

Sermon #1,138: St. Mark 16:1-8 (*Historic Gospel*)

4-5-15 (Easter: Festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord), Bethany-Princeton MN

Hymns: 352, 343, 348, 73; communion 310, 342, 341, 354)

EASTER EXORDIUM

The second-to-last paragraph borrows heavily and is adapted from the 10th century "Descent Into Hell," from the Anglo-Saxon Exeter Book, written in Old English.

Slowly the women were walking to the tomb, still wracked with sadness and grieving. The body of Jesus – which they had touched, followed around and seen doing miracles – was lying dead. The eyes of Jesus – into which they had looked and seen love for poor sinners – would not open again. The lips of Jesus – which had preached in parables and spoken tender words of love to them – would not open to utter another word. These must have been their thoughts.

But already His eyes had opened. Already His body was up and walking around. The first place He had gone was down to hell. And there He opened His mouth; Scripture says when He descended to hell *"He preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:19)*. He didn't speak compassion to them. He proclaimed His total triumph over the kingdom of Satan. It was preaching that only comforts His believers: that He has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil.

It was like a lion's roar, when Jesus descended to hell and preached. The devil cowered. The devils had to be silent. Jesus' preaching that morning was like a roar that echoed not only throughout hell, but in all the heavens and earth.

All the saints came crowding, trying which might see the victorious Son: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, many a fearless man, Moses and David, Isaiah and Daniel, a concourse of men, a host of prophets, a multitude of shepherds, soldiers, farmers and carpenters, a throng of women, virgins, wives, barren and widows, the martyred baby boys of Egypt and Bethlehem, countless people – all hearing the victorious Son preaching not only His victorious resurrection from the dead but theirs.

Let us join them, crowding each other to see by faith the victorious Son of God. Let us not cower and quail at what sin and death can do. The devil cowers at the risen Lord. The devils must be silent. It is our turn to shout and sing the Easter victory. Please rise to join in singing the festival verse:

348 "He is Arisen! Glorious Word!"

THE STONE HAS BEEN ROLLED AWAY FOR YOU

The Text, St. Mark 16:1-8 (v. 3-4). **And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away – for it was very large.** Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. By Your Word of truth, may we be Your own, live under You in Your kingdom, and serve You in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as You are risen from the dead, live and reign to all eternity. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who is risen indeed: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As the women arrived at Jesus' tomb it was still dark. We read here that it was **"at the rising of the sun,"** Matthew's gospel adds that they arrived **"as it began to dawn,"** and John says that when Mary Magdalene arrived **"it was still dark."** That darkness was no big deal, it was going away with the sunrise.

The tougher darkness for them was the sadness and gloom that they were feeling. It was connected, in a way they couldn't understand, to the darkness that had enveloped Jesus in the tomb, for the three days since His death, when Joseph of Arimathea **"rolled a stone against the door of the tomb"** with these same women watching. We have to deal with this darkness. It is the **"darkness and the shadow of death"** that the Bible speaks of. We hesitate and shudder to think about the darkness of death, the closing of eyes that will open no more, the darkness of the burial place when the earth covers the body, or the darkness of the tomb so tightly sealed, light can't get in. We don't want to deal with it. But God helps us face this reality, and Easter Sunday is the best time to face it!

Jesus' resurrection involves real darkness and a terrible, powerful enemy; that's the context. His resurrection follows His death. His resurrection is the answer to a problem: our sins and their consequences, our sicknesses, conflicts, lack of peace, our sufferings, our death. Our Lord will not help us avoid our problems. He took the full load of them onto Himself. He dealt with them Himself, that is why He was in the tomb. He went into the tomb with everyone's sins. "*The wages of sin is death,*" and Jesus paid these wages in His death and burial.

This has to do with the message of the Law, which shows us our sins and what the wages of sin are. The way Easter Sunday teaches us to think of this is in terms of darkness vs. light. Jesus was in the darkness and the shadow of death. All the darkness that the devil, the prince of darkness, introduces into your life through your own sins you commit and through the sins others do against you, Jesus let this darkness swallow Him up. He let it do this to Him for three days.

Jesus' tomb was sealed with the large stone. This stone is what kept everything dark. It kept out the light. This has its parallels in our life.

The large stone that imprisons you in death and the grave is sin. The large stone that it is impossible for you to move – just as the women, who said, "**Who will roll away the stone for us,**" could not possibly move the stone themselves even a little bit – this large stone is your burden of sin that you can't carry, it is your failure to obey God's Law fully for even a minute, it is your being unable by your own reason or strength to choose to believe in Him, it is your powerlessness to overcome the devil and that is why you fail so abysmally at living a holy life.

We think of this in general terms as our problem of sin. But this darkness takes shape. This weighty stone that walls and blocks you in takes many forms. Guilt. Shame. Depression. Self-pity. Conflict with people. Broken relationships. Broken marriages. Worry and fear about the future. Terminal illness. Death. Fear of death. Persistent grieving and sadness. Loneliness. Bitterness toward others.

Resentment. There is also the sin that used to be called *sloth*, which is not laziness but rather suffering from being listless, restless, having a general dissatisfaction with life, unable to care about anything or anyone.

In these things and many more, you can feel like things are dark, like they will not get better but only worse, and you feel helpless to change it. Or, no matter what you try, it doesn't seem to get better. You can't stop dwelling on what you did that makes you feel guilty. You are stuck in your grief. You can't get rid of the sad feelings. You dwell on what people have done to you, or not done for you, and it is like a constant video loop in your mind, you can't get out of it.

What is happening here can be explained by understanding the nature of the devil as the prince of darkness. He is well aware of the light. He is also aware that while thanks to original sin you were born in darkness, the Holy Spirit in baptism *enlightened* you with His gifts, made you a child of the Light. The devil is terrified that you would stay in this light. His advantage is that, like a newborn baby who isn't used to the light, and prefers to be back in the darkness of the womb, he knows you are easy prey for the darkness.

What the devil does is to *hide* the light from you, and show you only the darkness and make you think that's all there is. This is how he deceives you. He doesn't show you the full picture. He keeps showing you all the things that will make you dwell on, and dwell in, this darkness. He is not out to kill you. He is out to bring about hopelessness, to produce Death-in-Life. The Bible verse that most clearly teaches this is in 2 Corinthians 4, where it says that what the devil, whom it calls "*the god of this age,*" does is to "*blind*" people, "*lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ ... should shine on them*" (2Co 4:4).

So what you most need is to be exposed to the Light of the world, Jesus Christ your Savior. To know that, in spite of what you *feel*, the fact is that it *is* not hopeless. To know that you are not walled in, in darkness.

This is actually one of the reasons for coming to church every Sunday. We worship on Sunday – which the New Testament calls “the Lord’s Day” ((1Co 16:2, Re 1:10) – because of Easter, to remember the day Jesus rose. Every Sunday is a “little Easter.” So when you come to church you put yourself in the place of the women coming to tomb. I don’t know if you come because you are aware of your dwelling in darkness and through the Law are aware of what you need. Those women weren’t aware of it either. But somewhere deep inside you, there is a voice, the voice of a troubled heart unable to hold back the hopelessness, saying, **“Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?”**

And what do you see when you come? That the stone – your big immovable stone keeping you in darkness – has been rolled away. You do not have to work your way out of it. You do not have to do anything. Notice that the women’s question is a question that gets a Gospel answer. It has the words **“for us.”** That’s who your Savior and Lord is. That’s who the true God is. He is a **“for us”** God. He has done it for you. Not only in His suffering and death, but also in His resurrection. He has rolled away your stone, removed the darkness of sin, removed the darkness of unbelief and doubt, removed the darkness of death, removed the darkness of depression and discouragement, for you. Only He can.

He is revealed as the One who accepted all the darkness you feel as His own, He was swallowed up by all the darkness that the devil deals out to you, and in the words **“He is risen!”** He shattered that darkness, He shattered your darkness. It is not really darkness at all. Everything that the Law says to you is what produces your darkness, and His resurrection answers that completely. It is the Gospel, and it cancels what the Law says to you. The devil wants to hide this from you. The **“lest the light of the gospel of the glory Christ should shine on them”** is what the devil is afraid of. The way this light shines on you, is that you come to church, hear His Word and meet your risen Lord in the Sacraments.

When you come to church you see your loving Savior, revealed in all the means of grace. He is specifically named, out loud, to you who come to the Lord's Table, as "your crucified and risen Savior!" He stands before you. He is not dead but living. He is present and speaking to you in His Word. He washes you Himself in Baptism, and the water of baptism washes away your sin by virtue of His blood which cleanses you from all sin and is in the water by the speaking of His Word. In the Lord's Supper He comes in His body and blood, as your crucified and risen Savior, not only in His divine nature as true God but also in His human nature as true man, in His flesh, the very flesh that was slain for you and rose on the third day and in which He appeared to His followers. In the words of the absolution the risen Lord Himself is speaking through the pastor.

This is your protection and defense against the devil and the encroaching darkness. This is how you hold back the darkness. You don't keep it at bay by living in denial, avoiding the subject, burying your problems and just not thinking about death, hoping your guilt would go away, or avoiding that person you're in conflict with. You keep the darkness at bay by bringing it with you into the light, bringing it with you to church, exposing it to Jesus, the Light of the world! You don't have to be something you're not or pretend you're so strong. You let Him roll away the stone for you and flood your darkness with His light.

How do you do that? First by regularly hearing His Word, letting every week be a "little Easter" for you so the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ will shine on you and shatter your darkness. Secondly by bringing your concerns and problems to Him in prayer, being honest with Him about whatever darkness you may be in. For when you come to Him, even in prayer, you come to the Light, whose Word will give you light and chase away your darkness.

He is risen. **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**