

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Sunday • April 16, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 28:1-10

“At the Crossroads: Life”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! The waiting is over.

The soldiers had been waiting for hours and hours. It was a tomb. What was going to happen there? The chief priests and the Pharisees had gone to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, on the Saturday after Jesus' crucifixion – the Sabbath day of Passover week – because they were concerned. They remembered that Jesus had said he would rise on the third day, so they thought Jesus' disciples would come and steal away the dead man's body then tell everyone that he had risen. They wanted Pilate to make sure that didn't happen. That's how those soldiers found themselves watching a tomb early on Sunday morning. They were part of the military guard that Rome had allocated for overseeing temple security. If they were battle-hardened soldiers, this assignment probably seemed like a cakewalk – or possibly a supremely boring one. So they waited. They waited, hoping for dawn to come, ready to scare off any disciples foolish enough to attempt robbing this tomb. They waited, looking forward to the next rotation of soldiers to come and relieve them of their watch. That never happened.

Something they never could have expected comes instead: an angel, servant of the Most High God, appears to roll the stone away from the tomb with an earthquake. The Roman guards pass out in fear at the sight of him. These Gentile soldiers were the first human witnesses of the events of the resurrection. When it's all over, some of them go back to the priests to tell them what happened. But instead of going on from there to spread the news of this first Easter, they go off with coins in their pockets and a lie in their mouths.

Mary Magdalene was waiting that Sunday morning, too. She had been there on Good Friday, watching Jesus die on the cross. She had traveled with Jesus and his other disciples, becoming his devoted follower after he cast seven demons out from her. She heard Jesus teach. She witnessed the miracles that he made happen. Maybe she was waiting for something more, hoping that Jesus would be the one who'd bring peace to Israel and end the evil that she'd seen in the world. Whatever she might have been waiting for, though, she probably believed all hope vanished when Jesus was crucified. He'd been handed over to the Romans, mocked by the religious leaders, abandoned by his closest disciples. What else could he do, now that he was dead? And so Mary waited early on Sunday morning with the other women, going to the tomb where his body had hurriedly been placed on Friday afternoon, to honor Jesus with a proper burial. That never happened, either.

Mary heard the angel's message of peace to calm her fear. She saw the place in the tomb where Jesus' body had lain now empty. She, along with the other women, received the angel's instruction to go and tell the disciples of Jesus' resurrection. But Mary alone would have the honor of being the first person to whom the risen Lord would make himself known. He spoke her name, and ended her waiting. (John 20:11-19) Jesus changed Mary's life again, sending her to share the good news as an eyewitness to his victory over death, sending her out to deliver hope founded on truth.

Jesus' disciples were also waiting on Sunday morning, even though they're only indirectly mentioned in Matthew's account of the resurrection. But for what were they waiting? Their teacher had been betrayed by one of their own number and executed. Their hope died on Good Friday. Come Sunday, they're in hiding. They were Jesus' closest students for three years; he even called them friends. They sat at his feet as he taught about what it meant to live in God's kingdom. They saw the amazing things that happened around him. But now they don't know what's going to happen next – they had less of a clue than the chief priests and the Pharisees. If they went out in public as Jesus' disciples, chances are they'd be arrested, too. So they wait in their grief and uncertainty and fear.

When the unexpected message comes from Mary and the other women, they're astounded. Jesus is alive? He has risen? A couple of them run to the tomb to investigate and see that Jesus' body is indeed gone – but it's not until the risen Lord himself comes to his disciples that the reality of the resurrection hits home. Grief turns to joy. Uncertainty turns to amazement. Fear... well, the disciples' fear seems to stick around. A week later, they're still waiting to see what's going to happen next. What would Jesus have them do now?

It's Easter Sunday. Are you still waiting?

When it comes to your faith, maybe you feel like one of the disciples on that first Easter morning. Somewhere along the line, you came to think that Christianity is just about waiting. You believe that Jesus is God's Son, the Christ – even your Savior. You believe that when the time comes for you to die, you'll go to heaven. You might think that faith is a good thing, but to go out in public and live your faith in a way that makes it plain that you're a Christian... that's something else. It's safe to just come to a worship service on occasion and otherwise keep your faith to yourself. But here's the problem: Jesus doesn't leave that as an option for us.

The faith that God gives, faith which clings to God's promises through our living Lord Jesus, isn't passive. Faith isn't about waiting around to see what happens next. We've been told what will happen! With Mary and the others, we have heard the angels' message this day: Jesus lives. And because he lives, you have life. *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:3-5)

The hope that we have as Christians isn't about looking forward to heaven. **It's about resurrection.** The power of death has been broken by Jesus' once-for-all offering of his perfect life. Heaven is the pre-party. The real celebration begins in the resurrection. That's when our Lord reunites your soul with your restored, perfected body in a world that has been recreated free from the corruption and brokenness of sin. That's what Mary and the disciples saw firsthand on Easter; it's what we're looking ahead towards after mortal life ends. That's the hope in which we live as Christians.

Today on this Easter Day, you're at the crossroads of life and merely waiting for life. If you want to follow Jesus, if you want to be a Christian, it means that you're going to live as his disciple. Life in Christ isn't about waiting around, never acting or moving for fear of what might happen, or how inconvenient it might turn out to be, or what the world will think of you. Life in Christ is living out the new identity you have as an heir of the resurrection. Just as Jesus took your sin into death on the cross, so he takes you into restored life with God and with the people around you.

Here at St. John's, we've been exploring what it means to live in Christ as his disciples. We join Jesus in his mission to bring restored life with God to our broken world. Sent by our risen Lord into all the roles in life he's given, be with your neighbors – not waiting to share God's love, but living it. You are there, like Mary and the other women and the disciples, as witnesses of the resurrection. You are there to share the love that God has given you, love that has connected you with Christ and with your family in faith in his Church. You are there as an agent of God's grace.

It's Easter Sunday. Are you still waiting? At the crossroads of life and waiting for life, know that Jesus rose to bring the world life, to bring you life. He gathers us together. He grows us as disciples who follow him through life. And he sends us to go and share that life with our neighbors.

Following the risen Jesus in faith isn't about dying. It's about living: living in hope of the resurrection to come, hope that changes life.

The waiting is over. *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*
Amen.