



Lift High the Cross!

Text: John 20:17
Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:1-6
New Testament: John 20:1-18

The *Time Magazine* cover story from Good Friday of 1966 was “Where is God?” This was the question Jesus’ followers asked when they went to Jesus’ tomb that first Easter day.

Where is God in the face of the brutal injustice that crucified Jesus? Where is God when the great teacher of God’s love was hung on the Cross?

The *Time* story gave the impression that God was absent from life.

However, it was just the opposite. The *Time Magazine* Good Friday story was the sequel to an October 22, 1965 story it had earlier published. That earlier story was about a radical theology that was emerging across America. The radical theology was called the “God is Dead,” movement.

In 1965, theology professors at Temple University, Rochester Divinity School, Syracuse University, and Methodism’s Emory University claimed God is dead. Dr. Thomas Altizer from Emory University declared, “We must recognize the death of God is a historical event. God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence.”

On Good Friday, six months later, other theologians opposed the God is Dead Movement. The problem wasn’t God, they said. The problem was secularism. It was destroying Christian faith. Its worship of human reason denied God’s presence was necessary for human life.

Here we are, 54 years later facing an invisible enemy that has a death grip on the world. The coronavirus is pushing us to ask the same question, “Where is God?”



Christian faith appeared to be dismal over a half a century ago. We were in the middle of a Cold War generated by secularism. But today, before the coronavirus, God's absence seems to have infiltrated the highest level of government and religion.

The world is trusting in biomedical research, technology, and government edict to save it from death. We are accepting edicts that congregations and worshippers are not to gather with one another to praise God for Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead.

We're here this Easter morning to declare Jesus Christ's resurrection remains the most powerful inspiration in human history! Christ's eternity is not diminished by human doubt, scientific reason, or government edict.

Much has happened to Christianity and America during the intervening years. We've reached the moon and discovered the DNA code through reason. Human reason maps the functions of the human brain, and sends interplanetary explorers to find life on distant stars.

We can live life in the palm of our hands. We can see life moving in the womb. The world is richer for the information explosion that is transforming civilization. But human knowledge is no closer to resolving the hatred and envy that afflicts human kind.

The injustice that nailed Jesus Christ to the Cross remains a more stubborn foe to peace on earth than the coronavirus. The capacity of humankind to render evil for evil continues its relentless opposition to faith, hope, and love. Secularism has not solved the problem of human sin. Secularism cannot solve the problem of human sin.

Reason cannot stop sin.



During the past 54 years, we've seen revivals of ancient opponents to Christian hope that we thought secularism had ended. Drugs continue their relentless march through families as a new generation without spiritual direction succumbs to death.

We've seen self-interest triumph over loving our neighbors, and pride prevent community from forming.

Despite our wealth, our government that upholds the highest ideals, our freedom that remains the world's envy, and our education that fuels our technological advances, America hasn't lost its need to hope in God.

Despite the spread of democracy around the world, and educational advancement in totalitarian countries, the inability of people to live in community with respect and love cripples nations and destroys economies. Secular nationalism fuels conflict. Its tribalism justifies atrocities.

The empty Cross and the empty tomb are pillars on which Christian hope has built Christ's Church as God's alternative to self-interest. God's forgiving love from the Cross, and the evidence of His love through Christ's resurrection from the dead remains the ultimate hope for the world's unity.

Back in the 1980s, when my ministry was on a mission to help youth with their addictions, I spent a week in St. Francis Hospital's adolescent chemical dependency unit. I watched addictions' counselors challenge the defenses teens used to resist treatment.

It took more than psychology to penetrate an addict's denial of the death march they were taking. The common human need for God's help was the only means of successfully penetrating an addict's denial. Teen addicts found their way to new life through discovering God's love.



These recovering addicts found the same love given from the Cross and the empty tomb. It's Jesus Christ's love for the world!

Secularists raise barriers of denial to resist God's help. Their confidence in the human capacity to solve life's injustices without God has not born fruit. We've been on secularism's road for over two and a half centuries without ending humankind's war-mongering and denying human rights to life.

Only Christianity provides a universal message of dignity for every human being that offers a pathway to global reconciliation and peace.

God's message of human dignity was proclaimed in the remarkable words, "He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!" From the injustice of Jesus' Cross, God raised Christ to eternal life to show everyone who faces a cross that God promises new life to those who have faith in Jesus and His love.

Secularism has no answers to prevent injustice on earth. Its political expression in communist socialism enslaved the world to the fear of death during the Cold War.

Yet behind the Iron Curtain, communist socialism could not suppress the resurrection's promise of new life for humanity. Easter's declaration inspired Christians throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to rise from atheism's rubble and reclaim the promise of new life through Jesus Christ for generations raised under secularism.

Today, Christian school teachers are ordered by Western secularism to hide their crosses. Yet the greatest lesson to be taught to younger generations is the resurrection is the only source for global hope! This day God offers proof of the eternity of His love.



The question of despair, “Where is God” is answered by Mary and Martha crying out, “He’s not here! He has risen from the dead!” These women lifted high the Cross as a declaration of Christ’s victory over death!

Today, the threat of death is even more immediate for the world. We live with a new cry of, “Where is God?” amid this pandemic.

Wherever children and youth ask, “Where is God?” lift high the Cross as their inspiration for hope. Wherever people declare, “God is Dead,” lift high the Cross as God’s sign that points to eternal life!

The Cross isn’t simply a symbol that represents Christianity. It’s the sign post for people who question God’s existence that directs them to find God’s hope. The empty Cross and the empty Tomb offer what secularists cannot offer – assurance that God prevails over death.

When Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev died, he lay in state in the Kremlin. Red Army soldiers prepared to close the lid on his coffin, before they carried it to Lenin’s tomb. Brezhnev’s wife stood silently beside the coffin, gazing at her dead husband’s body.

Just as the soldiers drew up to the casket to close its lid, she walked to the casket. She placed her finger on the center of her husband’s chest. There, in the sanctuary of secular worship, she made the sign of the Cross. In that one moment of Christian faith in the resurrection, Victoria Brezhneva made one last statement to her husband, his political party, her nation, and the world about how wrong he had been about the source of human hope. Hope was not in dialectical materialism.

She lifted up the Cross for the world to see its ultimate hope.

Hope doesn’t lie in secular promises of salvation. Hope doesn’t lie in the dream of economic equality enforced by a totalitarian, secular, atheist



state. Hope doesn't lie in medical and technological advances that only delay the end of life.

Hope lies in where the Cross points. It God's directional indicator that points to where the redeemed in the Lord live a life forever.

Lift high the Cross!

Happy Easter!

Amen.