

Pastor's Message – Easter Sunday, 2021
Treasures in Heaven
Matthew 6:19-21

Shortly after American English poet A.E. Housman died, a collection of his poems was published under the title *More Poems*. The first poem in that collection is titled, “Easter Hymn.” Housman was not a confessing Christian but a seeker. Listen to his words as he wrestles with the idea of a risen Christ:

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.
But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
At the right hand of majesty on high
You sit, and sitting so remember yet
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.
(A. E. Housman, *More Poems*, 1936)

Housman was saying to Christ, “If you can't hear this and have no idea what has happened since you died, rest on. But if you rose to the right hand of God, remembering your cross and passion, look down from heaven and save.” Save us! That's the thing about Easter. It gets your attention, even the attention of those who do not believe and do not know what they long for and seek but must contend with the story of a risen Jesus Christ.

Life after death has been a constant longing and puzzle of humanity for as long as people have watched others grow old and die, for as long as we have seen others die too soon from sickness or tragedy. The longing is there not just at funerals either. It is there when we pass through the shadow of near death and wonder, even out loud, about how much time we have left to live.

It's like the story of the five-year-old riding by a cemetery in the car with his dad. He spotted a freshly dug grave with a mound of dirt over it. Amazed he shouted, "Dad! Look at that! One got away!" We might respond, "Well, no, little one, that one you think just got away is just freshly put down." He will learn what we have learned, that dogs and goldfish, plants and trees, grandmas and grandpas, friends and schoolmates—they all die, some sooner, some later.

Together, as if it were happening all over again, we all watched Jesus die an horrific death by crucifixion. His death was made sure by a spear to the side and a large stone to keep his body secure from grave robbers. He was dead all right. Yesterday, a day that some Christians call Holy Saturday, was the day of in-between, the day where we think of him entombed, a body with no soul on a Sabbath's rest. It was cold and dark in the sepulcher. Sadness and shock overwhelmed his followers, even though he had told them at least three times that he would die and rise. They hid away and waited for Sunday to tend to his broken, lifeless body.

But before the women had even arrived at the tomb, as the writers of the New Testament tell it, he did what no one else has ever done. He was raised to life after dying, never to die again. Others had been raised to life and then died again, but not Jesus of Nazareth. He rose to live forever and, in so doing, paved the way for us to do the same. Unlike Housman, the poet with whom I began this message, we do not have to say, "If you died to see no morning, then, Jesus, rest in peace." We do not even say "If you rose, Jesus, then look down and save." We state it as a fact, "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" And, because he lives, we will live also.

More than anything, Easter for Christians means life beyond our graves. We believe "in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." That is the center of our praise this resurrection day. Christ has paved the way for us to live forever in his presence with risen, glorified bodies.

Easter means something else, too. This Jesus who came to life is the same Jesus who said in his Sermon on the Mount that we are to lay up treasures in heaven which cannot be destroyed. This is the same Jesus who taught that our hearts need to be with heaven's treasures, not with the treasures of this life.

In other words, in the death-shattering light of Easter, we should be able to see clearly today what matters most in our lives. If our lifespan now extends beyond our projected death date, then our perspective changes markedly.

Now what we treasure most is not our jobs or our homes or our retirement plans or our bank accounts. A recession or depression can wipe those out in a moment. What we treasure most is not our strong and healthy bodies. Our looks wither and our bodies begin to wear out and we can't do the things we've always taken for granted and think we should still be able to do. Have you noticed that, as hard as you work out and eat the right thing, your body is deteriorating as it moves toward death? There is no changing that.

Maybe you were a "10" once, but you will not be a "10" again until Christ comes in glory, and your body is raised to be glorious like his (Phil 3:20-21). Then you will be a perfect "10" forever.

How much of our lives are spent on things that will not last? In 2018 a report of the self-storage industry reported that Americans now pay \$38 billion a year to have someone else store their earthly "treasures." There are 50,000 self-storage facilities in the United States. We do seem still to treasure what will not last.

So, what does matter most? Jesus Christ matters most. He loved us enough to lay down his life for us. Jesus took death down for us. He is our treasure in heaven. He is our First and Last priority. We live for him. We strive to be like him. We discipline ourselves to speak with him in prayer. We serve others in his name, the name of Jesus, the risen Christ. We invest in his purposes, his causes. We give ourselves to what lasts forever.

As one retiring senior citizen put it, "I am done short-timing it as if I'll only live until I die. If Jesus says I'm eternal, then I'm gonna give myself to what's eternal." Amen to that. We don't sprint to the tape but run through it for the best is yet to come.

Based on a sermon by Dean Nadasdy.

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