

EASTER SUNDAY (A), RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD
(Originally delivered Easter 2008, revised)
Sunday, April 12, 2020
Christ Lutheran Church, Warren, MI - Matthew 28:1-10

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!* Have you ever made or heard an excuse? Of course, you have! We live in a world that blames others, rationalizes wrongs and fudges with legalities. And it's been going on for a long time!

Consider these Top 5 Excuses Given by the Guards at the Empty Tomb: #5 - I thought he was the pizza delivery guy leaving. No wonder he smiled when I tried to give him a tip! #4-With the earth shaking and all those bright lights, we thought we were being abducted by aliens. #3 - Since the tomb was already empty when the stone was rolled away, I'm afraid you're talking to the wrong guys. Check with Burial Services. #2 - We must've been hypnotized! Centurion Robicus is still clucking like a chicken! And the #1 excuse given by the guards: What's the big deal? He told everyone He'd be back!

The women watched him suffer and die, hanging from a cross, nails in hands and feet, gasping for air. Finally, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary heard Him call out with the last bit of energy He could muster: *It is finished!* Jesus was dead. When Joseph took His body down from the cross, they helped wrap it in a linen sheet and carried it to a borrowed tomb carved from solid rock. They watched as the huge stone was rolled across the tomb's entrance, sealing Jesus in His grave forever, so they thought. Then came the Sabbath Day and they were left to linger in their despair and confusion.

As Sunday dawned, the women got up and went to see the tomb. Never in their wildest dreams could they prepare for what happened next: *Suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone, and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.* There was an earthquake, not just a gentle rumble, but a powerful earthquake, portending how Jesus' resurrection would rock the world and shake up our understanding of God's ultimate power over death, as well as the world's understanding of who Jesus was and how He came into the world to save everyone, by dying and rising again on Easter.

Then an angel from heaven, bright as lightning, white as snow, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. The stone wasn't rolled away to let Jesus out, for He'd already risen. It was rolled away so that the two women could see inside that the tomb was empty. And there were independent witnesses: the guards at the tomb saw it all and were terrified. The angel spoke to the women: *Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; for He has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where He lay.* We don't know if the women went into the tomb, but filled with fear and great joy, they ran to tell the disciples. The angel's message instantly transformed them. Now they believed the impossible. Jesus had died, but now was alive. Their fears became confidence and hope.

The Resurrection wasn't just something that happened 2000 years ago. It still changes us today, April 12, 2020, as we stay home to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Jesus' resurrection changes how we view our future. The greatest threat people face is death and dying. It controls our life much more than we realize. It can dictate what we eat, how we live, where we can go, who we can be near. It makes us attentive to every cough, sneeze, runny nose, body ache and pain.

But Jesus' resurrection takes the sting out of death. Easter proves that God is the God of the living, not of the dead, that He's in control, that He's good and loving, and that He gives us both abundant life and life beyond the grave. Death's no longer a giant ogre that threatens us, but a gate that leads us into a wondrous, beautiful, glorious and eternal life with Him. Now we can face death and whatever tomorrow may bring with new confidence and hope.

For all of God's beloved children, it's something like a little girl who had to pass through a cemetery on her way home from school. When was asked if it made her afraid, she answered, "No. I just cross through the cemetery to get home." That's what Jesus' resurrection has done with death. It's turned death into a harmless path on our journey home. What happens to a child of God at death is absolutely certain. Unlike a March Madness tournament game (but not in 2020!) where the outcome's uncertain up to the last second of the game. Even though we may doubt over what paths our lives may take or fear many seeming threats, the result of the game is never in doubt. Thanks be to God! The victory is ours in Christ Jesus!

There's a SECOND point: Jesus' resurrection also changes the way we look at our past. Does your guilt or sins haunt you? Do you worry that God knows all your secret thoughts and desires and that one day He's going to hold you to account? Are there some words or acts that you feel God would have a hard time forgiving? If so, you aren't alone. Easter is good news for all of us!

When Jesus rose from death, God vindicated His life's sacrifice on the cross for every one of our sins. Jesus is our risen and living Lord. If He'd stayed dead, then His death wouldn't be any different than that of any other human being. But since Jesus died for our sins, His resurrection shows that our sin-debt to God has been fully cancelled. Peter said, "All who have faith in Jesus will have their sins forgiven in his name."

Baptism and the faith it gives connect us to Jesus' death and resurrection. When the water of baptism poured over us at the font, we received all the mercy and forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross. "By our baptism," says Paul, "we were buried with Him and shared His death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life."

Yes, our pasts may embarrass us. People may judge us and think badly about us because of what we've thought, said or done, but ultimately, God's dealt gracefully with our past through Jesus' death and resurrection. We're totally forgiven and set free. No longer captive to guilt and shame. And because He lives so will we who believe in Him! That's Easter's good news for us!

FINALLY, Jesus' resurrection changes how we look at life today. People suffer the trauma of being made irrelevant, thrown onto the scrap heap after years of faithful service. We suffer the pain of broken relationships that's so intense it never seems to go away. People suffer abuse, poor health, mental illness, homelessness and poverty as an ever-present reality. Today, a growing number of people here in Michigan, the US and the world are suffering from the coronavirus pandemic. Many are dying. And many feel the pain of losing a loved one, that brings pain that softens much too slowly.

As painful as such suffering is for people, Easter declares that it doesn't have the last say over us. The Holy Spirit empowers children of God to rise above it all and live healthy fulfilling and productive lives in spite of our circumstances. Jesus' resurrection powerfully affects us our right now. For all who believe in Him as Lord and Savior, His mercies are new every morning! A newness, freshness, gentleness, peacefulness and love fills our lives, because Jesus always walks with us and strengthens us. We can face anything and everything with Him by our side. He answers our prayers. He's ready to mercifully use His power on those circumstances that cause us fear and worry. He gives us courage when our knees buckle. He brings second chances, rekindles hope, sustains us and renews even in the most hopeless situations, so that we can do the same for others.

The women went to Jesus' tomb on Easter. Confused, sad, depressed and grieving. But after feeling the earthquake, seeing the stone rolled away and hearing the angels' message, they ran to tell the others, full of fear and joy. On their way, Jesus greeted them and gave them their Easter mission. The resurrection changed their past, present and future.

Today, the risen Christ does the same for us! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!* Amen.