

Sermon #1,262: St. Mark 16:1-8 (Historic Gospel)
4-16-17, Easter Sunday, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns: 352, 347.1-2, 340.1.3.6, 343, 348, 73; comm. 359, 310, 341, 354:2.10)

Exordium

Once again the angels were sent from heaven, just as they were more than 30 years before.

- This time not to announce the birth of the Savior, but that He was risen from the dead.
- This time not to be heard from the sky but from up close, to roll away the stone that sealed the tomb and to be seated upon it.
- This time not to announce that the Savior of the world was here, beginning His work; instead to announce, **“He is risen!”** – that His saving work was finished, perfect, approved and unshakable.

We celebrate the festival of Christ’s resurrection by listening. We listen to what the angel says. We hear that the work of salvation is finished, that it has been accepted by God the Father, that all our sins are completely paid for, that Christ Himself lives to speak His Word into our ears and hearts, and that all who believe in this risen Lord will never die.

However, what we believe we also speak: *“if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Ro 10:9).*

Let us make this confession of praise of our risen Lord by standing to sing the festival verse:

Hymn: 348 “He Is Arisen, Glorious Word!”

We pray: Dear Lord Jesus, fill us with faith and trust to believe in Your resurrection and all it gives us, that we may walk with You in newness of life on the way of truth to life everlasting. On this way, this road, we sometimes doubt, sometimes stray and sometimes struggle to trust and follow You; we let fear and sadness and the world, and just life, conquer us. Please don’t forsake us but make another resurrection appearance to us, by means of Your Word, and give us joy and put into us the confidence that comes from Your Easter victory. Amen.

JESUS STILL WINS THE STRANGE AND DREADFUL STRIFE

The Text, St. Mark 16:1-8 (v. 8). ⁸ **So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.** Lord, this is Your Word; these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In the name of Jesus, He who lives, and was dead, and behold, is alive forevermore (*Rev 1:18*): Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Well, what did you expect? Exuberant joy, perhaps? Unshakable confidence? That is what we are expecting from the first ones to see that the tomb is empty and hear the heavenly voice of the angel. It's the expectation we perhaps put upon ourselves on Easter Sunday, to be transformed into joyful, exuberant people. Where is the Easter joy? That is the way we pressure ourselves, and not only on Easter Sunday.

But what do we hear about the very first people to hear the Easter message, "**He is risen**"? They do not respond, "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Instead they respond with troubled silence. Listen: "**So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**"

This description is full of emotion. They were trembling and shaking with fear, and so beside themselves that all they did was run away from the tomb as quickly as they could. They were "amazed" really is saying that their minds could not process it; they could not respond. They had been told to "**tell His disciples**" but were so overwhelmed that they didn't - couldn't - say anything, and what summarizes all of this, at the end, is: "**They were afraid.**" The word used by St. Mark here indicates that their fearful state was ongoing, they couldn't stop fearing.

These emotions, at this point, surprise us. We don't expect this. We understand what they were feeling on the way to the tomb: sadness, grief, despondency, gloom, and even fear. The men were hidden away "**for**

fear of the Jews,” which would only make these women feel more afraid for being unsafe, unprotected and vulnerable. Also they had a task to perform which was all about death, something they dreaded doing, it would be filled with heartbreak the whole time, they probably also feared falling to pieces the whole time, being unable to handle it emotionally, it would be too much and couldn't they just avoid it.

We understand these feelings as long as they're on their way to the tomb, before they knew. But now they have seen that **“the very large stone had been rolled away.”** Now they have seen an angel from heaven, sitting in front of them. Now they have heard the angel say to them, **“You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here.”**

The angel's words and the empty tomb, we know what this all means. We know the reason for their sadness is gone, removed just like the heavy stone. Jesus wasn't dead anymore. He is risen! We know what this means for our faith, what is true because of His resurrection: (1) It proves Jesus truly is the Son of God and all His words are true and authoritative. (2) It proves that all the sins of everyone in the world are all forgiven, because Jesus' resurrection is the sign that God accepted His death on the cross as full payment for everyone's sins. And, (3) it proves that since He rose from the dead, He truly is the Resurrection and the Life, and everyone who believes in Him will never die but their souls are with the Lord in Paradise and their bodies will be raised on the Last Day.

Well, we can't expect they would put all that together in an instant, this involves study of the Scriptures and gaining answers from God's Word. But at the very least, hadn't the angel just said, **“He is risen”**? Why then would they do any less than jump for joy and linger at the tomb?

For the same reason that you struggle to have faith, and confidence, and hope, and joy, and cheerfulness. For the same reason that you experience doubts, lack of confidence, feelings of hopelessness, sadness or despondency that you can't get rid of, and when you can't stop fearing.

In other words, this is “*a strange and dreadful strife*” that still takes place.

As we sang in Luther’s hymn:

*It was a strange and dreadful strife
When life and death contended;
The victory remained with Life,
The reign of death was ended.*

Yes, Jesus gloriously defeated death. Jesus did not just die. He went to meet death. Instead of dying and then His head bowing as a natural response, Jesus made a triumphant cry – “*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*” – and then first bowed His head before dying. He was in control of the moment of His death. He went to meet death. An old hymn says, “*Into death’s jaws Thou springest*” – so that He could break death’s teeth, take away its bite and sting, utterly crush death. And He did. It was a strange and dreadful strife, but Jesus won the victory. He defeated death in every way. He “*ruined all its right and claim.*” So death can’t hold the Christian. Whoever believes in Jesus will never die. He redeemed us from everything death can do. Nothing death does can last.

But what we are seeing in the women at the empty tomb is that there is another “strange and dreadful strife.” The devil can’t change that Jesus is risen. He lost that one. But what can he do? What victory can he still have? He turns his attack on the poor women. Now they must go through a hard fight to believe what the angel has said. This “strange and dreadful strife” is the battle for their soul, the hard fight of faith.

In effect the devil rolls another large stone in front of the tomb – in front of their hearts. Instead of what we hear, that they “**looked up [and] saw that the stone had been rolled away,**” the devil gets them looking down, and inwardly to focus on the disordered confusion of their own thoughts and feelings. I’m grateful that the Bible shows these women feeling this way. It’s honest about their fears and trembling, which gives hope to all of us who fear and tremble in our daily strife with the devil.

We can relate to them, I think. Your experience includes, like them, a lot of looking down and not up to the risen Lord and His empty tomb. You live with this troubled silence. It may be that you can't stop feeling guilt and regret; or you feel unworthy and think you're no good; or you can't move past grief or snap out of your sadness; or you can't stop fearing or worrying. Then you think: *What kind of Christian am I?* These thoughts come from the devil. They're his temptations - to think faith consists of the right thoughts and feelings of peace and joy, feeling strong and not weak, and when you lack them you think maybe you don't have faith or your salvation is unsure. This troubled silence isn't silent. Condemning thoughts fill your mind, your conscience accusing and shouting at you.

But this is because you are the one fighting this strife alone: putting pressure on yourself, trying to summon up faith, and you never will by your own strength, you can never stop fearing if it is up to you. The devil wants you to lean on your own resources, which he knows are too weak. This is all because the devil will not let us have this knowledge of Christ in peace. He turns his attack upon Jesus' loved ones. He tries to hide Jesus' victory from you. It is a fierce strife!

Do you know that Jesus does not condemn you? He has only compassion for you. He recognizes, even if we don't, that our trembling faith is the result of the devil going to war with us. Even though Jesus is risen from the dead - which proves His death forgives all your sins and that death can't hold Jesus' loved ones - the devil still seriously preaches to your conscience the lie that you are not forgiven and torments you with death and makes you feel its reality more than the reality of the resurrection! How dare the devil take Christ's victory and make you feel defeated!

This makes Jesus angry with the devil for you. He takes up your battle. He comes to your daily strife and makes it His. At Easter we learn that He is the Victor. If He the Victor - whom nothing can defeat - comes to take up your battle for you then your victory is sure! Nothing can defeat you! The victory in your strife belongs with Him and is given to you.

This takes the pressure off of you. Jesus is saying to you: *“Let me fight this battle. It is My strife, not yours.”* He has already won the victory. So His task in your life each day is to defend you, to keep you on the victorious side of the battle with Him, our strong Defender.

How does Jesus defend and protect you? With His Word. For you who suffer in troubled silence, Jesus comes to speak to you. He speaks His victory. The angel shows this as he says to the women: **“There [Galilee] you will see Him, as He said to you.”** He builds their faith on Jesus’ words. He grounds their faith on Jesus’ words coming true, being true.

This is how Jesus defends and protects His loved ones from the devil’s lies. He speaks His truth. He defends you with His Word. This is what His words are for: to defend the accused, to defend you. This is why you should love and yearn to hear His Word: what He says to you protects and defends you, and stops the devil in what he does to you.

Jesus will not leave you in troubled silence, but as His words are spoken to you He fills you with His words of truth and love. In spite of the worst feelings imaginable that you might have, you will only hear from Him that you are forgiven by God, that He loves you, He approves of you and accepts you, and He will not let the devil harm you or death have you or your loved ones who believe in Him. This is fighting the good fight of faith: to hear Jesus in His Word defending and protecting you.

The victory remains with Life, the reign of death is ended! Amen!