

April 8, 2012
The Festival of the Resurrection

"The Life of Christ Is the Death of Fear"

MARK 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, 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, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" ⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The Sabbath day was finally over. Oh what a long day it had been for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome! The usual day of rest to contemplate God's rich grace and mercy was a day of tears and gripping fear. Jesus is dead. How are we going to get along without him? We put all our hope in him to be the Messiah and now he is dead.

What a difference a day makes! By Sunday evening these sobbing women are fearlessly sharing the good news that Jesus is alive. Mary Magdalene cried her eyes. Now she hears Jesus call her name- "Mary." He talks to her personally. The paralyzing fears are gone. Jesus is alive.

What a difference one day makes for your life and mine. Jesus is alive. With his life he puts to death all our fears. Gone is the fear of not knowing what will happen to me after I die? Gone is the fear and worry that I am not acceptable to God. Gone is the fear that life lacks meaning and purpose and direction. Gone is the fear that the words of the Bible may not be true. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. His life brings the death of fear.

The fear that exists without the resurrection

As much as Mary and Mary and Salome cried over the death of Jesus, their greatest emotion was not sadness. It was fear. "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices that they might go to anoint Jesus body." The sun had set in the west. The Sabbath day was over. Stores and shops were open. Mary and Mary and Solome were able to buy the much needed spices and oils and linen clothes to finish wrapping the body of Jesus for burial. Looming up large in their minds is the badly beaten, bruised and bloodied body of Jesus that needs more attention for final burial in the tomb. A night time visit to the tomb guarded by Roman soldiers is out of the question.

"Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb, and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb?'" Do you not sense fear in these words? What if we cannot get into the tomb? What if we cannot get permission to roll the stone away? What if we can't give Jesus the final burial he deserves?

Life is full of "What ifs?" that bring fear into our lives. What if I do not get that job that is so important to me? What if someone I love dies? What if I get a bed report from the doctor? What if the kids at school don't like me? All these "What ifs" pale in comparison to the greatest fear that could ever come into our lives, "What if Jesus did not rise from the dead?"

Think of how much of your life is fueled by fear. You lock the doors of your car and home because you are afraid that someone will steal something from you. You work hard at your job because you are afraid if you don't do the work right, your job will be gone. You work hard to please people because you are afraid that you might be rejected or unloved. You save your money, even follow a budget, because you are afraid that when hard times come you may not make it. And if I were not a Christian I would be living in this awful fear of not knowing whether I had done enough to earn God's favor. Pity the poor Muslims. They speak of "kismet" this uncertainty that comes with not knowing if you have done enough to balance out the bad you have done to be accepted by Allah.

Observe now as the "what if" question of Mary and Mary and Salome are answered as they come to the tomb where Jesus was buried. "But when they look up, they saw that stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side and they were alarmed." At first heart pounding fear surges through their bodies as they see the stone rolled away. In the other gospel account we are told that Mary Magdalene was so afraid the body of Jesus was stolen, she ran to tell the other disciples how they had taken away the body of Jesus.

The other two women looked into the tomb expecting to see the worst. More fear comes to them when they see God's angel. The shepherds who saw God's angel at Jesus birth were sore afraid and so were these women. Remember the fear you had when you almost crashed on the freeway, or the fear you experienced on the field of battle, or the fear you had with a surgery, or the fear you had when you came close to dying. When sinners come into the presence of the glory of God, even glory reflected by God's angels, the response is always the same, "I am going to die."

A retired pastor went to the doctor for some unusual pains he was having in his side. The doctor did a thorough examination and found the evidence of a fast growing cancer. He came home. All he could hear were the doctors words, "You have about six more weeks to live." He read the Bible and all he could hear were the words, "Six more weeks." He prayed and all he could hear were the words "Six more weeks." Then he sat down in his chair and he started saying slowly to himself, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...." Later he told a friend, "Suddenly my fears were gone. I threw my shoulders back and laughed and said, "I have six more weeks." Because Jesus lives and he is our living Shepherd he destroys our fear. The life of Christ is the death of fear.

Fear dies with the resurrection

Jesus did not send his angel to bring fear to these women. He sent the angel to take the fear away. "'Don't be alarmed,' he said, 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.'" The angel directs the frightened followers of Jesus to examine the forensic evidence for his resurrection. "See the place where they laid him." The body is gone. The grave clothes are left behind. The gospel of John tells us Peter and John looked into the tomb, saw the burial cloth that covered the face of Jesus neatly folded and believed. There were no grave robbers or enemies of even good friends who took the body of Jesus. With the neatly folded burial cloth our risen Lord and Savior leaves the powerful message, "I am alive."

The angel has even more to say to bring about the demise of fear. "But go tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him just as he told you.'" Here is more forensic evidence to cause the death of fear. You will see him just as he told you. Jesus clearly said he would rise from the dead and meet his disciples in Galilee. Jesus made a promise and he kept that promise to rise again. He even said it would be on the third day.

In preparation for this Easter sermon I was reading some old sermons by the great Lutheran Hour preacher Walther A Maier who spoke on hundreds of radio stations in the 1940's. He told about a young woman who was very devout in her Christian faith. She went to college and at under the feet of teachers who raised doubts in her mind about what she believed. Forget the book by Clancy and the "Sum of All Fears." The sum of all fears for a Christian comes when Satan raises doubt about the truthfulness of the Bible.

How can I know with rock solid certainty that the words of the Bible are true? Listen to Jesus. He predicted that he would rise from the dead and he kept his promise. The prophet Isaiah predicted in multifaceted detail the suffering Jesus would endure on the cross for us 700 years before it happened. In the same chapter this prophet of God predicted that Jesus would see the light of life and prolong his days. When Jesus talked to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he showed them the forensic evidence of his death and resurrection. "It says, 'And beginning with the Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself.'"

On this glorious morning as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead it is also time to say goodbye to this terrible fear that comes with not knowing for sure if God accepts me and loves me. Peter had this fear. After cursing and swearing that he never knew Jesus, he went out and wept bitterly. Those were genuine tears of repentance coupled with the soul destroying fear Jesus would never take him back after what he had done. The angel told the women to tell Peter that Jesus would be paying a special visit to him. That visit was not recorded for us. Can't you hear Jesus assure Peter, "You are forgiven?" The night of his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples and said, "Peace be to you!" Then he showed the nail prints his hands as the supreme forensic evidence that every sin of their past life has been forgiven.

Satan is a master at dragging up sin from your past life to discourage you from seeking your forgiveness in the Savior who lived and died and rose for you. Imagine how afraid

you would be if things done wrong in your past, especially those in your inner recess of your mind, were somehow put into high definition images and then broadcast all over the internet. Satan has a way of reminding us how far we fall short of God's glory, not just in fuzzy, grainy, hardly visible images, but high definition. The wounds in the hands of Jesus that Peter saw first hand are still there on the body of Jesus. Gone forever is the fear that we could never be forgiven and accepted.

Because Jesus lives the fear of dying also dies. A Russian woman visited one of our mission churches in Siberia. She became a believer and was baptized. Later she told how she was always afraid of dying. At the age of eight she asked her mother what would happen to her after she died. Her mother told her she would be eaten by worms. Then she learned about Jesus and his resurrection and his promise, "Because I live you shall live also." Because of Jesus' resurrection the fear of death died.

The women left the tomb that morning trembling and bewildered. At first they said nothing because they were afraid. As the reality of Jesus' resurrection sank, the fears die and they joyfully confessed, "Jesus is alive." Today we celebrate that Jesus is alive. Not a day goes by when he is not with you to lead you in celebration of his resurrection. Because Jesus lives our fears die. So we boldly proclaim: "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"