

## The Message for Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

**Title:** “Stick Your Head in the Tomb”

**Scripture:** Luke 24:1-12

**I. Checking it out...** In 1995, Barbara and David Mikkelson created a website called, “Snopes” ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com), apparently pronounced, “snoops”). The purpose of this website is not only to debunk or confirm urban legends, but also to provide evidence for their findings. Every month, over six million people visit their website to check up on one or more of the urban legends that seem to float around “out there.”

Urban legends are not a new phenomenon. When I was much younger, there was a popular story told around many a campfire about a crazed person with a hook for a hand that used to terrorize young parkers at night. In the 1960’s, there was an urban legend that JFK (John F. Kennedy) had not been killed by a sniper’s bullet but was being held on a floor at a hospital in Dallas to which all admission was denied. In the late 1970’s, there were rumors about Elvis (Presley) still being alive and seen pumping gas in some rural service station.

With the spread of the internet, urban legends are almost a daily occurrence. Some of them even appeal to Snopes for credibility. I recently got one that said if you don’t believe it, check with Snopes. I did, and it was not true!

**II. Skeptical...** From my perspective, Snopes continues to be a very successful website for at least one reason: *The world has become a very skeptical place.* And nothing in today’s culture suffers from skepticism any more than does religion.

That is partially justified. The slickness of the prosperity Gospel is very unappealing to many of us. The mismanagement of Church funds by some televangelists has turned a lot of people off to religion. Squabbling over doctrine between some denominations has led untold numbers to decide that there is no such thing as “The Truth,” only versions of it. And, probably the most common cause of skepticism is prayer that does not get answered the way we think it ought to get answered.

You might not be one of them, but there are many skeptical Christians today. The thing that hit me squarely between the eyes about contemporary skepticism happened about eight years ago in the last church I pastored before coming here. Immediately following a stirring Easter Sunday service that included a brass orchestra and the entire congregation singing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” one person stood up at the conclusion of the service and casually said to anyone around him who would listen that “Michael O’Bannon would get into trouble preaching the resurrection, because nobody really believed in it anymore.”

I know I have shared this before; but I do not think my career has ever been, nor will it ever be challenged as it was that Easter Sunday morning. And, I think that for the rest of my ministry I will never, ever again, simply assume that everybody in worship on Easter Sunday will be on the same page—because we now live in a culture so skeptical that it will call into question even the most basic and fundamental of our beliefs.

**III. The first Christian skeptic...** I suppose I should not have been so surprised that someone might question the legitimacy of the resurrection, because that is exactly what Jesus' Disciples did on the first Easter morning.

The Gospel of Luke says that the Disciples heard what the women said to them when they returned from the empty tomb. But, they thought it was an idle tale. The Jewish law discouraged the testimony of women as being unreliable (in the Mishnah). And yet, Peter and John took what these women said seriously enough to run to the tomb to see for themselves.

Peter was the first Disciple to stick his head into the tomb. Luke tells us that he was amazed. I wonder how many times he and the Disciples had heard Jesus mention his death and that three days later he would rise from the dead. We think of Thomas as being the first functioning Christian skeptic; but, in reality it was probably Peter, who after being told that Jesus had been raised from the dead could not believe. That is why he ran to stick his head into the tomb.

Now, that leads me to say these three things, briefly.

**IV. When belief is difficult...** (1) There are a lot of things about our faith that are, at first, hard to believe. It was no easier then than it is now to believe the supreme miracle of resurrection.

We are not the first generation that has been taught to question. We are not the first generation that has been brought up to think that everything we need to understand can be understood with clear, defining logic. There are other things about our faith that defy logic.

- Why does evil persist in the world?
- Why is it we can not have total free will and do whatever it is we want to do?
- Why is it that God places limitations on us when our human bodies and minds urge us to do things that are sinful?
- Why can't we get everything we pray for?
- Why would God take so much care to see sinful humanity guided by Grace to eternity?

In answer to these and other very hard questions, let me simply say that it is absolutely arrogant to think that we deserve to know and understand all that God knows and understands. There are just some things that we do not understand and will not be able to understand until we get to heaven.

**V. Sticking our heads into the tomb...** (2) And, that leads me to the second thing I want to say. It was o.k. for Peter to stick his head in the tomb. It just meant that he really cared about what happened to Jesus.

Today, while here in church, the resurrection and God's power to prevail is easy to believe. We have the beauty of this sanctuary, the triumph of the music, and the witness to resurrection to help us. Tomorrow is the issue.

Tomorrow, when the sights and sounds of this morning are but distant echoes in our minds and hearts, our old fears and doubts will want to creep back in. We are going to be just like Peter. At some point, when we are feeling low, we are going to want to stick our heads back in the tomb, just to see if God really raised Him from the dead.

That's o.k. God knows that we need a little help. God knows that we need to be reminded that there is life after divorce. God knows that we need hope when illness threatens. God wants us to know that there is a job out there for us yet to find. God wants to reassure us that our children's problems can be met and handled. And, God wants us to believe there is life after death.

Why do I dare say this? How can I possibly know?

**VI. He wrapped His arms around us...** (3) That leads me to the third thing I want to say. Let me tell you this story. On August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed just after taking off from the Detroit airport. One hundred and fifty-five people were killed. One person survived: A 4-year-old from Tempe, Arizona, named Cecelia.

When rescuers found Cecelia, they could not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators first assumed Cecelia had been a passenger in one of the cars on I-94 where the airliner crashed. But when the passenger manifest was checked, there was Cecelia's name.

Cecelia survived because, even as the plane was falling, her mother, Paula (Cichan), unbuckled her own seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around Cecelia, and then would not let her go. Nothing was going to separate that child from her mother's love: Not tragedy or disaster, not the fall or the flames that followed, not height nor depth, not life or death. (Keith Smith, "How to win the Christian race," Bible Center Web Site, Biblecenter.com. Retrieved October 3, 2003 and posted at [www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com) in a sermon entitled, "What Not to Wear," 4/8/2004)

Do you believe that story? It was in the newspapers and it can be checked out on the web. It is true. A parent so loved her child that she wrapped her loving arms around her and protected her with her life. (Simply type in the date of the crash, or Cecelia Cichan. It is sometimes erroneously reported as "Chican." See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest\\_Airlines\\_Flight\\_255](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Airlines_Flight_255), e.g.)

That is exactly what God did. He wrapped the loving arms of Jesus around us and protected us at the cost of Jesus' life.

**VII. I have learned...** I know you expect me to say this because I am the preacher. But believe me, I have had to stick my head in the tomb at times in my life. And what I have found is that while there are some things I may never understand, this one thing I have learned. At the times of trial in life, I have learned that everything the Bible says about God's love for us is true. 'Every word of it. Amen.

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