

NOW IT BEGINS 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 the organization, "[American Atheists](#)," will hold their annual convention in Minneapolis, MN. [American Atheists](#) was founded by the late Madalyn O'Hair, the woman whose 1963 lawsuit banned teacher led prayer and Bible reading from America's public schools. Madalyn was the face of atheism in the 70s.

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 will even have the opportunity to get de-baptized. People will brazenly stand under a blow dryer, and renounce their former Christian faith.

It's all a pep rally for atheists. Speeches will be given on the so-called "*dangers of religious belief*." They'll propose outlawing religion. The crowd is violent and intolerant towards Christians, while accusing Christians of being violent and intolerant. I'm glad you chose to attend with us 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. And again women lead the way. Luke names the

delegation in verse 10, “**Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women.**”

Of course, I can hear some of you jumping to the defense of these ladies... *“How can you put Jesus’ faithful followers in the same category as a 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 Minneapolis.

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*. There are atheists with **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 women who accompanied her to the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning. Since you’re at an Easter sunrise service 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, and 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 would be arrested; then crucified; then three days later He would rise from the dead... And since they had seen Jesus conquered 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 registered 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 made the journey 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 had 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 declared, "**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 joke telling.

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'd snuffed out *the light of the world*. In essence, Satan blew out the birthday candles, only to discover God was using non-extinguishable candles. Three days later Jesus conquered death, hell, and the grave, and His crucified body revived 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 the Lord is listening? Before we serve, do we wait on 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 ourselves...* Rather than seek Him for guidance, *do we just take our best guess...* Rather than lean into His strength, *do we throw our meager reserves at the problem...* Rather than depend on His comfort, *do we turn to drugs, or sports, or games, or entertainment - do we try to keep ourselves 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 rewrap Him.

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 own 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 self-live they want to live.

Some church-folk treat Jesus like a family heirloom, or like the Christmas decorations. They stick Him in a trunk, or store Him in the basement, and only bring Him out on holidays - 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. Another 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 Sundays in a house of worship, no wonder you're missing Him!* Jesus is not a senior citizen confined to a 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, lead us, and use us. He works through His followers 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, *is 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 now nowhere to be found. This enemy of Jesus walks into the empty tomb - he sees the empty grave clothes. He then stares off into the distance; then whispers to himself, "**Now it begins. It all begins.**"

Don't try to roll back the stone over the grave. 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 waving?

I love this poem by Lois Cheney... "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 is 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 the living Lord 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 everyday, *"Tah-dah! I'm alive! Will you come and follow Me?"* **This is the good part.** This is where new life takes off...

Perhaps you've always claimed to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. You accept what believers believe. And since most Christians attend Church on Easter Sunday, you're here for the sunrise service no less!

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? Guilty of a practical atheism? Hey, 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! Let's get in tow with the Jesus who's overcome all obstacles - *not even death could hold him!* His plans have never failed, and Jesus is always on the move. Here's the final word this morning, **Now it begins, it all begins...**