

THE LAST PILGRIMAGE

Pastor Duke Jeffries

**1 Peter 1:3-6** NIV

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*

Christians all around the world – millions of them, I think – have, or are, or will be doing this morning just what we are doing here: Gathering, huddling in groups of like-minded folks at the crack of dawn to re-visit a story which most of us could recite from memory in our warm kitchens over a cup of coffee.

Why do we do this?

Nowhere in Scripture are we commanded – or even encouraged – to make a big fuss over the details of the Resurrection narrative as it is set forth in the Gospels.

So, why are you here this morning? Why did you get up hours earlier than normal to gather here?

Is it a religious imperative for you?

...Or is it a kind of spring ritual?

...Or a family tradition?

...Or a treasured holiday “have-to” – along with the baskets of candy, plastic grass, and easter eggs?

Probably you are here because the historical event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ – with all its theological, spiritual, and eternal ramifications – is deemed by you to be so mysterious and thrilling and astonishing that a special “extra” annual Christian gathering is demanded, not unlike Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, when, as we brood and even grieve over the historical event of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, we are reminded that, according to St. John, His last words on the cross were “It is finished!”

And then, the Evangelist remembers, He died. Didn't "swoon." Didn't just pass out. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, died. John insists that his readers understand that.

Yet we, along with St. John, are somehow certain that the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross at Golgotha is not the end of the Greatest Story Ever Told. "It is finished" is NOT the same thing as "It is over." We know, don't we, that Jesus' death is the least finished act in human history.

We believe that, having been crucified, dead and buried, He was raised from the dead by the mighty power of God. Not "resuscitated" or "revived" like Lazarus – who had to die again – but *resurrected*, completely freed from the power of sin and death and hell.

And we who believe cling to the living hope that His resurrection has made our own resurrections possible. We believe that He ascended into heaven and that He will come again and that we, too, shall be raised from the dead. We most of us have celebrated these same beliefs year after year for more years than we care to remember.

Not only that, but many of us will – in just a couple of hours – return to the Myersville School, where a special Easter Service has been prepared to help us to celebrate these precious beliefs again with hymns reserved exclusively for this day and sermons taken from the Gospel record of our Lord's resurrection. Just like last year, and all those years before.

We keep coming back. Most of us wouldn't miss it.

In light of that I want to ask a simple question (and please pardon my blunt curiosity): Do you attend Sunrise Services year after year as a pilgrim?

Or as a disciple?

According to Dr. Webster, a pilgrim is someone "who travels to a shrine or a holy place as a devotee." A pilgrim makes pilgrimages – religious trips, if you will, to religious artifacts.

The empty tomb – wherever its actual location – is just that: a religious artifact. If we could find it on a map and travel to it and look inside it, it would still be an ancient tomb, and an empty one. Jesus left it 2,000 years ago. And if you are here this morning to simply verify – in some figurative sense, at least – the presence and the emptiness of the tomb of Christ, then you are here as a pilgrim. You might bristle at any characterization of the empty tomb as a "religious shrine" but if you are here as a pilgrim that is how you regard it.

Once during Christ's incarnate life, a disciple – Simon Peter – suggested to Jesus that a religious shrine be erected. You could look it up – the story is included in the three synoptic Gospels. According to Luke's account, Peter was so dazzled by what he had witnessed that day -- the Transfiguration of Jesus and His fantastic meeting with an apparently resurrected Moses and Elijah -- that he proposed the immediate construction of three separate Tabernacles to mark the spot. Jesus seems to have dismissed Peter's wrong-headed notion without so much as a word. Luke suggests that Peter must have been out of his wits to suggest such a thing.

Jesus was not in the shrine business. He had no interest in religious ritual or religious commerce. He didn't make pilgrimage. He didn't venerate religious relics. What He did do, He repeatedly told His disciples, was His Father's business, the work for which He had been sent. That work, He said to anyone who would listen, was to reveal God and to inaugurate His Kingdom. His sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection set into motion the reconciliation of all things on the earth back to His heavenly Father.

Jesus initiated that ministry, but He did not complete it. He never intended to. His disciples were – and are – called and equipped to continue it.

Before His arrest and crucifixion He told them (again) that they were to carry on His ministry of reconciliation, and that He and His Father would send the Holy Spirit to equip them for and assist them in this vital work, which was to continue all day every day until He returns. They were to go into all the world and make disciples in all nations, teaching others all that Christ had spent four years teaching them, and to obey all that He had commanded them. This is the work of a disciple. It is not required of a pilgrim.

And if you are here this morning as a disciple, you know that. A disciple is, in the simplest understanding, a learner. But a true disciple is something more than a student. A disciple learns by getting out of the classroom and following his or her master, and doing just what he does. A disciple of Christ follows Christ, trusts Christ, loves Christ, suffers with Christ. A pilgrim, if he or she is careful, can avoid all that.

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ – not just a pilgrim – my guess is that you've been following Him more or less faithfully since last Easter Sunday, and that your journey has taken you once in a while to the high, exhilarating mountaintops of life and – more often, perhaps – through its deepest and darkest valleys. Your discipleship has included some suffering, and you are learning, aren't you, why we call it "Communion" when we come to the Lord's Table.

If you are a disciple of Christ you have also experienced great joy in the past year, some of it, you were surprised to realize, amidst difficult and unhappy circumstances. Your annual reflection on our Lord's resurrection at Eastertide is, even as we speak, blessing your heart and encouraging you in your sacred journey. You've caught the rhythm of the by-faith Christian life: the highs and the lows; the coming and the going; the in-gathering and the equipping and the sending; the love and the fellowship; the forgiving and the forgiveness. Your mission field, such as it is, might not extend too far beyond your immediate family, but you are busy in it with your ministry, this ministry of reconciliation to your spouse, your children: being a disciple, making disciples. Besides your family there's that humble little church to which you are connected, and your heart has been knit together with others in that place, and you love each other as brothers, sisters and co-labourers in this ministry of reconciliation. If this is who you are this morning, then your heart is full as you celebrate our Lord's resurrection.

"Christ is risen!" we say, and you respond "He is risen *indeed!* *Hallelujah!*" To our ears it sounds different when you say it. You are not remembering an historical religious event; you are testifying to the living presence of Christ in your life, and on your journey, within your ministry of reconciliation. You say the words from a wellspring of living hope. And the pilgrims among us envy you.

Brothers and sisters, my prayer is that each of us leaves Easter services today ready to embark on the next step of our faith journey.

If you are not a Christian, I pray that you will acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Saviour today, and that your own sacred journey – the exhilarating and exhausting adventure of following Christ – begins.

If you are among those who have spent the past year in yet another cycle of religious pilgrimage, your Christian life – dusty and repetitious, without a scrap wonder and mystery left in it – has probably run aground. If so, then I pray you'll take up your cross today – perhaps for the first time in a long time – and resume your sacred journey, continuing Christ's ministry of reconciliation in your home, in your church and wherever else you find yourself.

If you are a disciple – nicked and scuffed and a bit dog-eared since last Easter Sunday; another year older and, hopefully, wiser for it, but still earnest and still willing to trust God for at least one more year, or one more day – then my prayer for you is that your sacred journey deepens and quickens to the glory of God and the blessing of us all.

Go in peace, all of you. *Amen.*