

SERMON FOR EASTER 2021

TEXT: MARK 16: 1-8

THEME: LOVE THAT ENDS OUR FEARS

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. **2** And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. **3** And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” **4** And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. **5** And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. **6** And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. **7** But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” **8** And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

In the name of the Risen One, Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! Alleluia,

Three men die and are at the pearly gates of heaven. St. Peter asks each of them the same, simple question. “What is Easter?” The first man responds: “Oh, that’s easy, it’s the holiday in November when everyone gets together and eats turkey and is thankful.” “Wrong,” replies St Peter, and proceeds to the next man.

The second man replies, “Easter is the holiday in December when we decorate trees, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus.” “St. Peter shakes his head in disgust and looks to the third man, who confidently replies,

“I know what Easter is. It is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish Passover. Jesus was betrayed, crucified and buried in a nearby cave with a large boulder rolled across the opening to seal the tomb shut. And then every year the boulder is rolled aside to see if Jesus can come out and if He sees His shadow we have six more weeks of winter.”

America, sadly, has commercialized our celebration of Easter. For many, the celebration of Easter is all about the return of spring, its Easter egg hunts, and Easter candy. But Easter is so much more than that!

Our Gospel reading announces to us that Jesus is risen from the dead. Perhaps the most joyous and hope-filled statement in the whole Bible. And yet the reading ends with the women running away from the tomb, astonished and afraid. Now, what is going on here? I thought this was Easter. Why are the women in our story afraid? The women in Mark’s resurrection account are afraid, at least at first, because they are living in the real Easter.

As I have said, America has commercialized Easter so that it is the most unscary holiday the world has ever seen. But in Mark’s Gospel, there is fear, there is bewilderment. Why? Because these women are not standing in a Hallmark store. They are standing in a tomb. The women are living in the real Easter. They have known, they have followed, the real flesh-and-blood Son of God, Jesus Christ. Their lives are full of real struggles, real worries, real

disappointments, real failings, real guilt, real heartaches, and real dangers. In Jesus Christ, they have found hope in the face of it all. Or, they thought they did.

Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world. They had believed him. Yet they had also seen him arrested and tried, tortured and crucified. No bunnies or fuzzy chicks in this story. It is a dangerous tale, a passionate tale, a heroic tale of suffering and sacrifice, of blood and tears, of life and death. And now they stare death in the face. Everything for them and for the whole world depends on this place, this tomb, and the man who, the last time they saw him, was dead.

And now . . . the stone rolled away . . . the man dressed in white . . . these overwhelming words: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth. He has risen. He is not here!" It is easy to understand why the women left the tomb astonished and, yes, afraid. In this instance they are bewildered, and afraid. They worried that their lives and their efforts really had no meaning. If such a beautiful life as Jesus's could end in rejection and shame and death, what hope would they have? Was there any point at all to Jesus' life and ministry?

They had set their hearts on Jesus's promise of a coming kingdom, on the beautiful calling of denying themselves and loving others. Jesus's love for them had filled their lives with meaning. But now they were less sure of all of

this . . . and they were afraid. They were afraid of the future, they were afraid of what might happen to them, they were afraid of death, of what they did lose and what they might still lose. And now, in this tomb, it was all gone, and for what? They had given up months, maybe years of their lives following Jesus—was all this time lost? Was it all for nothing?

But those fears were about to be changed. Jesus was alive again. Jesus had risen from the dead. And just as we begin to wonder why there should be fear and trembling on the joyous occasion of Easter, the risen Jesus begins his marvelous work of appearing to the disciples and to the women and transforming their fear into joy and faith. With the same enormous love which led Jesus to the cross, the risen Jesus will now lovingly begin his work of changing their fears into hope and joy forever.

But why would Mark end his account of this scene with the statement, “for they were afraid”? Why does Mark stress the women’s fear in this Gospel reading? Because he wants you to reflect on the way in which the living Jesus will transform it. In our Gospel reading, the women have an empty tomb, an angel, and a promise. But this will not be the end of the story. Jesus is alive again. He has risen. Just as He said.

Soon after, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. He transforms her fears and her tears into joy. Then Jesus will appear to Peter, to the other disciples,

to two men from Emmaus, to Thomas, and at one point to more than five hundred believers at the same time! Fear will give way to joy. Fear will give way to hope. Fear will be replaced with boldness and with purpose. For Jesus stands alive again forever, triumphant over sin and death. Jesus has reconciled them to God. Jesus has opened to them the way to eternal life; he has burst open before them the gates of paradise. The one who looks upon them with such enormous love, who loved them even to death on the cross, he is alive forever, to continue to care for them with his enormous, perfect love. And “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” [1 Jn 4:18].

As it was for them, so it is for us. Jesus does not leave us trapped and alone in our fears. Whatever is causing you to fear the present or the future, whatever is burdening your heart and your life, the Good News of Easter is this. Jesus is risen! Truly, he is alive forever. And still today, our risen Lord comes to us as his people. He has overcome the world. Jesus has come to calm your fears. In his word, he shows himself to us. “My brothers, my sisters,” he says to us, “Behold! I am alive. I loved you to the cross. I loved you to the tomb. And now I love you in the resurrection. I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Today, throughout the world, to people weighed down by fear, the risen Jesus comes in his body and his blood. Take heart, he encourages us, I love to be with you, and you will be with me forever. Take heart, there , he

assures us, your sins are forgiven in my blood, you are accepted by God. Take heart, he promises us, though your life will be full of grief and losses, I will restore all things in the life which is to come.

Jesus is risen from the dead. The age of resurrection has begun. The day when Jesus will raise all the dead, and give eternal life and eternal joy to all believers—that day is close at hand. And as we await that day, our Savior's enormous love for us provides us with some of the greatest gifts that we could receive: true love, true purpose in life, and relief from all our fears. Today the songs of Christ's resurrection fill the world. For there is a living Savior who transforms our fear. He is our ever present Help in times of trouble. And one day, he will cast out all fear forever. At that time, on that Day, there will be nothing but joy and love and endless praise. For the Savior, who was slain for our sins, has been raised again in triumph and majesty, and He is with you now and forever.

Amen