

## CAP EASTER SERMON 2026

**Speaker:** Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

**Date:** 05-04-2026

**Scripture:** Matthew 28: 1-15

*"28 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.*

*2 And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.*

*3 And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.*

*4 The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.*

*5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.*

*6 He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.*

*7 Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."*

*8 And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.*

*9 And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.*

*10 Then Jesus \*said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."*

*11 Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.*

*12 And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,*

*13 and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.'*

*14 And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble."*

*15 And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day."*

I want us to look at this account in a little bit more detail this morning. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb. And what they encounter is not quiet stillness. It's divine interruption. There has been an earthquake. The stone has been rolled away and an angel is sitting on it. Matthew tells us his appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. And the guards, trained, hardened men, shook with fear and became like dead men. They saw it. they experienced it. they knew something undeniable had happened. And then the angel speaks. "He is not here. He has risen just as He said." And the women are told to go to tell the disciples to carry the message forward.

But then we are given another scene. The guards go into the city and they report to the chief priest everything that had happened. Think about that. They didn't hide it. They didn't dilute it. They reported the earthquake, the angel, the rolled-away stone, the empty tomb. And yet, the response is not investigation. The response is not curiosity. The response is not even doubt. The response is rejection. The leaders say: Tell the people that His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.

I want you to pause here and just think about that for a minute. How would they have known what happened if they were asleep? The story itself collapses under its own weight. It was easily verifiable. They could have gone to the tomb. They could have checked the evidence. But they did not. Because this was not about evidence. This was about willingness.

In fact, if you go back to the previous chapter, you see something even more revealing. Because they had gone to Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember that while He was still alive, that deceiver said, ‘After three days, I will rise again.’ So, give the order for the tomb to be made secure.” You see that? They remembered. They had heard Him. They had understood what He claimed. They knew exactly what Jesus had said.

And so they took precautions. Pilate tells them, “Take a guard. Make the tomb as secure as you know how.” And they did. They sealed the tomb. They posted guards. They secured the grave. They did everything humanly possible to make sure that nothing unusual would happen.

And yet, despite all of that, the stone is rolled away. The guards are shaken. The tomb is empty. And now, the same people who had taken all these precautions, who had anticipated something, who had secured the tomb, turn around and say, “Tell them the disciples came at night and stole the body.” And then they add, “Don’t worry. We will deal with Pilate.”

Do you see the contradiction. They secured the tomb because they were afraid something might happen. Now they ignore what actually did happen. They knew too much to be ignorant. But they refused to be honest.

And this is not confusion, beloved. This is not lack of evidence. This is deliberate resistance. A refusal to face reality because reality was too costly. If they had accepted the truth, everything would have to change – their position, their authority, their reputation, their past decisions – everything. And so, instead of surrendering to truth, they constructed their own narrative, not because it was believable, but because they could live with this new narrative.

That brings us to the very central question that faces us on an Easter morning.

### **What do we make of the empty tomb?**

The issue here is not: Is there evidence? The issue is: What do we do with the evidence? There is evidence; what are you and I going to do with that evidence? And there are two responses.

- On the one side is the guards and the chief priests. They had information. They had access. They had proximity to the truth. But they were unwilling. Because accepting the resurrection would mean that they were wrong. They had misjudged Jesus. They had crucified the Son of God. And that was too costly. So they choose a lie that was easier to live with.
- On the other side, take the disciples. They didn’t understand everything. They were confused. They were afraid. They were slow to believe. But they were open. And that made all the difference.

And if we are honest, we too stand in one of those two places.

But first, before we get to that, we need to understand what the resurrection really means for us.

### **Why does the resurrection matter?**

Paul makes a stunning statement in 1 Corinthians 15:14 when he says: If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.

1 Corinthians 15:17 “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you’re still in your sins.”

In other words, if Christ had not been raised from the dead, we have filled this sanctuary for nothing. We could well have slept in today, had a nice breakfast, gone out and partied, done something that we would do on a Sunday. It would have absolutely no meaning if Christ had not been raised from the dead.

That is what Paul is saying. Our faith would be futile. Without the resurrection, the cross is also incomplete. If Jesus died but did not rise, then His death is just another death, another tragic execution, another story of injustice.

But the resurrection declares that the sacrifice was accepted by God. The payment was complete. Romans 4:25 says, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Without the resurrection, we have no assurance that sin has been dealt with. Without the resurrection, Jesus would be just another teacher. If He remained in the grave, then He's no different from any other leader. He taught well, He lived well, but He died and that's the end.

But the resurrection declares that He is not just a teacher. He is Lord. God raised Him from the dead; therefore God exalted Him, we read in Philippians. And without the resurrection, death still wins. If the grave holds Him, then the grave holds all of us. There is no eternity. All those who have gone on before us are gone. We will never see them again. If that's all it means, if there is no resurrection, death is a final place of resting.

If there is no resurrection, the doorway into God's presence is shut. All that we say and we sing when we lower somebody into the grave, and say we will meet again, is a lie. If there is no resurrection, loved ones who have gone on, have gone on.

Paul says: Death has been swallowed up in victory. That's what happened to death. It's been swallowed up in victory. The resurrection changes everything, because death is no longer the end.

Consider this: A dead savior versus a risen savior.

- A dead savior might inspire; a risen savior can transform.
- A dead savior will be remembered; a risen savior can be known.
- A dead savior cannot help you today; a risen savior walks with you, today and forever.

And this matters because if Jesus is risen, then everything about how we live, what we decide, struggle, and hope for, changes.

Everything changes. How?

- i. You are not alone. "I am with you always to the very end of the age." You don't walk alone into tomorrow. You don't face struggles in isolation because the risen Christ is not distant. He is present. "Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you." That means in your uncertainty, He is there. In your pain, He is near. In your ordinary everyday moments, He walks with you.
- ii. You have the power to change. Why? The Bible says the same power that raised Christ from the dead is at work in you. The same power that broke through that tomb and raised a lifeless Christ's body into a resurrected body, that power is in you and in me, working day in and day out. That same power.

Think of the potential of that power when you face the things of life and what that power can do and bring into your life. For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose.

That means habits can be broken. Maybe you're caught in something like that. We had such a wonderful time on Good Friday. I believe that so many bondages were broken. Maybe you missed a Good Friday. Maybe you're here with an addictive behavior that you've carried for long. The good news of the resurrected Christ is it can be broken.

You don't need to leave this place with that same habit strapped to your back. or that same addiction. Patterns can be changed. What once defined you does not have control over you anymore. Because He lives, your story is not finished. Your failures may be real, but they're not final.

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. the old has gone, the new is here. God does not relate to you based on who you were. God relates to you based on who you are in becoming like Him. That's how God relates. He looks at your future. He deals with your past and He says, "I set you on this path. Now look ahead and see the potential that I can bring into your life, where every plan and purpose scripted for you in Heaven begins to find fulfillment.

You don't live life randomly. You live under His guidance. The risen Christ is not just a truth to believe. He's a voice to follow. Trust in the Lord with all your heart ... and He will make your paths straight. In your decisions, in your uncertainties, in your crossroads, He leads.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. You don't have to guess your way through life. you can walk with clarity because He directs your steps. And there is a future, beloved, a future that is secured. "Because I live," Jesus said, "you also will live."

The resurrection settles the question of your future. It's no longer uncertain, fragile, or dependent on circumstances. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Do you look at your life and say: My life is firm and secure? Or did you walk in here thinking that you're on sifting sand? Just for these one or two hours that I'm here on an Easter morning, I'm going to act like everything is okay. But when I leave here, I'll be back going through muddy waters, on uneven ground.

God has your future in His very capable hands. No matter what happens in this life, your ultimate future is held in Him. Because He lives, your life is held, your future is secure, and your hope is unshakable.

So now, we must return to the question: **What do we do with the empty tomb?** Because I'll tell you this – it cannot leave us neutral. It calls for a response.

- You can either do what the leaders did – explain it away, ignore it, stay where you are.
- Or you can do what the disciples did – move toward it, consider it, and respond to it.

I think this is where it moves from the realms of antiquity to our present day, to you and me, to our lives, and where we are in our walk through this earth. Because it's not about them anymore; it's about you and me.

**What will you do with Jesus?** Will you keep Him at a distance? Will you hold on to what is comfortable? Will you avoid the implications? Or will you trust Him?

I'm going to digress for just a minute. I've heard people say that I cannot trust Jesus because I've seen how other people who trust Him live. And I want to say this, that is never the argument from

Scripture. Scripture always says: Look at Jesus and His Word, and decide whether there is truth in it. If you look at people, you will always fail. Because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Look at His truths. Look at the word that He has given and ask the question: Is this true? If it is true, then you have to follow Him. You have to. There's no point looking at somebody else and saying they are flawed. They will be flawed as all of us are, this side of eternity. But we are a saved, flawed people.

So, are there any of you sitting here whose idea about walking in the faith is based on how others who call upon the name of Christ live? Don't do that. Because when we do that, even in the secular world, you will fail. Because there's no one perfect.

But look at the one who was perfection and say: Did He make a good enough case for me to follow Him? And if He did, then I tell you this – you have no choice but to follow. Because that is truth, if indeed you are looking for truth.

The stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out, but so that we could look in and see that He wasn't there. There was no problem for Jesus to come through that stone in front of the tomb. He walked through closed doors, if you remember. Walking through that tomb would have been no problem at all. But the stone was rolled away so that we could look in, the guards could look in, the disciples could look in and know that He wasn't there. When we look at truth in that way, then we decide what we must do with it. The resurrection is not just something to believe; it is something to respond to.

The same question that faced the disciples, the chief priests, the scribes, and the crowds – What do we do with a risen Christ? – that same question faces us today. You can't ignore it. You can live as though it does not matter. You can carry on with life as usual.

But indifference has its consequences. It may feel acceptable for now, but it is not acceptable in eternity. Because to be indifferent to Jesus is not a neutral position. In fact, it's a rejection. Jesus Himself said, "Whoever is not with Me, is against Me." Because in rejecting Him we are rejecting the very means of salvation that He has provided.

Through His death, our sins have been paid for. 1 Peter: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross." But if that transaction is not received, if we reject Christ, then we reject the rescue as well. and what remains is not neutrality. What remains is separation.

Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath then remains on them – the wrath of unpaid-for sins. For the wages of sin is death. If you reject the Son who took care of the sin component, you have rejected God's salvation plan. Then there is no hope left.

But if we say today: I believe in the resurrected Christ, then that belief must shape how we live. Because belief is not merely something we say; it's something that we must embody. Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2:17.

We must live transformed lives. we must live as those who believe in the values and the distinctions and the principles of the kingdom of God. Jesus didn't call us to admire Him; He called us to follow Him. "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow Me." There is no middle ground. This is not neutral space. This is not, as someone once said, demilitarized zone. You're either for Him or you're against Him. There is no comfortable in-between.

So we must confront a hard truth. We cannot walk down the path of Christianity, calling ourselves Christians, and yet not live out the values of the kingdom of God. We just cannot. Because indifference to His kingdom is indifference to the cross, and indifference to the cross is a rejection of Him, and a rejection of Him leads only in one direction – away from life eternal.

And yet, in those days, so many rejected Him. Not because there was no evidence, but because they didn't want to engage. They wanted to continue life on their own terms. Scripture tells us He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, and yet, not all believed.

Even when He was taken up to heaven, it says when they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted. Can you imagine that! To see Him, to witness Him, and still walk away unconvinced!

And on an Easter day like today, we stand in that same place with the same kind of choices. If you are indifferent to Him, we too are in danger of walking away from the finished work of Calvary. That's the price of indifference. So the choice before us is clear: We either receive Him fully, or we reject Him completely. There is no middle ground.

Somebody once said, "If you're in cruise control in your life as a Christian, you're backsliding." There is no cruise control. We are always moving upward, trying to live the life that Jesus invited us to live. We can't check out. We're a called people. And there's only one way a called people can live, and that's to live according to the life of the Master.

So the question for us: **If I say I am for Him, then how do I order my life today?** How do I live? What changes must I make? What must I surrender to Him? What must I embrace?

I read a bumper sticker once that said: If you were tried for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Think about that. Would people say, "That person's a Christian. I know that by the life they live." And that's the kind of life we are called to live – as ones who must emulate the Master. Because if it doesn't, then we must confront the reality to continue outwardly in religion while inwardly remain unchanged.

And that has no value at all. Jesus Himself said, "These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me."

Where is your heart today, beloved? Is it as close to the lips that we pronounce Him with. And if we truly believe this has no place in our lives, then we must be honest enough to walk away from empty form. But if we are seekers this morning, if we truly want to seek Him, get to know Him better, if we're genuinely searching for truth, then the truth confronts us today. Not gently, but clearly.

What will you do with Jesus? What will you do with the resurrected Christ? Will you walk past Him indifferent or will you say, "Lord Jesus, I will follow You. I will live as Your disciple. I will shape my life around Your truth. I will reflect Your character. I will let my life so shine before men that they may see my good works and glorify My Father who is in heaven."

That's the challenge for us today. Not just to believe (Satan also believes), but to live as disciples of the resurrected Christ. Not just to admire but to follow. Not just to acknowledge but to surrender. Because the resurrection demands a response.

And today the question before you, before me, is: **What will you do with Jesus? What will you do with the resurrected Christ?**

Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, Lord, our heads are bowed and we sense the movement of Your Spirit here. And I pray Lord that even as we have looked at an empty tomb and ask the question, what do we do with Your Son? that we would embrace Him, that we would follow Him, that if we had followed Him half-heartedly in the past, that we would follow hard after Him. Lord, that we would try to be true disciples of His.

And Lord, if for some reason we have just gone through the motions, happy that we're born in a Christian home and come to church every now and then, convict us, Lord, that that is not enough. That until we come to a point where we acknowledge we have sinned and that Jesus paid the price for that sin, took it upon Himself and we accept Him as Savior, that our eternity is not assured.

So I pray for those who may be saying in their hearts I want to know Jesus. I want to accept Him as Savior. I pray Lord, that as Your word says, that Your Holy Spirit would flow with power and authority into their hearts, that they would sense and know that You are in them, living with them. And for others Lord, who are saying I want more, give us Lord that insatiable thirst for more of You, that every waking moment, Lord, is a moment when we say, "How can I learn more about You? How can I imitate You? How can I portray a resurrected Christ in the way I live my life?"

Lord, as we come to this altar, as we partake of this memorial that shows us Your death, Lord, remind us of Your resurrection as well, that through the brokenness of Your body and the blood that was spilled at Calvary, Lord, we have full access into Your presence and that there is no sin that is too dark, too stained that Your precious Blood cannot cover. So help us to come with awe and reverence. Oh, but Lord, as we partake and go back, fill us with zeal for you, Lord, that we may live as Christ-bearers, Christ-imitators from this moment on. Lord Jesus, it's in your name that we pray. Amen.

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