

04/12/20

Easter Sunday

Do not be alarmed. He is risen!

Mark 16: 1-7

Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.

And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?”

But when they looked up they saw that the stone had been rolled away—for it was very large.

And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here! See the place where they laid Him.

But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this holiest of days, we gather in spirit with the entire Church of Christ to commemorate the high point of our liturgical year of worship, the glorious working of our Creator-and-Savior God, the culmination of the Gospel-Good News which we want to share with a dying world. That we are, at this moment, living through a time of threatening crisis caused by the coronavirus; that we cannot yet meet together in our beautiful and beloved sanctuary for worship; that we must at the present keep apart in an effort to contain and curtail the virus’s effects—none of these circumstances can take away our joy at the angel’s message, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here! See the place where they laid Him.” With these few words—the very first Easter sermon—the angel proclaims the message that transforms our very existence.

On that first Easter day, St. Luke tells us, to two of His disciples who were travelling to the town of Emmaus, the risen Christ explained how the Scriptures of Israel—Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets—all point to Him, to His atoning death on the cross for us, and to His glorious victory over the grave on our behalf. Our Lord’s triumphant resurrection is the clarifying lens through which we now read those prophetic writings and understand His plan of salvation which is presented there. The Seed of the

woman who would crush the head of the serpent Satan; the descendant of Abraham through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed; the Son of David who would establish and rule over His kingdom forever; the suffering Servant of whom Isaiah prophesied that, even though He would die, yet “His days would be prolonged” forever—these and the rest of those beautiful prophetic pictures and descriptions become clear to us as we take to heart the words of the angel, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here! See the place where they laid Him.”

I

The darkness of the pre-dawn hour during which the women in our text made their way to Jesus’ tomb on that first Easter morning was an all-too-accurate picture of the darkness in their hearts. The One whom they called “Lord”—the One whom they also loved as their Teacher and Friend—had been crucified to death on the Friday before. They had been witnesses to His suffering and pain. They had seen Him bow His head as He gave up His spirit. They had stood and watched as a Roman soldier had thrust his spear into Jesus’ side to ensure that He was really dead. They had seen the blood and water which, as St. John tells us, flowed from that wound, and they knew what that meant. There on the cross of Golgotha, Jesus had truly died. It was with broken hearts that these women now approached the tomb to perform for Him one last duty of friendship and love—to anoint His body for what they thought would be its final rest.

We know from the Gospel of John that when these women first saw that the stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, Mary Magdalene—she who would be honored to be the first to see and speak with the risen Christ—had immediately run back to report this to Peter and the disciples. Thus it was into the dark sadness in the hearts of the other women that there now broke the light of the angel’s words, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here! See the place where they laid Him.”

“He is risen!” The grave could not hold the Lord of Life. As He had foretold, He burst the chains of death and took up again that life which He had offered for our sakes. Then, Scripture teaches us, He “descended into hell,” as we confess in our creed. He did that not in order to suffer. The price for our redemption had already been fully paid—that is why with His dying breath He cried out that His work of redemption was complete. Instead, Scripture tells us that the revived and living Christ went into the presence of Satan in order to triumph over him and his demonic minions—to proclaim His victory right there in front of them like a conquering king riding in triumph through a city he has vanquished. And there is pure

Gospel for us in that proclamation by Christ Jesus of His victory right there in the devil's face. In all our worst times of fear or sorrow or uncertainty, we can know that Satan has been completely defeated, and he knows it. And then Christ Jesus left the tomb, and an angel came to roll away the stone from its entrance, to let those women and us in so that we may “(s)ee the place where they laid Him.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ is risen. The power of death itself has been crushed for us. His resurrection is our resurrection.

II

We claim His victory over death as our own with absolute confidence, because, as the angel makes clear in that first Easter sermon, our Lord's resurrection is joyous news precisely for dying sinners like you and me. “(G)o tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.” Those disciples had deserted Him there in the Garden of Gethsemane—run away out of fear for their lives, abandoned their loving Teacher and Friend to face His enemies alone in order to save themselves. And Peter—impetuous Peter who was so confident that he would never leave his Lord—had denied with curses and oaths that he even knew Jesus. “(G)o tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.” The words of the angel are filled with forgiveness and new life for those followers of our Lord. And they mean pardon and life for us as well.

“If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain,” St. Paul tells us, “(and in that case) you are yet in your sins.” And then the apostle goes on to say with joyful emphasis, “But now is Christ risen.” The empty tomb is the proof that the sacrifice which Jesus offered for us is totally and completely sufficient. From the cross, He had cried, “It is finished!” The light streaming from the empty grave, and the words of the angel, proclaim to us, “It is finished indeed!”

“He is risen! He is not here. Go tell His disciples and Peter.” That joyful message is meant also for you and me. The divine power of our Triune Creator-and-Savior God which raised the body of Jesus back to life—that same power now fills the water of baptism, and His word of Absolution, and that Good News which is preached to us about what He has done for us. His sacraments and His Gospel-Word pulse with that same life-giving power to raise also you and me to faith in Christ Jesus—the power to give new breath to our souls and to make us alive for all eternity.

III

“Do not be alarmed,” says the angel to us today. “Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified (for you) is not in the grave. He is risen!” And by that joyful truth, our very lives are transformed.

“Do not be alarmed—do not fear!” says the angel. Because, through our faith in Him, our Lord’s resurrection belongs to us, we do not need to fear death any longer. The funeral of every Christian has thus become a solemn celebration of the salvation and eternal life that our Lord has won for us.

And our way of living in this world has also been transformed by His Easter victory. His resurrection, Paul tells us, was poured over us at the baptismal font. We, who are buried to sin with Him daily in those baptismal waters, also rise again with Him every day to the new resurrection-life which is ours through our union with Him. We rise with Him each day to walk in His footsteps, to love as He loves, to serve as He serves, and precisely in such loving and serving to live the very life of heaven already here as we await His return in glory.

And also to us, the angel says, “Go and tell!” That is the work of His Church today—your work and mine. And if the present crisis caused by the coronavirus does nothing else for us, it must serve to remind us of how desperately this lost and dying world needs to hear about the Savior, about His cross, and about His empty tomb. There can be no more important purpose for us, no more rewarding task for us, and no greater joy for us than to take the role of the angel on that first Easter morning—to tell all who will listen, “Do not be alarmed. Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is not in the tomb. He is risen!”

May the Holy Spirit fill us with that Easter Message and the new life which flows from it! Amen.