

EASTER DAY 2009

St. Mark 16:1-8

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

If wild applause was ever in order in the church, Easter is the time. It is a day for Christians to cheerfully celebrate Christ's victory over death. Clearly the dominant mood in our worship this morning is joy. It is a day for breaking out the band, clapping hands and singing, "Hallelujah!" (Well ... we've done a little bit of this already.)

But if you ever read the gospel accounts of the resurrection, you discover an unusual thing; the first reaction of the women who came to the tomb was not joy - it was bewilderment and fear!

This is precisely the reaction of the women in that last verse from our Easter Gospel:

“ ... 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.”

Here we are, gathered on this feast of feasts, to celebrate the greatest event that ever happened – that death has been defeated, that the power of sin and the devil have been demolished, that nothing can stand in the way of what God will give to us all:

forgiveness, salvation - eternal life; all because of the crucified Jesus who was raised up – and what do we hear? Terror and amazement! The women said nothing to anyone. Wow! You'd think they would be so overwhelmed with joy that nothing would have kept them from spreading the news. It's easy to shake our heads in astonishment at their reaction. After all, along with the disciples, they had heard Jesus and witnessed some phenomenal events: like the feeding of the crowds, the healings and miracles, even the raising up of Jesus' friend, Lazarus.

But when you allow this story from St. Mark's resurrection narrative to sink in, that first Easter day could not have been anything but astonishing. There's no other way to describe it. Put yourself into this narrative. What if you were with these women? There you are, as dawn is breaking, taking spices and anointing oils, about to do what Jewish Law specified in caring for the dead. You are heavy with sorrow. The hopes and dreams of a kingdom filled with unending life and eternal peace had been buried with Jesus – or so you thought. All the love and care Jesus proclaimed – especially for the unloved, the life-worn, the bruised souls – all of that was deep inside a lifeless cave – or so you thought. And about that cave: the tomb where Jesus' body was placed had been hewn out of a rocky escarpment, purchased by Joseph of Arimathea, who had a stone rolled in front of it - more or less to protect it from raiders and animals. What about that stone? How would one – or a group - roll *that* out of the way? Then you arrive and find the stone rolled off to the side. Your thoughts are racing – did someone take the body? As you look inside there's a very young looking man, sitting off to the side, dressed in a white robe. Probably more like dazzling white,

since you're inside a very dark, damp place. You're not quite sure about him – could he be an angel? Then you hear these words:

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, this is the place they laid him.”

Here is where astonishment is replaced by fear and amazement – and rightly so. For the Marys, Salome, and for the disciples, truly the two realities for them were death and taxes! And since there were no rocket scientists around in Jesus' time, just the notion that someone could come back to life after being brutally killed on a cross two days prior was beyond the realm of reason and logic. It's beyond reason and logic today. So ... can you blame these women who were so afraid by what they had experienced for their stunned silence? Wouldn't you be afraid? Of course you would. There's no explaining this one!

But it did happen! The disciples did see their risen Lord, later in the day. He had indeed been raised back to life. And they would have the wondrous experience of being with their beloved Jesus an additional forty days, listening to him, eating with him, being further taught by him, having their lives completely turned around by him, and finally witnessing his ascent into glory. Even the apostle Paul saw the risen Lord as he was traveling to Damascus – and he was blinded by the glory of the crucified and resurrected Jesus.

Which brings us to this very day ... a day in which we, once again, listen to the resurrection account and rejoice in its good news. But know this, dear friends: this is a day when what we celebrate defies

everything logical, reasonable or rational. This day is all about faith in the illogical.

One of the biggest problems Christianity faces is the attempt – by some – to take the nonsense out of it. All of us are like the Marys and Salome at the tomb – looking – looking for truth, or looking for something that makes some sense. Every once in a while, just for the sake of my own integrity, I will listen to radio preachers, television evangelists, or speakers at Community-type churches who would have all of us believe that Christianity makes sense – or at least it should. To do this, biblical events are either pushed to a back-burner or explained away. In one of the major denominations in our country, there are several bishops (those set apart to uphold the truth of the Christian faith) who do not believe in a bodily resurrection, nor in the virgin birth, nor that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Whether it’s the folks we hear or see in the media, or others who would downplay a day like today, the word is simple: just follow anybody’s teachings – even Jesus’ teachings - and just love one another – that’s really all we need to do; it’s simple, and very practical. God is love – so don’t worry about the mysterious stuff – and don’t get too hung up over those stories of the healings and the miracles. When we hear things like this, it is terribly tempting to say, “Yep, I like this, I like a simple set of beliefs that are practical. After all, when it comes to stories like the feeding of the 5000 with fives loaves and two fish (unless the fish was lutefisk!); or the one about the man who had been blind since birth immediately receiving sight with some mud and spit; or the one about Jesus’ closest friend – Lazarus - who had died and was in a tomb in Bethany for four days, being raised back to life and restored companionship with his sisters; or the raising of the widow’s son; or the one about

that scorned Samaritan woman at the well who not only found out how much Jesus knew about her but also heard him speak a forgiving word – is it logical to believe in these old stories, especially the ones which defy medical, scientific, or high-tech rational explanations? Of course not!”

So, in one sense, we are all right there, with the women at the tomb. It’s not easy to preach a sermon on Easter Day, some 2000 + years after the fact. I know only too well that I too would be out of words, afraid to say anything, for fear that people would think this resurrection business sounds too high falutin’, nothing more than just an idle tale – as the disciples were recorded to have done in the resurrection narrative from St. Luke’s Gospel. I would have been just as amazed to have seen that tomb stone rolled away, and greeted by a young man dressed in white: “... he is not here. Look, this is the place they laid him.”

The sad fact is that Christians are still stunned silent at the very opportunities we have to tell others of our illogical faith. Do we realize that it’s precisely because the resurrection claims are nonsense; because the phrase, “Jesus lives,” defies explanation; because the Christian faith proclaims a radical message; that our lives – and all of life - have been dramatically changed? The women at the tomb would soon realize this when the resurrected Lord eventually appeared to them. So too did those first disciples who, in their own fears and tears would see the living Christ, face-to-face.

For those of us who are here today, seeking to hear a word of truth, we have this astonishing and welcoming good news to share: death is no longer the lasting, final word about any of us; sorrows will be

turned into laughter and joy; silence and fear will become shouts of everlasting thanksgiving and bold acclamations. All because of those wondrous words from the tomb: "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, this is the place they laid him."

Christ Jesus – who on Good Friday endured the scorn, the mocking, the terror of all times, the cruelty of nails and a spear, for what were endless hours upon the cross – is now the One who stands on the other side of death, bidding us on, telling us all the stones have been rolled away, that there is nothing – absolutely nothing – that will keep us in our graves. The words of forgiveness that were poured out on the cross are now our reality. The life I can now live may be lived out in the nonsense of the resurrection. Because love has triumphed over hate, goodness over evil, truth over lies, and hope over despair. Even death itself has been taken to death – left in the tomb, destroyed and cast away, by the One who stands in our midst today as our risen Lord, inviting us to his Eucharistic feast which points us to new and unending life at that high feast which shall never end. Nothing can hold us back. Yes, give me the utter nonsense of this message! Give me this holy mystery which defies reason and logic! Give me the truth that death is swallowed up in victory!

Because this means I can love my neighbors, forgive my enemies, reach out to those in their own despair with words of hope and encouragement, no longer in stunned silence, **no longer afraid**, because the real truth is found in the clearest message of the Scriptures – about a God who does the illogical, the nonsensical, the unbelievable: raising his Son to life to give us all the Easter life of love, forgiveness, and joy. You want practical? Well ... there it is!

Friends in the risen Christ, the dawn has broken, and this morning an empty tomb cries out:

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, this is the place they laid him.”

The grave could not hold Jesus. The stone has been rolled away. And our silence can now ring out with the most illogical – and yet the most joyful – acclamation of all:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen

Pr. Rod L. Ronneberg
proclaimed on the
Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord,
2009

*Many thanks to my old friend, Pr. Glenn Ludwig, who's book, **Walking To ... Walking With ... Walking Through**, © 1994 by CSS Publishing, provided some proverbial “grist for the mill” as I prepared this sermon (Glenn, I'm sure, would be surprised by this!).*