouted back, "**He is risen indeed!**"³ Despite every effort to force out Easter, they knew that beyond our risen Savior, there is **No Greater Love † In Life**. See it first in the...

† Unexpected Easter for Peter and John (vv.1-5)

One of the most amazing things about the first Easter is that the only ones who expected it were Jesus' enemies. The Jewish religious leaders were so worried the disciples might steal the body and claim Jesus rose as promised that they secured a Roman guard to watch the tomb. Pilate's seal with their zeal ensured against the hoax. Thank God! They gave us more reason to believe, "**He is risen indeed!**"

But so did Jesus' followers. The women sure didn't expect Easter. The other Gospel accounts say they had a big concern going out to the grave with spices for Jesus' body. They wondered who would roll the stone away from the door of the sepulcher. The Jews carved their grave caves into the rock from about 100 B.C. to A.D. 100, and used a large flat stone that rolled in a groove to close the door. We saw one in northern Israel discovered accidentally by a highway excavation crew a few years ago. Because this style of grave was used for such a short time, our guide said there's no question it was 2,000 years old. It was the same kind Joseph of Arimathea made for himself, but gave unused to Jesus. No way could the women roll that stone aside to get into the grave and anoint Jesus' body.

Whenever Jesus had tried to warn His disciples, they didn't want to hear it. It's as if the crucifixion part of Jesus' prophecy was so disturbing that they didn't even hear Him say that on the third day He would rise again. They wondered what rising from the dead meant, but the mystery escaped them.

Imagine how Peter and John must have felt when Mary Magdalene rushed back to say that Jesus' body was gone! The stone was rolled away and the grave was empty? If the disciples had done that, Peter would have been their leader...against crack troops of the Roman Empire...with his little sword that could only cut off a servant's ear. The story the Jewish religious leaders paid the guards to tell was

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from a draft translation by the undersigned for the Wartburg Project – John.

² From Lenten series: *No Greater Love – Our Savior's Passion Sermons*. March-April, 2014 – New Life, Shoreview, MN

³ Story credited to "Dick Imes" by Pastor Roger Schultz, *The Calvary Connection*, Spring 2014. www.calvaryacademy.net

ridiculous all by itself. And it does not fit the fact that a shocked pair of disciples raced out to see what in the world Mary Magdalene was talking about. Like the other women, she seemed to have lost her mind.

The older Peter didn't do much better in a footrace with young disciple John, than he did with his sword. Somehow every effort to assert himself backfired. John got there first, but bent over to look inside. You have to really crouch down because they did not carve the entry any bigger than necessary. The stone could only be so large and still be moveable by a couple men. So John looked and waited.

Personally, I praise God for the disciples. I'm looking in the mirror. I don't always like what God says about me in His holy Word, the Bible. How about you? We're so slow to believe what He says! Disease or sickness come our way, and we fear God left us. Yet He promises, "***Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.***" (Hebrews 13:5) You wake up at night, sweating over something you said, or something you forgot to do. Your conscience just won't let you rest about some sin so long ago. No one else knows – but God! And you forget Jesus' kind words were for you too. When they nailed Him to the cross, He said, "***Father, forgive them.***" (Luke 23:34) God says our sins are all forgiven. Easter shouts that this is true. But then we lose a loved one and our happiness in life runs away. Yet there is **No Greater Love ♠ In Life** because God says, "***Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.***" (Revelation 14:13) "***And surely I am with you always.***" (Matthew 28:20) Why are we afraid to die when Jesus promised mansions all prepared, ready, waiting, guaranteed by His **Unexpected Easter**. Oh, Peter! John! Look inside!

♠ Enlightenment to come (vv.6-10)

This just was not a grave robbery! When they buried Jesus on Good Friday, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped His body in linen cloths with about seventy-five pounds of spices. That was Jewish burial custom, and they had to hurry because the Sabbath began at sundown, about 6:00 PM. Easter morning Peter saw those burial cloths collapsed on the stone bench where Jesus' body had been laid – as if Jesus passed right through them. And the σουδάριον, face cloth, that had been wrapped around Jesus' head, was still wrapped up, but lying right where Jesus' head had been. They found more than an orderly tomb. They found everything, absolutely everything except Jesus' body. Grave robbers would not dare unwrap the face of a corpse because of the mess of body fluids. They would just grab and run.

As an eyewitness, John was convinced by the state of the grave that no robbers had stolen Jesus' body. As the disciple whom Jesus loved, John reports that "***he saw and believed.***" But he also admits something which a myth writer or historical fabricator would have no reason to say. John admits that along with Peter, "***They did not understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.***"

For all the disciples and the women too, **Enlightenment** was yet **to come**. It would take multiple appearances by Jesus to the disciples hiding from the Jews behind locked doors, a fishing miracle on the Sea of Galilee, the opening of their minds to over 300 Scripture prophecies about His life and ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus would work on that for forty days until His ascent into heaven from the Mount of Olives. Then ten days later on Pentecost He would send the promised Holy Spirit as Counselor to remind them of everything He had said. That's why John could still remember Jesus' words decades later. The Holy Spirit inspired this fourth Gospel account to fill in the gaps and corroborate the *Synoptics* – Matthew, Mark and Luke. Easter did not depend on their feelings and neither did their faith.

So my dear friends in Jesus, Easter does not depend on how you and I feel about it. God did not ask any of us if we wanted saving, because we're all so blind by nature we think we're fine – as is! God has to show us our sin in order to see our need for a Savior. God has to teach us that even if we were only guilty of one bad feeling in our whole life, we would deserve eternal hell from holy God. But God wants us back, reconciled with Him. And Jesus Christ is the Way. He wants us to shout from the mountain tops in peacetime or through a hail of bullets: "**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**"

Peter and John were willing to die telling the truth: **No Greater Love ♠ In Life**. Now you, grab the microphone. Go and tell. Amen.

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