



Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

Clifford Baptist Church, Amherst, Virginia
Rev. Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor



(Transcription from the Morning Service that was Streamed Live)

The pulpit had a beautiful arrangement in front, with lilies and white flowers. Behind the pulpit the cross was draped in white and adorned with a gold crown, with greenery and lilies in the choir loft behind the cross. The area was made beautiful again by the gifts and talents of Pam Giles and Roxanne Higgins.

Special Music: "What a Beautiful Name" by Pastor Tom Doss, Mary Mays, Carrie Hill

Sermon: "Two Letters that Change Eternity" **Scripture:** John Chapter 20, verses 24-31 (King James Version)

Good morning, Clifford Baptist Church! To the members here and our friends of the church, we're thankful and grateful on this Easter Sunday morning that we worship together. I want to welcome everyone joining us today; we have so many listeners joining us in Amherst and Nelson Counties. We have folks joining us in Roanoke and Chesapeake; we have people from all over the United States. I received a message from a friend of the church in Oregon this morning who said she'd be joining us for worship today. People are also joining us from other nations and countries. As we gather, this sanctuary has ten people here; we know it is full. Our prayer today is that it will be filled four or five times past our thousand seat capacity. We're grateful you are here with us as we worship on this Easter Sunday morning.

Before I begin my sermon, I want to tell you about the health of the church. So many folks are concerned about how the church in general is doing in these days of the pandemic when churches aren't able to meet, when our doors are locked, and our sanctuaries are empty. How healthy is the church in these days? Clifford Baptist Church is an absolutely healthy church in this day and age. This is the fourth Sunday we're meeting together that we've not been able to join in the sanctuary. Yet, we have so many joining us for worship and we're so thankful. God's people are still ministering; they're still giving; they're still going out into the world as representatives of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior. Whether you're a member of the church or visiting us today, my prayer is that all of us will join together to be the presence and witness of Jesus in this world. In these days and the days beyond, we're so grateful for God's people.

I want you to know, Clifford Church, our Nominating Committee is working right now getting our ministry team ready for next year and while we're meeting and the church is not together, the response to ministry positions and the response to the Nominating Committee have been stronger than ever in all these years! I'm thankful and grateful that you continue to love your church. I've gotten so many messages from people who say I'm just looking forward for all of this to pass that we can be back together. So am I, believe me, so am I! Perhaps that old saying is true: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." I'm thankful we can join together and have this media connection so we can reach out to the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. I believe in this day, not only for this church, but the church in general, that

the Lord Jesus Christ is increasing our borders of outreach to a world that desperately needs Him. In these days, He's growing us, He's using us, and is ministering through us as we continue to serve Him. Praise God we join together on this Easter Sunday morning!

I thought earlier in the day that today is Gwen's and my thirty-eighth Easter with Clifford Baptist Church and this is so different than the thirty-seven that went before us as we meet in an empty sanctuary and yet with a media connection. Normally, this sanctuary is near capacity. Last year it was over capacity; the parking lots were overflowing; we were worshipping shoulder to shoulder. Today rather than worshipping shoulder to shoulder, we're worshipping "screen to screen!" But we're still together. The church is still the church. The church is no less the church today than it is on any other Easter Sunday morning. This year while we're restricted to be able to open our sanctuaries, our sanctuaries are not empty. I believe our sanctuary is overflowing as we worship together today. I would have never been able to predict in my wildest dreams that a day like today would come. If last year after our Sunday Easter service was over and all our capacity crowd was gone, if Pastor Clyde and Pastor Jeffrey came up to me and said "We just want you to know next Easter Sunday morning, we're going to have ten people here." I'd say "How did you boys fall and knock your head out?! Something is wrong with you; I'm going to have a CAT scan done and have the church pay for it!"

We know things can change on a dime, and a pandemic is passing through our nation and world. Indeed, the service is different and we're no less the church today. I'm grateful today to say a virus cannot stop Easter morning. Giving prayer and consideration to so many families who've been affected by this virus in our nation and world and lives lost, we realize there are many hurting this Easter Sunday morning. We're grateful because of Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave that He is the Lord and the God of hope, and help, and healing. If your family has been affected by this virus, if death has visited your home in recent days or you're in a tragic situation or being challenged in some way, because of Easter we know the Lord is reaching out to you and is bringing healing and blessing to you and your family on this Easter. Today is still the day of Jesus' victory over the grave, and He promises every believer a life and a future in heaven. Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! We say that together in unison as we know He is Risen, He is Risen, indeed and because of His resurrection there is life, hope, help, and healing for every soul in this world.

The opportunity and open gateway to forgiveness, purpose, hope, joy, and to a home in heaven comes because of Christ's death on the cross taking our sin there, dying for us, shedding His blood so we might be forgiven—His resurrection from the grave that we might be promised hope everlasting and a home in heaven. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life as He tells us in John 14:6 that whosoever will come to Him will be saved and that person will be adopted into the family of God, through Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Bible says in at least eight places in both the Old and New Testaments that there is no respect of persons with God. What does that mean? It simply means this: the Lord God does not give preference to gender, to popularity, our color or nationality, our possessions. Whoever we are, wherever we come from we know His love expressed to us through the cross and the resurrection reaches to every single soul on earth. If today you do not know Him in this service, He's reaching to you. He's inviting you to come to know Him as Lord and Savior. He came to save us all as we worship on this Easter Sunday morning. He proved His power to save us by the empty tomb.

Today as I lead this Easter service, the highest of our holy days, I want to base my sermon on two simple letters of the alphabet—two letters that make all the difference for all of eternity. There are two days etched into my memory forever; I'm sure they're etched in my wife Gwen's memory too: November 26, 1988, and August 15, 1991. Those are the days, our daughter, Cari Joy, was born, and our son, Gabriel, was born. While Gwen is absolutely part of that, I want to put it in a few more personal terms with me. I think when your first child is born you fully realize that life will never be the same again! There will be individuals in your life who have you wrapped around their little finger, and you will respond to them no matter what. For me, coming to Clifford Baptist Church as pastor in 1982, there were six years I went to hospitals and visited with families who had a new baby arrive. I experienced their joy and elation that a new life had been added to their family and to our church family. It's still true today; I love to visit those families in the hospital when a new baby has just been born. But on November 26, 1988, when another baby was born and another baby was added to the church family, that day was extra special to me as pastor. For six years, I'd seen babies come into the church but this time it was my baby; this time it was my child, my daughter. It was a wonderful feeling to behold that new life coming into the world. For nine months, I knew I was going to be a father. But when Cari Joy was born and Gwen labored through that delivery and that little one was laid in my arms for the first time, I realized I was just not going to be a father but I was going to be a daddy. I was going to respond to every need of this little one; I was going to give her all the help and hope and provision I could give in her life to come. Just a few short years later, that little one would grow up and would verbally call me "Daddy." Three years later, a little boy came into the world and he, too, grew up to call me "Daddy." There are billions of people on the face of this earth today, but only two people in the world today can stand up and point to me and say "That's my Dad." They were a gift from God to me and Gwen. I think about the fact that only two people out of billions can stand today and say "That's my Dad."

Today on Easter Sunday the key word I want to center on is the word "my." My – "That's my Dad." On Easter Sunday most people around the world and in our communities know this is Easter. Most people celebrate Easter in some way. I feel sad for those believers and yet Easter and Christmas are the two principle times they come to church. I'm sorry for that; they need to come every single Sunday because every Sunday is connected to Easter. There are others who celebrate with family gatherings, big meals, new clothes, with colored Easter Eggs, chocolate bunnies—there are so many ways people say they celebrate Easter. Listen, it is only truly Easter for those who understand and accept the truth that Jesus Christ went to the cross and died there with our sins on His shoulders. He poured out His blood; He laid down His life so we might be forgiven. He took sinners and as the perfect Lamb of God, He died in our place on the old rugged cross. But three days later, He overcame the death of the cross by overcoming the grave. He is resurrected; He walked away from the grave in life and He is the Living Savior today! For the world in general, many may say "Jesus is the Lord." But what Jesus came to do is transform that statement for every life to say "Jesus is my Lord." There is a world of difference in saying "Jesus is the Lord" and saying "Jesus is my Lord."

Write this scripture reference down: Philippians Chapter 2, verses 9-11. Listen to these words Paul writes to the church at Philippi: "Wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of things in heaven and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every

tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” What Paul is writing to the church is to say the day is ahead of us but the day is absolutely on God’s calendar and God’s timing that all of the universe is going to bow to Jesus the Christ—that all of the universe is going to say “Jesus is the Lord.” That includes everyone who mocked His name and every atheist who ever lived and everyone who would never believe. Everyone is going to bow their knees and with their tongues say “Jesus is the Lord.” In fact, Satan himself will bow to Jesus as Lord. But there will be a select few—those who bow at the foot of the cross and said “Lord Jesus, I am a sinner and I believe you gave your life on the old rugged cross so I might be forgiven of my sin, that my rebellion against you would be taken away as far as the east is from the west. Lord Jesus, I believe that not only did you die on the cross, the cross is empty now and so is the tomb because you are resurrected—because you are my Lord! You are my Savior. You are my king.” All the universe is going to say “Jesus is the Lord” but those who surrendered our lives to Him will say “Jesus is my Lord.” Those two letters, m y, change eternity for every single life.

Let’s read a key passage in the Easter story. I will get to the scene from the gospel of John later in the day on Resurrection Sunday in just a moment. It had been a very eventful day according to John’s gospel. Early that morning before daybreak, Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb. She had seen the stone rolled away from the door, and she ran to get Peter and John so they could come and see the scene as well. I love the way John recounts them coming—he says we both “sprinted” to the empty tomb; we came to where Jesus was buried and I outran Peter. I love that little macho statement that “I beat him; I got there first.” Peter comes as well a few seconds later, out of breath, and both of those men go into the tomb and witness the truth that Jesus is not there. His burial clothes were laid to the side; the napkin traditionally laid over the face of the deceased was there. It began to dawn in their minds and hearts that Jesus had ceased being deceased! I like that statement—God gave me that this week. Jesus had ceased being deceased; He was the risen Savior. They confirmed that as they went into the tomb.

Peter and John then made their way home, and Mary stayed behind as dawn was just beginning to break forth. In that morning dawn, she met Jesus—alive, outside the tomb. She did not recognize Him in that particular moment; she did not know who approached her. When Jesus said one word, she knew exactly who He was. He said “Mary.” All those years she had followed Him, ministered to Him, loved Him, and heard Him and she had heard her name spoken by Jesus probably hundreds of times over the three years of His ministry after He delivered her and saved her and she had followed Him and loved Him, He called her “Mary” so many times and on that resurrection morning when He said “Mary” all her memory flooded back and she knew exactly who it was. It was Jesus—risen from the cross, lying in the tomb but risen from the dead.

Later that same Sunday the disciples had gathered in a room; all were there except Thomas. They were there in fear and were scared for their lives. They were still huddled together believing any moment the door might be broken down and they may meet the same fate of their Master who died on the cross—perhaps any moment because they were His followers that they, too, would meet death because they had walked in the footsteps of Jesus. The door was bolted shut, locked as tightly as they could get it—closed away from the world, closed away from the enemy so they couldn’t be

taken out and killed. As the door was bolted shut from the enemy, the Master, their friend, came in. Jesus appears to them, and He shows them His hands and side. Scripture says they were “glad when they saw the Lord.” Thomas had not been there; he was also called “Didymus” which implies Thomas perhaps had a twin. (Didymus means two.) Thomas was not there in that initial gathering; when he came to join the group the disciples told him what happened—that Jesus had come to be there, that Jesus was here. Do you remember what Thomas said? Turn to John Chapter 20, verses 24 and 25: “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger in to the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Quite a statement from one of the disciples. But that’s the reply of many of the people in the world this day.

Many people recognize the holiday of Easter, and they celebrate it in some way but so many people today in this world are saying “I’m too busy with the things of life; I’m too sidetracked to think about what Easter truly means.” There are some in the world who say “I just cannot believe God created the entire universe in six literal days. I cannot truly believe a man and his family took pairs of animals from all over the world and they sailed through a flood and re-established the human race. I can’t believe those words of the Bible so because I can’t believe that, I certainly can’t believe that Jesus would be resurrected from the dead.” Sadly, there are too many people in the world like that and Easter is no more than a holiday. For them it has never become a “holy day”—the day Jesus rose in victory from the grave.

So what happens to Thomas? Continue reading with me in John Chapter 20, verses 26-31: “And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst and said “Peace be unto you.” Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name.” What a beautiful passage of God’s word as John recounts what happens with Thomas. So as old, unbelieving, skeptical Thomas is approached by Jesus, when he had said “...unless I touch the scars, unless I thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe” Jesus meets him eight days later and holds out His hands and says “Thomas, touch the wounds.” Perhaps He pulls His robe aside and shows him gash in His side and says “Thomas, put your hand here and feel what happened to me with the lance of the Roman soldier.” He had been mounted to the cross with those spikes through His hands and feet. On the cross near the end of His life and, in fact, after He died a Roman soldier thrust a lance into His side, literally piercing His heart for one of two reasons: Either to hasten His death because Passover was coming quickly or to prove He was already dead. Scripture teaches us He had already died at the time the lance was thrust into Him. But He invites Thomas to touch Him fully, completely, so he would have the proof Jesus had indeed died on the cross and was resurrected from the grave. Scripture never teaches us that Thomas ever touched Him. But at that invitation, Thomas surrenders his doubt and skepticism and bows to say “My Lord and my God.” That

moment changed his eternity; it changed his life. I want you to see the reason it changed his life is because he used the word **my**. My Lord, my personal Lord having a relationship with you. Two letters changed his life.

Some of the greatest verses in the Bible have that little word in them. I've read these verses over and over again, but God opened a window of understanding for me as I prayed about this Easter sermon and how I was to approach the people of God with the word of God. He lit up that little word "**my**" to me in scripture after scripture. Let me give you a few examples outside the gospel of John. Write these references down and go back to them sometime, perhaps in your devotions today or this week:

Job 19:25 from the Old Testament. Job, one of the first Bible books written and one of the earliest books in your Old Testament, says this: "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."

Psalms 18:2: "The Lord is my rock and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower." The writer of Psalms knew the Lord belonged to him.

Isaiah 12:2: "Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song, he also is become my salvation."

Daniel 6:22: In the middle of the lions' den with his life literally at stake before hungry lions, Daniel says this: "My God hath sent his angel and hath shut the lions' mouths."

In the New Testament, Hebrews Chapter 13:5-6: "...he hath said I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say the Lord is my helper.

Some of the most familiar words in God's word, the beginning of Psalms 23 written by King David: "The Lord is my shepherd." **My** Lord, **My** God, **My** Shepherd.

This morning I am moved, I am blessed, and I am directed by God to tell you that Easter in its highest celebration, in its deepest meaning, and its most heart-stirring moment assures us it's based on one simple word. That Jesus can be **my** risen Savior, Lord, and God. Easter is my personal story. Easter is my personal relationship with that risen Jesus who walks with me and talks with me and tells me that I am his own. Easter is my salvation. Easter is my Savior. Easter is my Lord, my God, my friend. Easter is based on two letters: **my**—a personal loving relationship with the Savior. As Pastor Clyde said today, it's nothing to do with religion it's about relationship—knowing Jesus in a personal relationship.

For believers joining us today, praise God that we celebrate the resurrection of our Savior and our Lord. For old Thomas it was a moment of sheer faith, sheer amazement, and sheer love when he laid down his skepticism, doubt, and unbelief and simply said "My Lord and my God." Believer, Christian, never lose the amazement that Jesus saved you and me. Never lose the wonder that He came to us, He went to a cross for us, He rose from the grave for us that we might have a personal relationship with Him, that we might say "Lord you are **my** friend and you walk with me because you love me every single day." It was a gift we did not earn, a gift we could never pay for, a gift we did not merit. There's nothing we've done that is so good could earn salvation; it is a gift that came by way of the cross and the empty tomb. It's amazing today as I think of that empty tomb. It is so true that Jesus is our victorious, risen Lord! Before there could ever be an empty tomb, there had to be an old rugged cross. He died for us; He is risen for us. Today, we say Hallelujah and

praise you, Lord that you love us that much. “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene and wonder how He could love me, a sinner condemned, unclean.” That’s the story for every one of us. All of us need Him; all of us are sinners. There are none righteous, no not one. All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God. But Jesus came, Jesus died, and He arose again that sinners could be saved—all of us, every single one.

Today, believer, this Easter Sunday will we in this moment of praise, blessing, adoration, and thanksgiving—simply say: “Thank you, Lord. I renew my life once again; you are **my** Savior, **my** Lord, **my** friend, **my** God. Help me daily to walk with you. Help me daily to surrender my will to be your will. Help me be your witness. Help me raise my children in the love of Jesus Christ; help me bring them to you Lord. Help me to walk in the ways of the world that others might see Jesus in me simply because you’re living so deeply in my heart. Lord, thank you that you’re **my** Savior. I recommit and rededicate my life to you every day in thanksgiving that you’re mine and that I love you and that you love me so much you came to the cross and walked from the tomb that I may have life everlasting. Thank you, Lord, thank you.” That word **my** changes eternity for every single one of us.

Today I pray we come in humble thanksgiving. If you’re watching and joining us in worship, you’re part of Clifford Baptist Church. No matter where you are in the world, you’re part of Clifford Baptist. I’m so grateful I can offer an invitation to you; this is not my invitation, it is Jesus’ invitation. He simply gives me the privilege to speak his invitation to you. He loves you so much. He stands beside you today wherever you are, whatever state you live in, or county or country you live in He’s standing beside you with open arms and says “Will you come to me? Will you take me as your own? Will today be the day you say I want you as **my** Savior? I want you Lord as my friend, my God. I want to walk with you every single day.” He is with you right now. Listen, my friends, He is not a dead prophet on a cross; He is not a dead Savior in a tomb. He is a risen Savior of power, victory, might, glory, and blessing! And He wants you and me for His very own. He wants us to say “That’s **my** Savior!”

Today, if you’ve never said that this is your moment. I humbly tell you that as a sinner I came to Jesus, and I’m still a sinner. He still continues to forgive me. I wish I could tell you I stand in this pulpit as perfect, but I am certainly not. But my Savior continues to love me, forgive me, heal me and carry me forth and He wants to do the same for you. Too many people in the world say “I can’t come to Jesus because I’m not good enough; I’m not perfect enough; I don’t know the Bible well enough.” Jesus wants you right now. He’ll begin walking with you; He’ll begin teaching you His word. He’ll begin growing you in what it means to serve Him and witness for Him. But He wants you right now—this very moment! Don’t put it off, don’t wait, and don’t make an excuse. Today is the day; this is the moment. Easter Sunday morning you can give your heart to Him. For the first time in your life, you can say “Jesus is **my** Lord and **my** God.” He’s waiting for you to make that decision for Him.

As I end this Easter sermon I’m grateful, believers, I call us together in thanksgiving to say “Thank you, Lord, for being **my** Savior.” I cannot end without asking you if you’ve never come to Him to make that statement today.

Let's pray together: Our Father, our Lord, and our God as we gather here on Easter Sunday morning, there are so many in the world who are not celebrating Easter for the right reasons. I thank you, Father, I can call together God's people. First of all we say "Lord, thank you." We rededicate our lives to the Savior who came to a cross and walked away from the grave that we might have life everlasting. Increase our witness, our borders, and our love. Open our eyes to see the people who need you the most; open our eyes to the needs around us. Help us, Lord, to grow and continue to be in your church and be your people. That begins with me—individually. Thank you that you're my Savior. Help me to be your witness in a growing way every day. Maybe Lord there's someone on this Easter morning who's never said "Jesus, I want you as my Lord." Father, I pray that one will hear and accept this invitation and simply say "Lord Jesus, I believe you died on the cross for me personally. I believe you took my sin to the old rugged cross and you took my place and died for my punishment on the cross. You gave your life, you shed your blood that I might be forgiven—me personally. I also believe, Lord, you walked away from the grave. I believe you're resurrected on this Easter morning. Today, perhaps for many years, I've said Jesus is the Lord but for the first time this morning I'm asking you to be my Lord. I'm asking for a personal relationship; I'm asking you, Lord, to walk with me. I'm asking you to teach me, and grow me. I'm asking you, Lord, day by day as I grow and become yours that I will keep my eyes on you, walk like you, be like you and witness for you. It begins by one statement—all of eternity rests on one statement: "My Lord and My God." I pray today Lord that hundreds are saved; that many are bowing their heads and their hearts in this moment to say "Lord Jesus be my Savior. I open my heart to you." Bless us as believers today, Lord. We believe in the cross, we believe in the empty tomb, and we believe in the risen Savior and our life belongs to you—you are mine. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

