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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/8/2012, Easter Morning
Mark 16:1-8

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

At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

HAPPINESS IN HEAVEN AGAIN

⁵And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. (Mark 16:5, RSV)

This is the morning when heaven becomes happy again. For imagine the divine dismay and consternation on Good Friday. The Bible says that when Jesus was dying on the cross, even the sun could no longer bring itself to shine, midday though it was:

And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. (Mark 15:33, KJV)

If creation's noble sun could not shine for sadness, imagine the sorrow in the mighty heart of God the Father as he beheld his only begotten Son dying on that cross. And imagine the grief in the heavenly host as they looked on in horror at the death of our Lord.

But now, on this morning, heaven becomes happy again. It is mere fun speculation, I know, but imagine the scene – that divine recruitment scene when God gathers all the angels together and tells them he needs a volunteer. The Lord needs an angel to go sit in the empty tomb for a while, to be there in place, ready for when the women arrive at that tomb. The job is to tell them the most stupendous news this world has ever heard. The angelic message is to be this:

Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. (Mark 16:6, RSV)

So, the Lord says to his angels, “I need a volunteer. I need someone to deliver the holy gospel to the world.” Then I imagine the angelic arms shooting upwards, like eager children in a classroom. “Oh! Choose me! Choose me!” And the Lord makes his choice. He chooses one of his angels. Things then are all set when the women arrive. A white-robed young man awaits them, to their amazement. He is the first to set loose on earth the good news of Easter. The women had come expecting to find a cold, dead body. Instead they found a message worthy of warming many a heart and improving many a life: “You seek Jesus. He is not here. He is risen!”

LINGERING WITH THIS STRANGE ENDING

Now, about those women, our text says that they left the tomb terrified and disobedient. They *do not* go to the disciples with the Easter news as they had been instructed to do:

⁸And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8, RSV)

Let me tell you something interesting and strange about this. This is a bit of Bible scholarship. The interesting thing is that most modern Bible scholars believe that this is the last verse of St. Mark’s gospel. If so, what a stunning disappointment it is! According to the best of the ancient Greek manuscripts available to us, the story simply ends here, with fear, trembling, and disbelief. You turn the page, and you do not find the risen Jesus meeting with his disciples, but rather you find the next book in the Bible, Luke.

I am not troubled by this. The opinion of the eminent New Testament scholar Tom Wright makes sense to me: Some opponent of the early Christian faith tore off the end of the manuscript scroll, as if that could defeat the faith of the church. Then some later scribe felt that this mangled ending was intolerable and wrote the proper ending. If you look in many Bibles you will find discussions about these things. My dear old Revised Standard Version Bible, for example, simply adds what is called “the longer ending” as a footnote. So, as far as my well-worn old Bible goes, the women fleeing the tomb and telling no one is the end of the story.

In any case, Mark’s longer ending, whether he wrote it or not, is part of the canonical Bible and is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Besides that, there is the good old rule that no passage of the Bible is to be read in isolation from the rest of the Bible, but must be interpreted by the whole of it. And the whole Bible joyfully and firmly declares the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Still, let's linger with the way this morning's text leaves the matter. It does not speak of Jesus meeting with his disciples. It does not speak of Doubting Thomas seeing our Lord's body or of the joy of the disciples. It simply ends with astonishment, flight, and silence. Let's linger with things this way because I think there is a substantial lesson for us to learn from this. It is a lesson reminding us that in its heart of hearts, the Christian faith makes a breathtaking and stunning claim: it claims that Jesus has won and death has lost. And this is a *large* matter to try to take in.

Let us not condemn these three women in this morning's Easter story. They flee and tell no one, but at least love had led them there in the first place. If there was fleeing to be done, the boastful disciples who had sworn that they would never abandon their Lord had already done their fleeing. On the terrible night of our Lord's arrest, the disciples had run away:

And they all forsook him, and fled. (Mark 14:50, RSV)

But not the women in this morning's Gospel story – the two Marys and Salome. They had remained with Jesus through thick and thin:

⁴⁰There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, ⁴¹who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:40-41, RSV)

So, if these holy women fled and disbelieved, at least they hung in there longer than the Twelve disciples did.

But the greater point is this: the trembling and fleeing of these women is a human thing. I think we need to acknowledge that. For one thing, it should make us kinder and more patient with those who do not yet believe in Christ or whose faith is faltering.

OUR FAITH IS CAPABLE OF DISPROOF

The interesting thing about our Christian faith is that in principle it can be disproved. It all has to do with whether Jesus is raised from the dead or not.

I am still delighted by a conversation I had with our catechism students a few years ago. One of them had encountered the joys of archeology. In her enthusiasm she exclaimed, "Wouldn't it be great if archeologists found the bones of Jesus!" To this, I found myself exclaiming, "But they can't!" "Why?" she asked. To which I answered, "Because Jesus is risen and so he needs his bones!"

You see, if that white-robed young man in the tomb had hidden the dead body of Jesus – say, thrown a blanket it over it or something – and misled the holy women into think that he was risen from the dead when he had not, then our faith would be false. We could simply shake the dust from our hands, turn and walk away.

St. Paul puts the matter this way:

¹⁴if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. (1 Corinthians 15:14-15, RSV)

We are at the very heart of our faith on Easter morning. And perhaps it is best to say that the trembling of the women before the news that Jesus is risen reveals how full of insight they are. For if Jesus is risen, this is massive news worthy of some trembling and some pondering.

In the Gospel story, no one seems able to believe that Jesus will die, let alone that he will be raised to life. Again and again, Jesus preached that lesson to his disciples. Jesus forewarned his disciples that he would suffer and die. For example, in Mark 8, we read this:

³¹And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. (Mark 8:31-32, RSV)

Peter! What are you doing? Do you dare to rebuke your Master? Well, Peter does. He is impetuous and so he blurts out his answer. He does not want to believe that Jesus will suffer and die. Even less does he seem to believe that Jesus will rise again. If he had believed that, he could have rushed off to the tomb on Easter morning to see his risen Lord. But no, it is the women who go to the tomb, not Peter. In the other Gospels we read that Peter does not go to the tomb until the women invite him.

At the start of this sermon, we gladly spoke the Easter acclamation:

- ☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!
- ☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The words came easily to our lips, but let us not condemn those who are not yet ready for such an acclamation, for it is an astonishing thing we claim when we speak of the resurrection of Jesus. Death had never lost its grip on anyone before. Death might have been delayed a bit. There might have been resuscitations and miracles of restored life, but none of those were of this Easter sort – not at all. For our Easter claim is not that Jesus is resuscitated, but that he is resurrected! We are claiming that Jesus has conquered death. He is alive and afoot in such a way that he is never to die again. Death! That terrible heartbreaker and disrupter of every good plan is not going to disrupt the good plans of Jesus.

If what we acclaim on Easter morning is true, then it changes everything! It makes everything much better and it clarifies many things about how we should be living on this earth.

Ahh, but is the good news of Easter true? Is Jesus indeed raised from the dead? I am no genius or saint, but I do think I can give you two kinds of answer to this. First, I ask you to search your own heart. Does not some part of your soul say, “Amen! I believe Jesus is risen! I might not be able to give any mathematical or scientific proof of my faith, but that is my faith nonetheless. It simply strikes me as so. I maintain hope for this world that outstretches any rational evaluation of things. I stand at the grave of a loved one, and I hope to see that dear one again. I stand before some temptation and know that I must turn it down. I have hope for us and reason for goodness in my manner of life because I believe that Jesus is risen.” If that be the instinct of your heart, do not discount it. I think it is the very whispering of the Holy Spirit to you.

And my second thought is this: Cannot many of us say that we have known other people in our lives who have believed in Jesus, believed in his resurrection, lived for him, and have never regretted a day of it? That is, there is something objective out there, which confirms the testimony of our own hearts: there is the testimony of those who have lived for Christ. Since that first Easter morning, there have been countless people who have believed in him. The imagery of the Lord’s promise to Abraham is the right scale of things: as numberless as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand along the seashore is the number of human beings on our earth who have believed in Jesus and lived for him. It seems to me that there has got to be some honor, even some logic, in taking our stand with so many good people.

SEEING HIM

I end now by lifting up a few more words of that white-robed young man in the empty tomb. He gave his message to the holy women. He told them that Jesus is risen, which is the message we cherish and which has strengthened

multitudes of people over the centuries since then. But also, he spoke of *seeing* Jesus:

⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there *you will see him*, as he told you.”

The women are too astonished to obey. They do not hasten off to tell Peter this good news. Indeed, they tell no one. Yet what that Easter angel said to them is also meant for you and me: One day, we will see Jesus face to face. For now, we read his sweet teaching, we feel his body and blood in the Blessed Sacrament, and we hear his words of love meant for each us one by one: “This is my body, this is my blood, for you, for the forgiveness of sin.” But one day, faith will be replaced by sight, and if we tremble then, it will not be with fear as it was with the holy women on that first Easter. Rather, we will tremble with joy before one we have served and believed in, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!