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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord (Series A)

April 20, 2014

Text: Matthew 28:1–10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This morning we gather to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). Why else gather in a church on a beautiful spring morning except to seek Christ? For He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. We seek the resurrected Jesus on this Easter morning.

But that's not what the two Marys had in mind on that very first Easter morning. It was a somber but necessary task they set about to do. Jesus had been crucified on Friday late afternoon. He died at about 3:00 p.m. So Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, disciples of Jesus, acquired the Lord's body and hastily buried Him before 6:00 p.m. It's the best they could do for their Lord and Master under the circumstance. Jewish law required that they be home by 6:00 p.m. in order to celebrate the Passover. It was a bad situation; they did the best they could.

And so the Marys, also disciples of the Lord, went to the tomb early on Sunday morning in order to finish giving Jesus a proper burial. They went to the tomb carrying spices and ointments. It would be their final, loving service to Jesus, dead though He be; that's the sad fact of today's gospel reading. The living were going to see the dead, or so they thought.

Matthew records that an earthquake occurred while the women walked to the tomb (vs. 2). The cause was not geologic forces from underneath the surface of the earth but rather the majestic descent on a holy angel of God (vs. 2). Soldiers had been stationed by the Jewish leadership in order to make sure that none of Jesus' disciples could steal away His body. But when the guards saw the angel, Matthew colorfully says “the guards trembled and became like dead men” (vs. 4); we would say they passed out for fear. And why not? The angel's appearance “was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.”

While the soldiers lay passed out on the ground, the Marys approach the tomb. The angel speaks the first words of Easter morning – as we should hear them well – “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay” (vs. 5–6).

Don’t be afraid! That’s the first Easter sermon!! Don’t be afraid! Jesus is risen from the dead. Nothing will ever be the same again. The world was a different place on that first Easter morning. Humanity’s greatest enemy, Death itself, was shorn of its power and unchallenged dominion.

The Marys hadn’t gone to the tomb expecting to find an open tomb, a majestic angel, or a transforming Easter sermon. And yet, because of that one, miraculous fact – Jesus is risen from the dead – they need not be afraid of the soldiers, of an angel, an earthquake, or even death itself; they needn’t be afraid ever again for Jesus has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil. The Lord’s resurrection changes everything. Never forget that glorious fact!!

And by the way, we need to keep things straight when we talk about the Lord’s resurrection and what Easter is all about. So often the media describes Easter as being the day Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. That’s not quite precise for my taste. Easter is the Sunday in each Spring in which Christians celebrate the Lord’s resurrection. We don’t know the exact date when Jesus rose from the dead, whether it was April 20 or March 31 or whatever date in early Spring. We do know that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday, the first day of the week. That’s a fact beyond dispute. The early Christians were so certain about the day of Christ’s resurrection that they chose Sunday to be the day of the week to gather for their primary worship service. Every Sunday, you see, is a celebration of Christ’s resurrection. You don’t have to wait for that one Easter each Spring. Every Sunday we rejoice in Christ’s victory over death and the grave. Every Sunday is Easter in Christ’s holy Church.

Furthermore, we Christians don’t simply “believe” Jesus rose from dead as if there wasn’t corroborating evidence, as if such a faith was established on a blind hope. The Lord’s resurrection is a historic fact to which there were many eyewitnesses; first the Marys and other women, then Peter and John, the other disciples, more than 500 Christian believers at one setting, then James, and finally Paul on the road to Damascus. And we mustn’t forget that thousands of Christians in those early centuries gave their lives unto martyrdom precisely because they refused to deny that Jesus was the Lord who rose from the dead. Martyrs don’t die for a known lie and fabrication.

The Easter message of “Don’t be afraid for Jesus is risen from the dead” stands in the face of all fears and tragedies proclaiming that all evil and suffering are defeated. Everything our Lord accomplished in His perfect life, He now gives to you completely and fully. Jesus gives of Himself and all that He is to us. His crucifixion and resurrection give us joy and freedom to live in this world without fear. We are in Christ. Death is defeated. Sin is vanquished. New life is given. Don’t be afraid dear Christians. Christ is risen.

That’s the assurance the apostle Paul gives to the Colossian Christians in today’s epistle reading (3:1–4). He writes, “If then you have been raised with Christ...Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Your earthly life is found in Jesus. You are marked with and by Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism, by the words of His gospel, and through His body and blood given in Holy Communion. And when Jesus comes in again in glory on the Last Day, you will also appear with Him in His glory. As Jesus was raised from the dead in glory and victory so shall you rise in the resurrection at His return. You need not be afraid.

And yet this Easter sermon must be shared with others. Even the angel gives the Marys a job, “Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him” (vs. 7). Everyone touched by the death and resurrection of Jesus is called by God to share that good news as the Lord gives opportunity. Usually that happens in the most ordinary circumstances. Parents teach their children about Jesus. Friends share their Christian joy and peace with each other.

You’ve just got to love how Matthew describes the Marys reaction to the angel’s message, “So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (vs. 8). They were told not to be afraid but these are awesome events: opened tombs, a heavenly angel, a holy commission. But there’s something new added to their Easter experience: joy. Christianity is first and foremost about joy beyond all telling. Joy that surpasses human understanding but not beyond human experience.

The Marys quickly leave the tomb but before they could get too far along Jesus appears to them. Vs. 9, “And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ As they worshipped Him the Lord proclaims again the same words spoken by the angel (vs.

10), “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” This is such a great passage of Scripture. It seems to me that Jesus couldn’t wait to show these fearful women that He’s alive! “Don’t be afraid! I’m alive. All evil foes are conquered. New life is given. God’s kingdom is established. Now go, and tell your friends and family this great message of good news. They too will see Me. They too will have joy! I once was dead, but now I live and reign to all eternity.”

Our Lord’s resurrection clinches the promise of our victory over fear, sin, and yes, over death too. For in Christ we live; now by faith, on the Last Day, in the glorious victory of our own resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb and the resurrected Christ are the heralds of our glorious triumph! Dear Christians, Jesus gives Himself and all that He is so that we need not be afraid. May our Lord’s death and resurrection be to you as the highest good and the greatest joy!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.