

April 24, 2011
The Festival of the Resurrection

"Risen! Just as He Said!"

MATTHEW 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." ⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

They should have known! The women who came to the tomb should have known that Jesus would rise from the dead. He specifically told his disciples he would suffer, die and rise again on the third day. They heard him say, "Destroy this temple (the temple of his body) and I will raise it up in three days." He even compared his body resting in the grave to Jonah spending three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish.

Before we are too critical of these women for their lack of trust in the promises of their Lord, let's think of those weak moments when we have doubted or questioned how our risen Lord can take care of us and even work out everything for our good. How easy it is to forget the words of the risen Lord, "Lo, I am, with you always."

What a joy it was for the angel to tell the women who had lost touch with the promise of Jesus, "He has risen, just as he said" On this glorious Easter morning, with all the music, the special worship services, the brunch, the chocolate bunnies, the Easter egg hunt, even the new dresses, we want to revel in the words of the angel to the women and to us, "He has risen just as he said."

Losing hope without the promise of the resurrection

It has been said that you can live for 30 days without food, 3 days without water, 3 minutes without air to breathe, but only 3 seconds without hope. The women had lost their hope they went to the tomb with baskets of linens and spices to finish wrapping the body of Jesus. It says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. They were not going to the tomb to look for evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. They went to the tomb to touch the dead body of Jesus one more time.

All four gospel accounts record how they watched as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body down from the cross and laid it into Joseph's newly carved tomb. They watched as they wrapped the body with 75 pounds of expensive spices and linen clothes. All they can think about

is the dead body of Jesus. They want to do their part to have a decent burial for the body of their Lord.

When death comes into our lives, it can be so traumatic. We may even lose sight of what Jesus tells us about his resurrection and our hope of the resurrection on the last day. I think of the tears in the eyes of a mother as she recalled the tragic death of her eight year old son that occurred ten years earlier. In vivid detail and with much emotion she described coming back to the house and seeing his tooth brush still on the sink where he had brushed his teeth that morning. A retired Lutheran minister came back from the doctor with the report that he had only six weeks to live. He wrote down how he tried to read the Bible to be strengthened by God's promises. All he could think about was six more weeks. "All I have is six more weeks." But then the words of Psalm 23 came to his mind, "The Lord is my shepherd..." The comforting words of this psalm brought him back to the reality of Jesus' promises about death and the resurrection. He wrote how he threw his shoulders back, laughed and said joyfully, "All I have is six more weeks to live."

If you don't know Jesus and his promises about the resurrection, then terrible fear will come to you when death comes knocking at your door. So it was the Roman soldiers who were guarding the tomb of Jesus. "There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became as dead men." Have you ever come close to dying? Maybe it was a car accident, or a near drowning experience, or a fall off a cliff, or something wrong with your heart. The heart pounds and you can hardly breathe. If you don't have Jesus during such heart pounding moments you have no hope. You don't know what really lies behind death's door. So it was these Roman soldiers. I read recently that the average teenager thinks about death every 5 minutes.

A woman frantically called her pastor. Her husband had been rushed to an emergency room and was having a heart attack. She was a member of the church, he was not. He was too young for a heart attack, in his early forties. The pastor read the 23rd Psalm to him with the comforting words, "The Lord is my shepherd..." and also prayed with him. He recovered and was OK. After he recovered he was angry that the pastor read the 23rd psalm to him because he associated that psalm with death and dying. The reading of the 23rd Psalm filled him with fear rather than hope. When you know Jesus as your Good Shepherd, then you love to hear the words of the 23rd Psalm and the promises that the Savior has made to you. They fill you with hope. Because of his resurrection you have the living hope that every promise made to you in the Bible is true.

Gaining hope with the resurrection from the dead

The angel told the women who came to the tomb without hope, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." The angel says "I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." God knows how to help us when we are overwhelmed by thoughts of death or even the routine problems of life. He knew what these women were thinking about the body of Jesus. That is why he tells the angel to say to the women, "He is not here. He has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

"Come and see the place where he lay." It does not take an advance degree in criminology or forensic studies to determine what happened inside the tomb of Jesus. The evidence was there. The gospel of John tells us that the headpiece covering the face of Jesus was neatly folded. And from what it says about the strips of linen lying there and how Peter and John reacted to what they saw, you get the impression the body of Jesus left the linen and spices just as they had been wrapped around his body. One quick glance into the tomb and you realize Jesus is alive.

After seeing the empty tomb it says "The woman hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples." When your life is filled with the hope of the resurrection, it makes you want to run with joy. It allows you to wake up every morning saying, "This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it." Every day is a day is Easter when we can greet each other, "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"

More joy and more hope waits for these women who came to the tomb without hope. "Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings' he said. They came to him and clasped his feet and worshipped him." Jesus has no need to appear to these women shining in white and flashing like lightning as the angel did at the tomb. He makes himself known to them with a glorified body in human form just as he comes to us on the pages of the Bible as the one who has given his life for us. Our Savior is so accessible to us! They run to Jesus, clasp his feet, worship him. There are tears pouring down their faces, not tears of sorrow such as they shed at the cross, but tears of joy because Jesus rose from the dead just as he said he would.

Today, on this glorious celebration of our Savior's resurrection we find ourselves falling down at Jesus feet and thanking him for rising from the dead just as he said he would. Because he kept this promise to rise from the dead, he will keep all of the promises that he has made for us in his Word. Jesus made the amazing promise: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have every lasting life." Because he rose from the dead, this promise is true. Anyone who believes in God's gift of his Son will have eternal life.

Have you ever had someone say to you, "Trust me" but just the way they said these words filled you with doubt and suspicion? Jesus told his disciples the night before his death, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." How hopeless life would be if you had to trust in your own goodness to pay off your debt of sin and make yourself acceptable to God. With David we confess: "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you." By keeping his promise to rise from the dead, Jesus assures you beyond any doubt that payment for the debt is reliable. The IRA, the Individual Redemption Account, you have with your God is rock solid and secure.

What about the challenges of life that face you this coming week? Where would we be without Jesus' promises to protect us and hold us in his loving arms? We listen to him say to us, "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and no one will pluck them from my hand." Picture yourself as this sheep resting in the arms of Jesus your shepherd. Because he kept his promise to rise again, his loving arms will hold you secure whatever problems come to you in your life. His arms will even carry you as you walk through the doors of death. The resurrection lets us confidently say with Paul, "Nothing in all creation will ever separate us from his love."

Because Jesus kept his promise to rise from the dead, we live each day knowing with certainty that we will be raised to life again when Jesus returns in glory. The risen Christ who keeps his promises has said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am." Jesus will come again in clouds of glory. There will be a body resurrection from the dead on the last day. The grave does not mark the end of your life. It marks the starting place of a whole new life lived with the Lord in a real world, in a place he has prepared for us. Today we think of our loved ones who died in Jesus. We find hope in the words of 1 Corinthians 15: "We will not sleep, but we will all be changed- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." It is all real because Jesus has risen just as he said. Amen.