

NOW IT BEGINS (sunrise)

LUKE 24:1-10

Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?

He is not here, but is risen!" Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'"

And they remembered His words. Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles.

This weekend an organization known as "*American Atheists*" will be holding their 45th annual national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio. *American Atheists* was founded by the late Madalyn O'Hair. She was the infamous woman whose 1963 lawsuit banned teacher-led prayer and Bible reading from public school.

Madalyn was the face of atheism in the 1970s.

Obviously, the timing of the Atheist convention is intentional. Mad Madalyn once said her purge of religion in America should include “taking back Easter and making it a celebration of the start of spring.”

At the American Atheist convention, you’ll see slogans intended to mock Christianity... For example, “In God We Trust. NOT...” “There’s a Sucker Born Again Every Minute...” and “God is Just Pretend.”

Conference attendees even have the opportunity to get de-baptized. They brazenly stand under a blow dryer and renounce their former Christian faith.

The conference is a pep rally for atheists.

There are speeches on the so-called “*dangers of religious belief.*” Folks are condemning and hostile. They’ll propose outlawing religion. They are violent and intolerant towards Christians while accusing Christians of being violent and intolerant. I’m glad you chose to worship at Church today, not at the Atheist convention.

But let me suggest “an atheist convention making a declaration of unbelief” is exactly what we find in Luke 24:1-10. And again women are leading the way.

Luke names the delegation, “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women.” Of course, some of you will want to jump to the defense of the ladies who visited Jesus’ tomb...

“Pastor Sandy, how can you put Jesus’ faithful followers in the same category as a blatant, belligerent, blasphemous

enemy of all that's good and godly like Madalyn O'Hair? These Marys, are no Madalyns!"

But here's the point I want to challenge us with this morning.

Atheism comes in two varieties!

On the one hand, there's the flaming, antagonistic, militant brand of atheism embodied in organizations like the one meeting today in the city of Cincinnati.

This kind of atheism opposes religious expression and wants to deny people their right to worship the God of the Bible. They're anti-God and anti-Christ.

These guys wear the **black hats**. They're relatively easy to spot. And for years, the perennial poster child for this type of atheism was Madalyn O'Hair.

But there's a more subtle form of atheism. This is the atheism that works its way into churches and brings spices to the tomb of Jesus. It's *respectful, reverent, and religious*. These are atheists in **white hats**.

They attend church, and speak half-hearted prayers, and worship at appropriate times, and hide behind a veneer of compliance. This is the atheism found among folks who even claim to be followers of Jesus.

You'll never find this kind of atheism calling for the *elimination of faith* - rather, it just ignores the *implications of faith*. It includes the resurrection in its creed, but it treats the risen Lord Jesus as if He's dead.

And the poster child for this brand of atheism is Mary and the other women who accompanied her to the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning. Since you're at Church today and

not the Atheist Convention, you're probably not a **Madalyn...**
but *are you a Mary?*

A few years ago, the Atlanta newspaper made an awful error. It published the obituary of a man who was still alive. The obit was in the Thursday edition. Friday's paper printed the retraction. The editors blamed the mix-up on a miscommunication with the Funeral Home.

But how would you like to wake up one morning, open up the AJC, and see yourself memorialized in the obituaries? No one alive and kicking wants to be treated as if they're dead. Yet this is what the two Marys, Joanna, and the other women do to Jesus.

While they were still in Galilee, Jesus told them what would happen... He gave them the play-by-play...

He'd be arrested, and then crucified, and then three days later He would rise from the dead. Since they had seen Jesus conquer sickness, demons, and storms at sea, it made sense that death couldn't hold Him.

But though they heard what He said and probably acknowledge it at the time, the reality of it didn't click.

Maybe they assumed He was teaching a parable - or His words just sailed over their heads. Maybe it was similar to what happens when you tell a teenager to take out the trash. Oh, he hears you, *but does he?*

Why the truth didn't register with the disciples we are not sure. But on that first Easter morning, *Mary and company*

came to the tomb. They were treating a man who was as alive as you and me - as if He were dead.

The women came to the tomb with fresh and potent spices. They were prepared to rewrap Jesus' corpse.

Mark 16 tells us as they walked to the tomb they wondered among themselves how they were going to move the heavy stone from the grave. Their intention was to finish giving Jesus's body a decent burial.

Even when the women found the tomb already open the reality of what happened still didn't hit them.

Rather than marvel at a miracle, they were perplexed and puzzled. They were standing on holy ground - yet they thought they were at the scene of a robbery.

It took two angels with a question to jar these women back to reality. The guys in shining garments asked them, "**Why do you seek the living among the dead?**"

And I can hear the angels chuckle as they say these words. Their question implies a funny thought... *Why are you treating a man who is alive as if He's dead?*

Folks who are alive don't usually hang in graveyards. The angel told them, "**He is not here, but is risen!**"

In the Russian Orthodox Church, there's an ancient tradition observed on the day after Easter. Post-Easter Monday is a day reserved for humor and telling jokes.

The priests and people alike save their best jokes for that day and gather together to tell them to one another. It's their

way of honoring the cosmic joke God played on the devil with the resurrection of Jesus...

Satan thought he'd won. In killing Jesus, He figured he had snuffed out *the light of the world*.

In essence, Satan blew out the birthday candles, only to discover that God was using non-extinguishable candles. Three days later, Jesus conquered death, hell, and the grave and revived bodily to let the whole world know. Satan had laughed, but God got the last laugh.

The joke was on the devil. What he thought was his greatest victory, became *his* defeat and *our* salvation.

Yet all too often the joke is on us. Jesus is alive and well. He's ready to lead us into new ventures and work through us to change the world - yet we still visit the tomb with fresh spices. *Jesus lives! So why are we hanging out in graveyards - among dead dreams, and dead hopes, and dead relationships, and dead joys?*

The problem with many believers and churches today is what could be called, "a practical atheism."

Our theology is correct, but our practice lags behind.

We say we believe in the risen Lord, but we live as if He's dead... *When we pray, do we assume He listens?*

Before we serve, do we wait for His power?

When we're lonely, do we look for His presence?

Rather than run to Him with our problems, do we try to solve them on our own... Rather than seek His guidance, we make our best guess and trudge on...

Rather than lean on His power, *do we muster our own meager reserves...* Rather than depend on His comfort and joy, *do we turn to drugs, and sports, and games, and movies, and entertainment* - do we stay distracted so we don't have to deal with life's emptiness.

Here's this morning's big idea... **Jesus is alive and well, but all too often we treat Him as if He's dead.**

Once, a young, innovative pastor was doing his best to relight the flame of a dead church. There was an old, crusty, stuck-in-his-way deacon who kept blocking his efforts. One day the stubborn ole geezer just lost it...

He exploded, "Preacher, I'm telling you now, if Jesus knew about all the changes you're trying to make in this church, He'd roll over in His grave." Whoops, his slip of the tongue revealed the superficiality of his faith.

Actually, though no one would ever admit it, if the truth were known, there are many religious people who would prefer a dead Jesus to a live One. If it were up to them, they'd use the burial spices to wrap Him back up.

They would roll the stone back over the mouth of the grave and let Jesus out only when it suited them.

Some folks would gag Him with His grave clothes so He wouldn't be able to remind them of all those troublesome commandments that cramp their style.

There are people who'd rather have Jesus stuffed away, and out of sight, and kept in His place, so He couldn't meddle in the life they want to live.

Some church-folk treat Jesus like a family heirloom or Christmas decorations. They stick Him in a trunk, and store Him in the basement, and only bring Him out on special occasions - like Christmas and Easter...

*You can pay homage to a dead Savior whenever **you** want... You can visit a tomb when it's convenient for **you**... You can make impressive pledges of commitment to a dead Jesus while living for yourself...*

In his book, "*The Jesus I Never Knew*," author Phillip Yancey writes honestly, "In many respects, I would find an un-resurrected Jesus easier to accept. The resurrection makes Him dangerous. It means He must be loose out there somewhere. Like the disciples, I never know where Jesus might turn up, how He might speak to me, what He might ask of me."

A living Lord is not so convenient and predictable.

He's alive and on the move! He demands my loyalty moment by moment. He has the power and prerogative to interrupt my plans and prompt me to change.

Jesus can never be confined to a box *or a grave*.

The risen Lord calls the shots and expects us to follow. One author writes, "The resurrection means we can never nail Jesus down, not even if the nails we use are real and the thing we nail Him to is a cross."

Hey, if you follow a risen Lord, you're liable to find Jesus anywhere... *at the ballpark, or on the roadside, or hanging out in your backyard, or in a movie theater, or cruising with*

you in your car, or joining you on the job. Not just the sacred but the secular is His domain.

The Bible tells us the world is His footstool.

If the only time you look for Jesus is on Sunday mornings in a house of worship, no wonder you're missing Him! Jesus is not some disabled senior citizen confined to His bed in the nursing home.

He's full of vim and vigor! His adrenalin still pumps at adventure. You can bet - *Jesus is out and about!*

Once, a family gathered in front of the television to watch a video on the life of Jesus. The six-year-old daughter was moved to tears by the graphic scenes of Jesus' scourging, and trial, and crucifixion, and death.

The little girl sniffled and wiped her eyes as the Roman soldiers took the body of Jesus down from the cross... She watched as His friends laid him in a borrowed tomb... Then suddenly, she shot up in her seat and a huge smile broke across her face. She turned to the rest of the family and with tremendous anticipation, she shouted, "Now comes the good part!"

And I couldn't agree more! I'm thankful for the cross and the blood Jesus shed for me. Without it my forgiveness is impossible. But Jesus is no longer dead.

He's alive, and His plans for today include us!

Our salvation was won on the cross, but the cross was not the end of the story - it began for us a whole new adventure with God. The risen Lord now lives large in us... to change us, and lead us, and use us.

He works through us to impact a needy world.

There's a scene at the end of the epic film series, "*Jesus of Nazareth*." The High Priest's henchman, the man who conspired with Judas to kill Jesus, *was breathing easier*. Despite the fact Jesus was clearly divine, if He'd been allowed to live, He would've upset the status quo. The religious higher-ups agreed He had to be silenced. Powerful people had too much to lose.

Yet now, three days later, the same official hears that something is wrong at the tomb. He arrives to inspect with two other priests and a squadron of soldiers.

He finds that the Roman guards were supernaturally overcome - the stone was rolled away - the body of Jesus is nowhere to be found. He walks into the empty tomb - sees the empty grave clothes. He stares off into the distance, and utters, "Now it begins. It all begins."

Don't try to roll back the stone.

Keep your burial spices on the shelf. There's no need to even frequent the tomb any longer. **Let Jesus be as alive in your life as He is in the world today.**

The resurrection is where it all begins - where now it begins - *a new beginning for a fallen world and a new beginning for fallen people with believing hearts.*

Think of it, the risen Lord Jesus continually sets sail on the sea of today. Are you onboard with what He's doing, or are you just standing on the dock?

I love this poem by Lois Cheney. Listen closely...

"Once upon a time there was a God who so loved the world that He gave His Son - His only Son.

And they took that Son, and they hung him on a cross, and that Son died, and they buried the Son - sealed Him up tight. But God said, "*Oh, no you don't,*" and He rolled back the rock.

He unsealed His Son and His Son came out.

Came out walking and breathing and He was alive.

And He's alive today, and He walks around, and He stalks around breathing life and life.

Every morning, just before dawn, for thousands of years, little grim people - preachers and bankers and storekeepers and students sneak up to the grave and roll back the stone - to seal it up tight.

And every morning, God roars, "*Oh no, you don't!*" And He flings back the stone, and out walks Jesus all over again. Out stalks the grinding, striding Jesus.

Tight-lipped little people hover all day around the tomb, and cover it with incense, and bow before it, and walk before it, and pray to it, and sing to it, and weep to it, and lean on it - and no one notices. Or at least they pretend not to notice, the living, breathing, walking, talking Jesus - out on the edge, calling, "*Hey, hey you!*"

Has Jesus been trying to get your attention?

One Easter, a pastor gathered the kids in the altar for a children's sermon. Out of the blue, one boy asked loudly,

“What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?”

His question caught the pastor off-guard.

He was stumped. A little girl piped up, “Pastor, I know what Jesus said!” The pastor was curious, “Okay, what did Jesus say when He first came out of the grave?”

She threw out her arms and shouted, “Tah-dah!”

I’m not sure that’s exactly what Jesus said, but she was close! I see Him standing in the opening of that tomb, arms spread wide, a smile on His face, and He’s laughing loudly, “Tah-dah! I’m back! Death couldn’t hold Me! I’m here! I’m alive! And I’m going places!”

In a sense, Jesus still stands in the opening of the tomb shouting to every living person, “Tah-dah! I’m alive! Will you come and follow Me?” This is *the good part*. This is where new life takes off...

Luke 24, our text this morning, recounts what happened that first Easter, but let’s say, I was asked to retell you the story *without using words*. **No words**. I had to recount the story with nothing but *punctuation*.

How would I punctuate the resurrection story?

I’d begin with a **comma**. These women were returning to the tomb to finish a job they’d left in haste three days earlier. The Sabbath had been like a comma - a pause in preparations - a brief interruption.

But now they’re headed back with fresh spices to repack the corpse and rewrap the burial shroud.

They’re going to finish this tragic sentence.

But then I'd put down a bold, cold period. For there's no bounce in their step - no smile on their face - no anticipation in their conversation. A period now sits at the end of their dream for a better life and better world.

They've all assumed Jesus is dead.

There's no thought that He still might have one more bold miracle up His sleeve. I read a **period** here.

Next, though, I'd place a question mark. For when they find the tomb empty, we're told they were "**greatly perplexed.**" All kinds of theories and possibilities swirl in their heads. *They should've known He'd risen!*

Jesus had been clear about He would rise, yet all they're able to do now is muster a **question mark**.

It's only after the angel's rebuke - after the reality of the empty tomb and its implications had settled over their soul - and the risen Lord had revealed Himself to them... that the women respond **with an exclamation!**

The Marys and the others ended up trusting Jesus, and they go on to follow Him to the ends of the earth.

Its comical now, but these women had been treating a man who was alive as if He were dead. Jesus was alive and on the move! Despite their earlier failure, they were given a new start! *Now it begins... It all begins...*

Is your faith a comma?

You pause on Sundays to attend church, you sing a song, say a prayer, hear a sermon, but come Monday you're re-immersed in your secular routine.

On Sunday, you say you believe in the resurrection, but from Monday to Saturday, you live as if He's dead.

Is your faith a period?

Life has let you down. Hurts won't go away. You've given up on dreams you thought would be fulfilled.

Sometime not long ago, you stopped reaching for the stars - and now your goal in life is to just make it through another day. Your life desperately needs a miracle, yet you're not anticipating one from Jesus.

Is your faith a question mark?

Recently, your life has taken some strange twists. Circumstances have occurred you can't explain. You've tried to calculate solutions to your problems, but you've never considered Jesus to be a part of the equation.

You need to factor in His resurrection! He's alive, and Jesus may just be setting you up for a miracle.

Or is your faith an exclamation point?

Are you living hand in hand - stride for stride - with Jesus? Do you *look for Him*, and *lean on Him*, and *live with Him*? Are you excited about the future?

Are you anticipating the living Lord Jesus to change you, and fill you, and love you, and lead you, and use you in many and mighty ways? *If not, then why not?*

Perhaps you've always claimed to be a Christian. You accept what believers believe. And since most Christians attend Church on Easter... you're here!

Yet let me challenge you to go beyond the rhetoric.

Regardless of what you've been mouthing, in your heart, have you been acting like an atheist? Are you *a white hat atheist*? Are you guilty of *a practical atheism*?

You're not a Madalyn, but have you been a Mary?

Listen one final time to what the angels asked the women who came to Jesus' empty tomb, **"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is risen!"**

From now on, let's follow the risen Lord!

Hey, get in tow with the Jesus who's overcome all obstacles - *not even death can hold him!* His plans never fail, and He's always on the move. Here's the final word... **Today, it begins, it all begins...**