

The Resurrection of Our Lord

April 12, 2020

The Lessons: Jeremiah 31:1-6
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

The Hymns: # 458 "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands"
461 "I Know That My Redeemer Lives"
486 "If Christ Had Not Been Raised From Death"

The Collect: O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Sermon: Matthew 28:1-10
"Don't Be Afraid"

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

I. Fearless News at the Tomb

"Do not be afraid." Those are the first words of the angel to the women at the tomb. They've made their way to Jesus' grave as soon as light and law permit, in order to prepare His body properly for permanent burial. He's been beaten, crucified and killed—His body dishonored by scourge, nails and spear; and they come to honor Him one last time. One can only imagine the depth of their grief and their sense of hopelessness: they followed Jesus because they believed Him to be the Messiah. They've mourned since they saw Him dead on Friday. Now He's gone, and they come to honor Him. It's the right thing to do.

It's also a way to put off the fear for a little bit, and there's plenty of that to go around. Whatever else is the cause, fear comes from facing things beyond your control, whether it be enemies too big, futures unknown or distrust in your own decisions. Who knows exactly what fears are lurking in the minds of these women. Perhaps they fear for their own judgment—they don't trust themselves for following Jesus for the past three years, for trusting in a Messiah who ended up dead. Perhaps they fear for the future without Him, without Him and His Word and His wondrous works. It certainly seemed that God was with Jesus; and Jesus lived a life that was totally, wonderfully devoid of fear. But now He's in a tomb. And if God wasn't with Him, who would God be with?

Without God, there is way too much to life that is beyond help or control. That is reason to be afraid.

At the tomb, the earth quakes as an angel of the Lord descends from heaven, rolls away the stone and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning; his clothing is white as snow. The guards are fearful and become like dead men: they're well-trained as soldiers, but dealing with hosts of heaven is above their pay grade and beyond their control. It would be so for the women, too, but the angel speaks to them; and the angel's first words are "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come see the place where He lay." O women, there is no need for fear: His Word casts fear away, and before His death He told you He would die and rise again. Come, look at the tomb and see that He is risen, body and all. And then, don't keep the news to yourself: the angel continues, "Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him."

"Do not be afraid," says the angel. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus is certainly beyond the control of these women. But it is well within the power of God. God was with Jesus, God has raised Jesus, and God is with Jesus—for Jesus is God Himself. And He is risen from the dead.

The women depart quickly from the tomb—still fearful, but also with great joy as they run to tell the disciples. Behold, Jesus meets them and says, "Greetings!" The word for "greetings" is actually the word "Rejoice!" That goes well with His next words: "Do not be afraid." It is good for the risen Son of God to say this to the women, because they're still afraid and they're not clear why He's risen from the dead. Is Jesus back for mercy—or for vengeance?

See, a God without the Gospel is not Good News. If He is back from the dead to condemn sinners, then that's definitely reason to be afraid. At the top of the list for condemnation, perhaps, will be His disciples—His closest followers who abandoned and denied Him in His hour of suffering. There's no hurt greater than betrayal by loved ones, after all. But they are not His enemies or prey: they are His brothers. That's what He tells the women: "Do not be afraid; go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." He casts out fear with His Word, and He declares that He comes in peace, with mercy and grace.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and He calls the disciples His brothers. In other words, He is more powerful than death itself, and He is risen in power to save His people from death.

There is no reason for His people to be afraid.

II. Psalm 34:4

So, "Do not be afraid," says Jesus. There is no reason for you to be afraid. Christ has conquered sin and devil and even death for you, and He shares that victory in His Word and in His Sacraments. Even today, He casts out fear by His Word. Do not be afraid.

Fear comes when you are confronted by things beyond your control, when the foes are too big, where you're helpless to fix things. Fear comes when circumstances expose your weaknesses and limitations and inabilities, when it's nakedly clear to you that you're out of your league. At such times, many can only hold on for the ride, can only wish and hope that it all turns out for the best. They can do their best

to ignore fear, but they can't defeat it. You, though, have Christ: where you are helpless, He is not; and He is risen to deliver you from all of your fears.

Sin brings fear. You sin against somebody else, and you're afraid that the damage can't be undone. You do what you can to fix it, but there's still much beyond your control—namely, whether or not the other person is willing to be reconciled with you. That's the part that makes you afraid. Now apply that to God. You've sinned against Him, and you feel the dread that you cannot make up for your sin before Him: all the good you could possibly do cannot cleanse you. What if God is not willing to be reconciled with you? That's why people live in fear of God. The fear may come out in the form of anger and defiance of His Law, but anger and defiance are often a bluster to hide fear.

When you are troubled by your sins, the devil will work hard to make you afraid of God, to scare you from your Savior. He will bring up every last sin you've ever committed, throw it in front of your face and say, "God has no love for a sinner like you. There is no way you could possibly be a Christian with a track record like that. You've done too much to burn that bridge, and there's no way you can make up for it. Be very afraid." The devil's best lies are often half-truths. It is true that you cannot make up for your sin, and if you try to do so on your own you should be terrified of God's inescapable wrath. But there is more truth—the truth of Good Friday and Easter. The truth is that Christ has made up for your sin, because He has suffered God's wrath in your place. He's died to save you. Risen again, He declares to you, "Because I've suffered My Father's wrath for your sin, My Father has only grace and mercy and life and help for you. I've atoned for your sin, and God doesn't hold your sin against you anymore.

"You are reconciled to God. Do not be afraid."

That, dear friends, is a life-changer. You do not live your life as one afraid of God's wrath, trying to accomplish what you can get away with before the hammer falls. You do not live vainly hoping that God won't notice what you're doing and will let you slip into heaven despite your sin. You live as one forgiven. Where atoning for your sin was beyond you, Christ has done it for you. He is your life. He is your strength, and His grace is made perfect in your weakness. Because you are His, there is no need for fear. You may feel helpless and out of control, but you are in the merciful hands of the Lord of heaven and earth.

This is true even in the matter of death, which is the other great fear of all. It haunts you and affects everything you do. You spend time every day avoiding it by what you eat, how you drive and all the rest. You may try every activity and toy in the book to distract you, but it doesn't change the reality. No matter how careful you are, death eventually comes. You're helpless against it when it's time, and there is nothing you can do. That fear can own you, rob you of any joy in this life and any hope for the next. But Christ is not helpless against death—He is risen from the dead! He died only to break death's grip, and He has broken it for you! Death is now an enemy under His feet, and He uses it to deliver you from this dying world to everlasting life in heaven. You and I are no match for death—it is too great an enemy for us, and the devil will use it drive you into doubt and terror. But Christ says to you, "I died, and look! I broke back out of the grave. In baptism, I have joined you to My death and My resurrection. I will not forsake you. I will raise you up to everlasting life. Do not be afraid."

Christ has died and Christ is risen to deliver you from sin, death and devil; and if you are delivered from these enemies, then there is no reason to be afraid. You are helpless against them, but Jesus is not and

you are His. The only reason to be afraid is if you are not repentant of your sin—then you rightly ought to be afraid of God’s wrath. It is not that Christ is too weak to save you if you are impenitent, but that you have chosen to reject the salvation He gives. If you cling to your sins and reject His grace, then repent—or be very, very afraid.

But for the repentant people of God, there is no doubt: Christ’s death and resurrection make you a child of God and give you every good gift in Him. There is no need for fear.

Here is some more good news: you do not have to be fearless to be a Christian. Some will take Jesus’ words, “Do not be afraid,” and say, “Because a Christian shouldn’t be afraid, anybody who is afraid is not a Christian.” This is simply not true. You will still have fears in this life, because you’re still made of sinful flesh and tempted to doubt the Lord’s care for you. In that case, fear can serve a useful purpose: it will often show you where you need to repent of sin, that you might be forgiven and your faith strengthened.

When you feel guilt over your sin, a huge component of that is fear. Part of that is fear that others find out, because it would damage your relationship with them. Part of that is fear because your conscience is telling you that your sin offends God; and if you live a life offensive to God, then you no longer have His grace and favor. You have only His wrath and judgment. That’s big fear, and rightly so. Repent of your sin, for Christ has died and Christ is risen to deliver you from sin and hell. Having repented, do not be afraid. His blood covers all your sins. God holds nothing against you.

Fear will show the need for repentance when your will departs from the Lord’s. There will be many times that you are afraid that things will not turn out the way that you want them to, and you’re helpless to do more than you have about it. The fear indicates that it is time for you to examine yourself and ask if you’re truly praying “Lord, Thy will be done,” or if you are afraid that the Lord’s will is different from yours. It often is, you know; and the Lord often uses the ordinary and even hardship to accomplish what is best for us. So when you are afraid, there is a good chance it is because you’ve snatched your future out of God’s hands, even though you’re clearly aware that you’re quite limited in what you can do.

The Russians have a great saying that fits: “pray hard, and keep rowing.” In other words, you’re set free from sin and a beloved child of God, and God grants you strengths and skills and callings to do what you can. That’s the rowing part, for God uses you as His instrument for your good and the good of those around you. But above and beyond, commit all things to the Lord, trusting that He is your strength, your salvation and your deliverance. He works all things for your good: do not be afraid.

You may, for instance, fear insignificance. You want to be somebody, make a difference; but you feel trapped where you are and you fear that you will never break out. Perhaps you fear you’re only getting weaker. First, look around you because that is where God has put you to serve your neighbor. Your family is your first place to be a significant servant and evangelist. You are not insignificant by any means: God knows you by name, has given His Son to die for you, and uses you as His instrument where you are. Examine yourself, for you may well need to repent of resenting where God has put you—and that is the cause of your fear. Should career or other opportunities arise that do not contradict His Word, it’s time to row hard as you can if you like: but whether it pans out or not, you are in the Lord’s care, because Christ is risen for you. Do not be afraid.

It is the same wherever the devil tempts with fear—and there will always be temptations of fear: fear of not having enough, fear of loneliness and isolation, fear of risking hurt in loving others. All of these have potential to dominate your thoughts, to rule and ruin your lives. Worse, they have potential to make themselves cruel gods that demand your worship and give nothing back. Where such fears bully and say, “We are too great for you,” you speak of Christ. You say, “These things are too big for me, but they are not too big for my Savior. He is risen from the dead—He has conquered even death, and He will surely deliver me.” So where the devil would haunt you with fear, spite the devil by using that fear as a springboard to confess your sins of distrust to God.

And, rejoice. Jesus Christ has died for your sins, and Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Risen from the dead, He has grace and deliverance for you; and if He has already conquered sin and death and grave, there is nothing so great and fearful that He cannot save you. A blessed Easter to you all, dear friends. And do not be afraid: for Christ is risen indeed, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen