

With Fear and Great Joy

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Matthew 28:1-10; Acts 10:34-43

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Easter Sunday – April 12, 2020

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

We have said it here before, and we will say it again, on Easter Sunday, the church celebrates the way that *Jesus Christ has overcome sin and the grave, and therefore, we do not need to be afraid, of anything, or anyone, anymore.* The resurrection gospel of Easter announces to our disbelieving, anxious hearts that fear is no longer the most appropriate response to the circumstances of our lives. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, because God has raised Jesus from the dead, breaking the fearsome grip of death and fear and sin for all time, we no longer must shrink in fear before difficult circumstances, we no longer must hide from challenging people or situations, because mistakes and bullies and any of the swaggering forces of death can no longer control us, or define us, or destroy us. The worst they can do (and we should acknowledge, this is quite a lot), the worst these powers can do is to kill us, but the gospel of Easter announces that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now, we have said it here before, and we will say it again, that just because Jesus Christ has overcome sin and the grave, that does not mean that sin and the grave cannot touch us, cannot make an impact on our lives. We know this to be the case with sin, for it is empirically verifiable that our baptisms do not mark the end of our participation in sin. Baptized people sin every bit as much as those who have not been baptized.

And we know this to be the case with death and the grave, because it is empirically verifiable that our baptisms do not provide us with some kind of magic, insulating bubble that keeps bad things away. Baptized people get sick and die, every bit as much as those who have not been baptized.

What the resurrection gospel means is that sin and death no longer define us, no longer hold ultimate control over us, and they can never separate us from God's grace and God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but the coronavirus pandemic has forced me to think about the meaning of the gospel in deeper and harder ways. What does the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean when we are in the midst of a pandemic? When so many people, including people who are participating in this online worship service right now, have been touched deeply and painfully by COVID-19; when job losses, and economic losses are taking place, when personal feelings of safety and security have been shaken? What does Easter mean in these kinds of circumstances?

At a recent Session meeting, we were talking about the nature of celebrating Easter during this difficult time. We talked about how the losses and griefs of our time might call for a

somewhat more somber tone to this celebration. And we acknowledged that any meaningful service of worship this Easter would have to take into account the circumstances in which we are worshipping. But then a member of Session reminded us – and unfortunately I did not write down the precise remarks, so this is something of a paraphrase – this Ruling Elder reminded us, “When the church celebrates Easter, we are not celebrating the fact that things are going the way we want them to in our lives or in the world. The celebration of Easter is *not* about things going the way we want. Easter is about how God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead.” Those words injected new energy and clarity into our meeting and discussion.

The text that Linda read from Matthew 28 begins with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary going to see the tomb. That is to say, they were going to check on the effects of the powers of death. The powers that he had executed their beloved Lord and friend two days earlier, and they were going to check on the tomb. This bears an eerie similarity to the way that we open the paper or watch the news each morning to see what effects the powers of death have had in the last day, how many new cases of COVID-19 have been diagnosed, how many deaths have accumulated.

And what the women find when they arrive there is an angel of the Lord, sitting on the great stone that had sealed the tomb. The macho imperial guards who were stationed there passed out from seeing the angel, who then says to the women, “Now don’t you be afraid, too. I know that you’re looking for the crucified Jesus. I know that you’re here to see what death has wrought. But I’m here to tell you that he is not here. He is going before you to Galilee. Death was not the end of him. He is going ahead of you, for forever and ever.”

The women lived in the very powerful space of attending to death and witnessing to life. The angel’s news of resurrection came to those who did not stay away from the reality of death, but the news of the resurrection did not allow them to be paralyzed by the reality of death. Because of the gospel, they were able to live with new freedom in the midst of death. And you can sense the energy that this gospel provides them, for they “left the tomb *quickly* with fear and great joy.” My strong hunch is that the fear with which the women ran was no paralyzing fear, but the kind of *awe* that you feel when you have climbed to the top of a mountain, or when you are rafting down on a whitewater river, where you know that you are very, very close to the raw power of life.

From this point forward, they would live with the awareness that God’s grace opens up a peculiar freedom right in the midst of every one of our fears.

These days of the coronavirus pandemic are very, very challenging. These days are draining, they are taxing, they are demanding. *And*, it is the case that the risen Christ is with us through them all, the risen Christ is going before us, into all of the Galilees of our lives, and because he will meet us there with new life and wisdom and freedom, we can follow him with courage and without fear.

Friends, Jesus Christ has overcome sin and the grave, and because of that, we do not need to be afraid, of anything, or anyone, anymore.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.