

Sermon on Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Jesus our Lord is risen from the dead! This is a *scary* thought, as well as a *joyful* one. Consider how the story is told this morning by Matthew. On that first Easter morning, while Roman soldiers guarded the tomb where Jesus' body lay, an earthquake struck. Earthquakes are frightening; they bring death and destruction. An angel of the Lord removed the stone, appearing like a bolt of lightning, which terrified the detachment of soldiers, who collapsed in fear and played dead before the angel. Easter began as a terrifying experience for those first human beings to witness it. Nothing like our present day hymns of praise, Easter egg hunts with children, and joyful cheers of "Christ is risen", which combine to take the scary edge off of the Easter story of a man who rose from the grave to live again. In most of our experience, such things only happen today in horror movies, but we have made a happy children's event out of the resurrection. Because the alternative terrifies us. What do we do with a man who has risen from the dead?

The story told in the original gospels is so different from the feelings we experience on Easter Sunday today. The context for Matthew's telling of the Easter story was life under the Roman Empire of death, who held onto power by force and terror, using the weapon of crucifixion to threaten any who dared oppose it. Romans executed common thieves, murderers, revolutionaries and terrorists, and left their hanging corpses rotting alongside highways in a grim warning to passers-by. *Do not dare to oppose Rome.* Matthew reminds us of the shadow of the corrupt regime of the puppet King Herod, which loomed over the ministry of Jesus. Herod the Great had sent soldiers to kill the infant boys of Bethlehem, and now his son had finally lived to see the promised Messiah dead, no longer a threat to his throne (or so it seemed). He was perhaps relieved at knowing his problem was finally solved. Jesus was now dead, securely buried in a tomb, sealed behind a great stone guarded by a detachment of Roman soldiers. Jesus' followers were too frightened to come anywhere near the tomb. The men hid out in the upper room, because of fear. Only a small group of women, who had followed him as disciples from the beginning in Galilee, dared come near, with spices to anoint his body, and their tears. That was the first Easter morning. It was nothing like today.

But what did this fearsome angel say to the faithful women who came to see Jesus' tomb, while the Roman soldiers lay like dead men? Like so many times in the gospels, like the angel said to shepherds outside of Bethlehem, the angel said, "*Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is*

not here; for he has been raised as he said. Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you.' So [the women] left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples." They had been released from their fear with a mission: to go and tell the other disciples. Along the way they met none other than Jesus himself, who simply said, "Greetings!" They kneeled and held his feet, worshipping him (what else would you do?). Then Jesus said "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

I'm glad to report that the women did hang on to their fear, at the same time that they ran off in joy to tell the others. Fear and joy are not mutually exclusive emotions! They can, and often do, exist simultaneously. Kind of like doubt and faith; having both at the same time is common! You can be joyful at the same time you are afraid of what is going on. Just as you are joyful, at the same time as you hold such doubts. Such were the emotions of that first Easter, for these first women witnesses. Fear, along with great joy, because Jesus was alive!

It seems to me that we share a lot of the context today with those first disciples, both male and female. We live in a land with powerful leaders, though we don't call any of them "Emperor" or "Caesar", there is plenty to fear from them. There is also plenty of injustice and fear of violence to go around, not only on a global scale in the Middle East and in North Korea, but also in our state, communities and neighborhoods. The "Mother of All Bombs" was just dropped on ISIS tunnels in Afghanistan. U.S. Navy vessels head toward the Korean coast, where North Koreans are testing nuclear weapons. Egyptian worshippers were blown up by suicide bombers during Palm Sunday worship last week. It's probably healthy to be afraid, for sometimes we have much to fear. It's not just Isis, terrorists on the other side of the world, which we may fear. It can be our own future, our own leaders, the choices we have to make, or our worries about our children.

We know how the characters in the Easter gospel reacted. The Roman soldiers were terrified, and played dead when the angel opened the tomb. Later, they were bribed by the Temple representatives, told to say that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body. The disciples stayed in hiding, and missed the resurrection. They were told of it by the women who came to the tomb despite their fear, and ran off joyfully to tell the others what they had seen and heard.

So we approach the Easter story of Jesus' resurrection today with fear and trembling, because our own fear of death and of the world around us is clear. If you don't approach the prospect of your own death, or that of your loved ones with some fear, it means you are in denial or not thinking clearly. And I have noticed the past several months how people in general seem to be living with a lot more

fear than usual. Several of us have experienced the death of loved ones in recent months. Many of us also are living with the painful news of loved ones suffering from cancer, dementia, or other illnesses that trouble us. So we approach this thing called faith, and the news that Jesus has already been raised from the dead and promises the same to us, with fear and trembling. That's if we are honest.

So what does Jesus say to you and me today? He says "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers and sisters that Jesus is alive, and will meet all of us in the days ahead." Then we go out of here, with fear alongside our joy. Because if it were only with joy, without fear as well as doubt, we wouldn't be honest. Then what kind of witnesses would we be? Would we be believed?

I just heard a sermon yesterday by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, president of the Lutheran World Federation. If there is a pastor who knows fear today, serving in a place that has been the center of religious strife for centuries, it is him. As he prepared his Easter sermon in Jerusalem, the city of the crucifixion and the resurrection, he had the sad news of the Palm Sunday massacre of our sisters and brothers in Egypt on his heart. He had the doubts and fears of living in the tensions of Palestinian and Israeli conflict, and the civil war in Syria just across the border. But he was uplifted in faith by remembering that Christian faith is not just based on assurance and certainty: doubts about faith, and the struggle to understand life in the midst of death are always with us. Peter denied Jesus three times; the Roman guards at the tomb were terrified by the resurrection, the disciples hid behind locked doors, and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ran from the tomb with "fear and great joy". This led Bishop Younan to preach the resurrection of hope and life, even in the midst of fear, and to proclaim the risen Christ. He said: *"In the midst of their confusion, the angel told the ones gathered at the tomb, "He is not here, He is risen!"*

In the midst of the bombings, Christ is risen!

In the midst of persecution, Christ is risen!

In the midst of violence and occupation, Christ is risen!

In the midst of poverty and sickness, Christ is risen!

In the midst of war, and the threat of war, Christ is risen!

And in the midst of our families, our communities, and our churches today, Christ is risen!"

He went on to say that "this is our hope, and we must cling to it. The message of Easter is not idealism. Christ's victory over sin, death and despair is the only hope that has kept Christians steadfast in this [Holy] land for two thousand years. It is the only hope that carried the saints of every age through trials, struggles, and persecutions. And it is the only hope that today will carry us through these confusing times in the Middle East and throughout the world. The

Good News of the resurrection gives Christians clarity and purpose, no matter where they are [Syria, Egypt, Korea, Europe or the United States], and no matter what the future brings. Jesus, our risen Lord, goes before us to lead the way – and the Way of Jesus is always the way of peace, justice, mercy, healing, reconciliation, respect for diversity [and all religions], and living together as one people of God.”

Therefore, Palestinian Christians will continue to be steadfast in our land, Bishop Younan says. So will Christians in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, South Korea, Europe and around the world. How about us, in the United States? We are called by Christ to continue to carry the message of resurrection in the face of all who promote a culture of death, with joy, despite our fears. In the midst of power struggles, political maneuvering, and the growth of extremism throughout the world – including America – we who follow Christ will only proclaim the culture of life and life abundantly, with full dignity for every human being, whatever their race, culture, ethnicity, gender or religion. We must resist the rattling of the sabers of war, and stop threatening others, because we know our Lord’s truth: that those who live by the sword will die by the sword, or the gun, or the bomb. We must oppose the calls to hatred and exclusion, and reconcile with one another, welcome the stranger, the immigrant and refugee, build bridges – not walls, and make our churches places of sanctuary and peace.

On this Easter feast, as we celebrate our Lord’s victory over death, in this 500th year of the Reformation of Martin Luther, let us trust that Jesus’ Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection have already liberated us by grace. We have been set free! We are not afraid! Despite all troubles and tribulations, let us go out from our churches and into the world with the joy of the resurrection, knowing that the risen Christ always goes before us. Let us encourage one another with the two thousand year old Easter greeting of Jerusalem: Hallelujah! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Salaam alaikum.** Amen.