



Liturgical Day: The Resurrection of Our Lord

Date: April 12, 2009

Sermon Title: A Faith for the Future

Surprised at the tomb;
A message from an angel:
Christ: risen indeed!

Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed!*
Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed!*
Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed!*

Three men were asked, "When you are in your casket, and friends and family have gathered around you, what do you hope they will say about you?" The first man replies, "I would hope that someone might say I was a great doctor of my time, and a great family man." The second says, "I would hope that someone might say I was a wonderful husband, and a school teacher who made a great difference in the children of tomorrow." The third one replied, "I would hope that someone might say... 'Look! He's moving!' "

Today is Easter Sunday. And although in the Christian Church every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, this is the one day set aside to remember that at the very center of the Christian faith is the proclamation that Jesus is more than a great doctor, more than a great family man, more than a great husband, more than a great teacher... He is one who continues to live beyond the grave, one who goes ahead of us (just as he went ahead of his disciples to Galilee), and who calls us to follow him into a future that is filled with hope and joy.

That is what Easter is all about: the future. It is not an event that only commemorates something that happened two thousand years ago. We talked about this last week during our Wednesday Bible study. If you ever want to learn about the writers of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), one way to do that is to compare what they wrote about a particular aspect of our Lord's life. We studied what each of them had to say about the resurrection, and guess what? We found that they each tell the story in their own particular fashion, and from their own particular point of view. As you study all four accounts, there is no way to match them up detail for detail, and that is not accidental. Because, you see, these evangelists didn't write the Gospels in order to verify exactly what happened during Holy Week, and in what order the events took place. They didn't write to establish a second-by-second, minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour account of the last week of our Lord's life. They wrote the Gospels in order that those who read them might be stirred to faith, and might become willing to follow our Risen Lord into the future that God has appointed for us. Even for our Gospel writers, Easter isn't all about the past. It is all about the future. Your future. My future.

These days it is hard to look at the future. Of course in our short-sighted and politically divided country, those who are way out on the right are sure we are careening towards disaster, and those who are way out on the left are sure we are headed in exactly the correct direction. But the truth is, calmer minds are less certain. They realize that we are still in a difficult place as a country. Too many of our citizens are out of work. Too many retirement accounts are but a fraction of what they were a year ago. Too many business are uncertain about how long they'll be able to stay up and running. It is a difficult time to look at the future –

many who do, see little more than danger and uncertainty.

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 10:34-43

OR

ISAIAH 25:6-9

PSALM

PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24

SECOND LESSON

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

OR

ACTS 10:34-43

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MARK 16:1-8

OR

ST. JOHN 20:1-18

PRAYER OF THE DAY

GOD OF MERCY, WE NO LONGER
LOOK FOR JESUS AMONG THE
DEAD, FOR HE IS ALIVE AND HAS
BECOME THE LORD OF LIFE.

INCREASE IN OUR MINDS AND
HEARTS THE RISEN LIFE WE SHARE
WITH CHRIST, AND HELP US TO
GROW AS YOUR PEOPLE TOWARD
THE FULLNESS OF ETERNAL LIFE
WITH YOU, THROUGH JESUS
CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH
YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE
GOD, NOW AND FOREVER.

AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

I wonder if the followers of Jesus aren't feeling the same way on that first Easter morning. After the events of Holy Week, the disciples are reeling – they are devastated as they consider their own futures. The one they thought had come to save the world – to renew the strength and prominence of Israel – has been brutally tortured and put to death. They had been expecting him to throw out the Roman occupiers, and retake the throne of David. But now he is gone, and they don't know what to do. They don't even know how to imagine what the future might hold for them. They are bewildered, and frightened, and paralyzed – unable to do anything but lay low and wait to see what happens.

According to St. Mark, that's pretty much how the story ends. Mary, Mary and Salome work up the courage to make a visit to the tomb. When they arrive, they are shocked to see that the tomb has been opened. And when they enter it, they encounter a young man in a white robe, who announces to them that Jesus has been raised, and that they ought to make their way to Galilee where they will see him. But even this isn't enough to bring them out of their funk. According to St. Mark, their hearts are seized with terror and amazement, and they don't say a single word to anyone about what they have seen and heard. If you think about it, it is a troubling end to the story of our Lord's life. A very discouraging end.

But that is not so unusual. Many of the stories in our New Testament don't have neat, tidy endings. We never find out what the Prodigal Son's older brother decides. We don't learn whether the rich young man eventually gives everything away and becomes a follower of Jesus. We don't learn how the Centurion's life was changed. Many of these characters drift in and out of the Gospels, and we are not given a clue as to what actually happens in their lives. We don't often hear, as Paul Harvey used to say, "the rest of the story."

Most dramatically, in St. Mark's Gospel, we don't even hear how the story of our Lord's resurrection comes out. The oldest copies that still exist of St. Mark end at verse eight, with the women amazed and afraid, and unwilling to say a word about what they heard to anybody.

Many people have wondered about that. Some of them suspect that the original ending of St. Mark has simply been lost to us. Some think that all of the old copies of Mark sort of coincidentally cut off at the same verse. I think there is more going on in this text than that. I think Mark intended to end at verse eight. I think his aim was to leave this story unresolved – without all of the loose ends tied up. And I think he does that, because he understands that it is impossible for him to write the end of this story. It is impossible, because he knows the story has not ended yet. The story of Christ's resurrection lives on as that first generation of believers is moved by the Spirit at Pentecost, and begins to share the news about Jesus to all of Jerusalem. The story of Christ's resurrection lives on as a young Pharisee named Saul meets the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and begins to travel all over the world telling people about him. The story of Christ's resurrection lives on as the people of St. Mark's day gather together and recall the stories, and share the meal, and leave to serve the world. And the story of Christ's resurrection lives on as faith is kindled within you and me, and we go to share his presence with the world that surrounds us.

St. Mark doesn't give us a neat and tidy ending to the Gospel story. But that may serve as a word of comfort for us today, as we head down life's journey, not knowing exactly where it will take us. Our lives may be no more neat or tidy than the end of Mark's Gospel. But we march on nonetheless, trusting that the one who calls us into the future awaits us there, and grants us the strength we need to keep moving forward. In the Lutheran Hymnal, one of my favorite prayers is the one that is now appointed for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.ⁱ

Whether we are facing the uncertainty of difficult economic times, or the uncertainty of knowing how and when to share our faith with others, God promises that we need not go forward in fear. Instead, we can

ⁱ Service of Morning Prayer, [Evangelical Lutheran Worship](#), copyright © 2006 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, Minneapolis) page 317.

go in faith, knowing that the God who calls us to this responsibility, promises to give us the faith and the courage to carry it out. If Easter, ultimately, is not only about the past – but instead, also about the future – then the message of Easter is what puts our hearts at ease with God through forgiveness, and empowers us to take the gift of faith and share it with others.

Fred Kreisler was a world-famous violinist who lived during the first half of the twentieth century. He earned a fortune from his concerts and compositions, but he generously gave most of it away. So, when he discovered an exquisite violin on one of his trips, he wasn't able to buy it. Later, having raised enough money to meet the asking price, he returned to the seller, hoping to purchase that beautiful instrument. But to his great dismay, it had been sold to a collector.

Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home, and offered to buy the violin. The collector said it had become his prized possession and he would not sell it. Keenly disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave when he had an idea. "Could I play the instrument once more before it is consigned to silence?" he asked. Permission was granted, and the great virtuoso filled the room with such heart-moving music that the collector's emotions were deeply stirred. "I have no right to keep it to myself," he exclaimed. "It's yours, Mr. Kreisler. Take it into the world, and let people hear it."ⁱⁱ

"I have no right to keep it to myself." This morning we shared the news of the resurrection: "Christ is risen." (Response: "Christ is risen, indeed.") This is the most heart-moving news that the world has ever received. And you and I have no right to keep it to ourselves. May the story that began in the Gospel of St. Mark continue in our lives – the never-ending story of how God touches our hearts, transforms our lives, and moves through us to change the world.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (April 12, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text:ⁱⁱⁱ

^{16:1} When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 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 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ From a sermon entitled "Resurrection Happenings" by Steve Shepherd; based on St. Matthew 28:1-10; preached at Jonesboro Christian Church.

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^{iv} St. Mark 16:1-8, *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{16:1} Καὶ διαγενομένου τοῦ σαββάτου Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ καὶ Μαρία ἡ [τοῦ] Ἰακώβου καὶ Σαλώμη ἠγόρασαν ἀρώματα να ἔλθοῦσαι ἀλείψωσιν αὐτόν. ² καὶ λίαν πρωτὶ τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων ρχονται ἐπὶ τὸ μνημεῖον ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου. ³ καὶ λεγον πρὸς ἑαυτὰς τίς ἀποκυλίσει ἡμῖν τὸν λίθον ἐκ τῆς θύρας τοῦ μνημείου; ⁴ καὶ ἀναβλέψασαι θεωροῦσιν τι ἀποκεκύλισται ὁ λίθος ἦν γὰρ μέγας σφόδρα. ⁵ Καὶ εἰσελθοῦσαι εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον εἶδον νεανίσκον καθήμενον ἐν τοῖς δεξιοῖς περιβεβλημένον στολὴν λευκὴν, καὶ ἐξεθαμβήθησαν. ⁶ ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐταῖς μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε Ἰησοῦν ζητεῖτε τὸν Ναζαρηνὸν τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον ἠγέρθη, οὐκ σὺν ὧδε δε ὁ τόπος που θηκαν αὐτόν. ⁷ ἀλλὰ ὑπάγετε εεπατε τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῷ Πέτρῳ τι προᾶγει ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν ἐκεῖ αὐτὸν ὄψεσθε, καθὼς εἶπεν ὑμῖν. ⁸ καὶ ἐξελθοῦσαι φυγον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου, εἶχεν γὰρ αὐτὰς τρόμος καὶ κτασις καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ. ^v

^v St. Mark 16:1-8, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).