

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009
Mark 16:1-8

Christ is risen! Alleluia.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Imagine the puzzlement of the spice merchant when the women return with their unused spices¹. The little bell above the door lets out its ring, signaling that someone has entered the shop. It is a merry ring in the ears of the merchant. Most times that ring means that a customer has arrived. "Ahh, good," the merchant thinks to himself, "I have seen these women before. They did not simply window shop, they actually bought my spices. Why, they were here at my shop just a couple days ago. Yes, it was a Friday -- that strange Friday when there was darkness in the middle of the day. These women were here sometime after those awful hours when the sun hid its face in midafternoon. I remember them. I cannot forget them, they were so very sorrowful then. They were heartbroken then. Now I seem to detect a change in them. They are not quite happy. No, they are more along the lines of excited, confused, awestruck. Let's see what they want."

"Hello, ladies, it is nice to see you again. How might I help you?"

"We want to return these spices."

"Why, were they bad? I can hardly believe they would be. We bring in the finest spices to this shop. We sample each bag. I am sure I sold you good spices. Aye, and at a fair price."

"Yes, dear shopkeeper, the spices are fine. But happily, we do not need them."

"How can that be? You bought them to anoint the body of a dead person, your friend, Jesus."

"Yes, but he is no longer dead! And so we do not need the spices."

"I do declare!" says the merchant. "I never heardtell of such a thing! You bought those spices to anoint the body of a dead man, as generations of grieving folks have done from time immemorial. Never have I encountered a story like this. Never have burial spices been returned to me! If this is so, then it is wondrous! If this is so, then someday, I am going to be out of business, but let it be! I would be glad to be out of the business of spices for death, for I am very glad to hope for a world in which there is no more death, nor tears, nor sorrow anymore. If this is so, that your friend Jesus lives, then everything is changed. Everything must be rethought. Everything teems with amazement!"

And indeed it does. The shopkeeper is right: Easter teems with amazement. If Jesus is risen, then this world is better of that we thought.

¹ The idea of looking at Easter from the point of view of the spice merchant was an idea of my dear pastor, Rev. Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory. I did not hear his sermon, but someone mentioned his idea of the shopkeeper, and I have run with it.

Let's enjoy this thought by probing it a bit in four different directions. I am thinking of the amazement of Easter for four groups of people: I am thinking of those who grieve, those who are tempted toward sin, those who have been disappointed in life, and those who are happy and enjoying a good season in life.

First, the grieving: Three times in this morning's Gospel Reading we encounter the word "amazed." And no wonder! The holy women enter the tomb carrying in their hearts the grief this world knows all too well. They had come expecting to see, perhaps for the final time, the body of their master and their friend, Jesus. But instead, he is gone and in his place is an angel. That angel addresses their amazement, as if inviting them to set it aside and to ponder something entirely new:

Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. *He has risen*, he is not here...

How calmly the angel speaks the words that transform everything: He is risen!

The women had come to the tomb bearing the grief and the trauma that some of you have known too. They grieve for a loved one. A voice that had become sweet to their ears had been silenced by the Cross. He had "breathed his last." Eyes that had looked upon this world, and so upon them, with affection and compassion had become dim with exhaustion and finally closed in death. Arms that had held little children and blessed them, hands that had reached out and touched the leper... these limbs had become limp with death and fallen to his side. Images of the man - their friend! - haunted their imaginations and saddened their hearts.

But now the angel speaks those few words that permit them to release their sorrow and to contemplate a possibility never before known: they will be with Jesus again, for death has no power over him. It is hard to speak the words in a plain, everyday fashion. We tend to spiritualize them. We imagine that when the angel says you will see him again, that the angel means that by-and-by, when we get to heaven, we will see Jesus again. But that's not what the angel means. He means simply, you will see him again, as if he had gone out of town for a day or two, but has now returned. You will go to yonder place in Galilee and he will be there. You'll see him again, except nevermore to lose him, because he has triumphed over death. That voice that had become sweet to your ears, you will hear it again. Those arms, those hands that had done so much good, you will see them again. They will bear the imprint of the nails which crucified him, but for all that, they will be the same living limbs which comforted people in the past. Those eyes that looked with compassion and affection, they will look out again in that manner. That heart of his that loved and sacrificed... that heart is going to wend its way forward, loving still.

There is afoot in this world someone who is stronger than death, and you and I are in his hands. And the Church has long understood this to mean that we too have hope of victory over death, not by our own strength, but because Jesus lives and means to boot death right out of the world.

"Does this mean that I will see my mother again?" It is a happy question posed by Easter. If Jesus is risen, does it mean that I will see my beloved again? Yes, for Jesus also loves your beloved, hates death, loves life, and has power to raise up your loved ones again.

Or a ninety-nine year old sister in the faith asks, "I am weak and frail. Do you think I will go to heaven?" Oh, yes, my sister. I believe that, for I believe in Easter!

So, for the grieving we can say, The resurrection of Jesus means that love is strong, even as you always suspected. Love is strong and cannot be disrupted even my death, for Jesus is on the side of love.

Next, some words of encouragement for those who are tempted by sin. I do believe that you would be even better than you are if you did not have to fear that time was running out on you. It is the press of time that tempts us to sin. We fear that we are not going to make a fortune by daily labor that is fair and square, and so we are tempted to cut corners, to produce inferior work, to overcharge, or worse: to fall into illegality or even crime. Or, we fear that the years are playing themselves out and that we just have not had enough fun in life. And so we are tempted to grab some fun, even if it means letting people down, soiling our character, risking our health or our reputation.

Or, again, we yield to lust or laziness or greed because we just do not imagine that there will be any day of reckoning. But the resurrection of Jesus means that there will be such a day. The resurrection of Jesus means that we are going to have a one-on-one conversation with this risen Lord. He has plenty of time to reach us, and there is no where we can hide from it, not even in the grave, for he has power over life and death.

Let Easter, then, make you a better person. First off, Easter grants you time. Indeed, ages upon ages roll ahead of you and you will have plenty of time to accomplish you hopes and dreams. You do not need to grasp everything now. Especially, you do not need to stoop to low means to grasp everything now.

And then, Easter means that you and I are going to have a major conversation with Jesus. Think of that person in life who you would least want to hurt. Think of that one in your life you whose opinion of you matters the most to you. Imagine that one who most impresses you and in whose eyes you would most like to look fairly good. Easter means that you are going to meet such a one. I've long imagined that I would like to meet Abraham Lincoln, that there is something about that man that would reach my heart, and that I would like to be the kind of man he would like. Such a thing is going to happen to me and to you, only we will be standing before a man our heart will recognize as being even greater than Lincoln. We are going to stand before Jesus, and let's try not to have such an embarrassing record as we stand there.

Now, let's take this same image -- you and me having a one-to-one conversation with Jesus -- and let's look at it again, this time not for the sake of the tempted, but for the sake of the disappointed. One of the things I have learned as a human being alongside other human beings is that I cannot always heal the brokenhearted. I wish I could, but I seldom can. To have the gift of healing a heart that is broken -- oh! How I wish I could! To have the power of granting the heart's desire to someone who has languished in disappointment for so very long -- any of us would wish to have that power. To be able to restore the years that have seem lost, what a wondrous ability that would be.

I do not have that ability. Or rather I have it only in a way similar to you: I can lend a sympathetic ear, I can give what counsel I can, I can help with time or money to some degree, but I am not a rich man and there is a limit to what I can do.

And if it were not for Easter, we might have to think that there is *no one* on the face of this earth who has the power to heal the broken-hearted, only Easter tells us that

there is. There is Jesus. There is the One who can take an invalid who has waited and longed for healing for thirty-eight years and who suddenly is healed by Jesus, so that he jumps up and leaps like a deer and has a new life ahead of him. There is the One who can release the woman caught in adultery and set her on the path toward sainthood. There is the one who can lift up a young girl and say, Tabatha, arise, live your young life to the fullest. And there is the one who can say to a miserable criminal dying on a cross: today you will be with me in Paradise. Easter means that there is afoot in our world someone who can heal the disappointed heart.

Easter means that though you might have been disappointed in life, your *life* is not over. Nor is your story told, for Jesus lives. You should believe that the best part of your life lies ahead of you, and you have the right to go for it! You have the right to choose some good adventure and to pedal on toward it, fearless that your time or health is going to run out, for it is not. If are ninety-nine years old, you have the right to wake up in the morning and turn your hands and that lifetime of experience of yours to some good work. And if your poor heart should give out, fret not about that. Let it be! At least you mean to die with your boots on, unafraid of failure, unafraid of disappointment, for you trust yourself to the living Jesus. Disappointment might have haunted your past, but it oversteps its boundaries when it supposes to wreck your future, for you have got Jesus with you as you stride forth into your future. Let your daily cry be, "Out of my way! Time's a'wastin. I've got some good to do today. I've got some joy to find today. I mean to play the part of the saint today and I shall work with a happy heart. Nothing can stop me because nothing can stop *mine* -- my sweet Lord Jesus."

Finally, let me say a word to those of you who are happy. I pray that many of you are so, that this happens to be a season of refreshment and joy for you. Perhaps you are in love. Perhaps you are finding deep satisfaction in your family or your vocation. Easter, then, says two things to you:

First, do not fear that the other shoe is about to drop. You are not some victim of randomness, and your joy is not some happenstance in an immense indifferent universe. No, you are meant for happiness. It is your Maker's desire for you. If you are happy, you are simply in your native state. You are enjoying a foretaste of that eternal joy that Jesus went to the Cross to win for you. Sadness and sin are the aberration. Happiness and righteousness are your destiny, now that Jesus is risen.

And second, try to spend some of your happiness making others happy too. Try to take pause, even in the midst of your joy, to reckon with the thought that just as wealth is entrusted to the wealthy that they will prove good stewards of it for the sake of the poor, so joy is entrusted to us for the sake both of ourselves and of the sad.

And so it is that the shopkeeper is right. The return of those burial spices means that something very interesting has started. Easter means excitement for the grieving, the tempted, the disappointed, and the happy. Indeed, in a thousand different directions, Easter means that this world needs to be rethought, for we are better off than we imagined, better off than we deserved, thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Christ is risen! Alleluia.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!