

“From Easter Fear To Easter Faith”

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! We come to this Easter Day with gladness and joy, hope and expectancy. We come to this day with just about every positive emotion of which we are capable. We've got flowers and great hymns this morning. We've dressed up and have a special dinner planned, some of us anyways. We're looking forward to time with family and friends. Okay, there are no presents as at Christmas, but there are chocolates and the weather is a whole lot better. It's Easter. A day bright and joyful, exultant and celebratory.

Everything is going so well today, until we read Mark's account of that first Easter, today's gospel reading. It's about as sparse an Easter story as there is. There are three women getting up early, heading off to the cemetery to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Their biggest concern is that they are going to have serious trouble rolling away the tomb. When they arrive, they are met by a young fellow garbed in a white robe, sitting there as if he'd been expecting them. Their reaction? They are alarmed. Not expectant, not hoping against hope, not daring to believe that what Jesus had said might be true. Alarmed!

The young man speaks simply and directly, telling them almost matter-of-factly that Jesus has been raised and is heading off to Galilee where he'll rendezvous with the disciples. The women are to tell them what happened. And their reaction? They “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” End of story. In Mark's Gospel, that first Easter ends not with joy and thanksgiving and celebration, but with terror and silence.

And you know, my friends, that just doesn't seem right. Most of us have watched thousands of hours of television where the most complex human problems get nicely wrapped up in 30 or 60 minutes. We are accustomed to tidy endings, we expect them. We don't expect the most astonishing story ever told to end with terrified women running in fear. This is like a movie without a conclusion. It just stops. We wonder if some pages have been torn out of the book, in fact the early church made up a different ending to Mark because it didn't like how the story ended, with silent women, terrified, afraid, full of fear.

Why are these women afraid? Maybe these women are afraid because they realize that everything that Jesus said is true. If the only things we can count on are death and taxes, well, death just got taken off the list. And that's frightening because it means that now anything can happen. Up until Easter, life – no matter how bad or good, no matter how meaningful or useless, no matter how blessed or cursed – always ended up in the cemetery. On that we could rely. Death was the great equalizer. One could be rich, famous, accomplished, talented, powerful, envied, and still all roads would lead to the graveyard. At the very least, it was something to count on.

We know where the bodies were, where to go to grieve and pay our respects. For all our grouching, maybe we liked it that way. At least it was predictable. Maybe we'd even like it if Jesus had stayed put. We could remember him fondly. We could sigh about how the good die young. We could mourn the folly of the world, always bent on slaying the good. We could lay flowers at his tomb.

After all, Jesus had some wild ideas. He actually believed peace was possible among people and nations. Jesus actually believed people could be healed and transformed by love. Jesus thought children truly mattered and were not merely amusing at their best and annoying most other times.

Jesus believed in helping people who would never be able to help him. Jesus thought compassion was a better path than competition. Jesus believed in loving enemies. Jesus didn't think possessions were the measure of a life worth living.

Jesus believed suffering was not the sign of God's absence, but a time for a deepening relationship with God. Jesus even believed that death was not the final word in human existence. I mean, really now. Let's remember him, let's pay homage to him, let's remember his birthday. Christmas is kind of nice. But business as usual isn't so bad, is it? Let's take care of our religious duties towards him and then head back home.

Only Jesus is not there. As usual he's gone on ahead of us, calling us yet again to follow. Jesus is calling us to follow him into the living future he is creating, in Galilee and unto the ends of the earth. After Easter, everything Jesus taught and did is vindicated. His way has been affirmed and exalted by God as the way. Jesus' way is the way of life. God desires, delights in, participates in, and sustains. While that's frightening, it is also what finally overcomes the fear of those three women. At first, the news is overwhelming and disorienting. But in time, it becomes the very essence of life. The resurrection is our confirmation and our calling to continue in the way of Jesus. Yes, we may look back fondly to the very origins of our faith, for the very reason we are gathered as the church, but we are to go forth, expectant of a future where death has no dominion.

Those three women, the two Marys and Salome, are the ones who had the faithfulness to go do what needed to be done. They were worried about who would roll the stone away. And what they learned is what we learn. God rolls the stones away from our lives. It is God who opens new possibilities where we see only problems and dead ends. It is God who will enable and empower us to love as fully as we are created to live. We can surrender our grip in business as usual as well, as all our fears and despair, because there is more to life than death.

My brothers and sisters, my fellow Easter people who share my resurrection faith. Hear this well. Easter means we no longer have to be afraid to have God roll back the stones we've carefully placed over certain parts of our lives. Easter means we no longer have to be afraid to love as creatively and faithfully as Jesus did. Easter means that, though terrible things happen in life, God is always alive and at work to bring new life out of our hurt and loss and grief. Easter means we have been set free from the dominion of death. We have been set free to love the earth, to love even our enemies. Easter means God's love triumphs over death, even though it scares us to think so.

My friends, say it with me. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! AMEN.