

Easter Sunday – Year B
Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Mark 16:1-8

April 15, 2009

Faith

Pastor Paul Horn

Places of the Passion: the Empty Tomb – a place of life for you

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" ⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

No longer must consumers choose between high priced coffins for themselves or their loved ones, but... what artwork would you like on the exterior of your coffin? Check out www.artcaskets.com, and you'll find a coffin entitled, "The Race is Over." The description states, *The checkered flag, the trophy, the roar of the crowd, all serve to insure that every auto-racing fan will enjoy the high performance look of the Art Casket. Fairway to Heaven, there's no better way to celebrate the life of a golf enthusiast with an Art Casket that captures the magic of the early morning light on a breathtaking fairway.*

That's a novel idea, isn't it? The truth is, individualized coffins as personalized "final statements" are not so new after all. Many ancient cultures, including the Egyptians and Japanese, for instance, were masters of this practice. Tomb preparation began long before a person's death, with craftsmen engineering a sarcophagus to make a statement revealing what that person had accomplished in life, especially in preparation for impressively meeting the gods—at least that's what some Egyptians believed. There seems to be this same coffin confusion among many folks today — but not for us. This morning we will travel to a tomb. But it is not a giant pyramid, it is not filled with gold or priceless artifacts. It is empty. This unexpectedly empty tomb is God's final statement to a questioning world. But what does it mean for us today?

The sunrise was waking up their corner of the world, but these women were so tired, so exhausted, so emotionally drained from recalling the events of the past two days that had suddenly snatched away their Master's life. Look at their emptiness: arms full of spices to anoint a dead body, eyes full of tears, hearts full of disappointment and fear. Listen to their low expectations: "We won't be able to roll the stone away," says the mother of James. "I heard there are soldiers guarding the tomb; they will probably turn us away," sighs Salome. "Why did God let this happen?" sobs Mary Magdalene. You know that

empty, sinking feeling, like when your computer crashes. You know the feeling of hopelessness, like the Lady Cards playing against a team who had already beaten them twice in regular season — nobody expects to win. But when the droopy faces of these dreary women slowly tilted up to take their first look at the tomb, there were no guards standing watch, the stone was rolled away, and when the women shuffled into the tomb to investigate, they saw a young man sitting inside dressed in bright white.

“Don’t be alarmed,” (vs. 6) this angel told the women before they could drop their spices and run as if they had seen a ghost. With a bit of reassurance and a bit of rebuke, the angel announced, **“You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified”** (vs. 6). The half-hearted women came looking for Jesus, the humble carpenter’s son from Nazareth, not Jesus, the almighty Son of God who can do anything. They came looking for Jesus, the unjustly killed Rabbi, a victim of a political conspiracy, not the Lord of Life who had already demonstrated his power over death by raising dead people to life. No matter how much Jesus had told these women and all his followers that he would die an ugly death—but that death couldn’t harm him because he would rise again to life in three days—they still expected much less.

The angel lifted their heads and hearts back up - by pointing them to the place where a dead Jesus would be, but was not. **“He has risen! He is not here”** (vs. 6). There was nothing to be alarmed about, nothing to be afraid of. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! Ladies, now drop your spices (you need them no more!) and run for a better reason, to announce to the world that your Savior reigns over sin, death, and the grave, and Satan has been defeated, just as he said.

Do you have a hard time believing other people? “They’re building an Olive Garden in E-town!” Yeah right, I’ve heard that one before. This happens at your place of work, school, at home, among local, state and federal government politicians, we hear promises, and respond with a bit of skepticism.

Sadly, you and I do the same with our God, don’t we? You don’t always believe that he will do what he said he will do. For example, in Romans 8, God promises that he will make all things work out for the good of those who have been called by him. We tend to have low expectations of what our God can do, especially when there’s a possibility that we could lose our job, our retirement monies are gone, family life is...well, there’s some issues that need to be addressed, when your spouse is deployed overseas into combat, when a loved one is at death’s door. Lord, how could you possibly make this work out for my good?

Some may be skeptical of the future of our congregation. They moan, “We’ve always been a small storefront church... we’ll never get the new building built... we don’t have the finances... we’ll never grow with more souls with whom we can share God’s Word.” Really? What has God promised? Scatter the seed of the gospel, let his Holy Spirit do the work. For does he not promise - “My Word will not return to me empty without accomplishing my good purposes.” (Isaiah 55)

How do you think God feels when we treat him like this? How do you feel when people say of you, “I’ve heard you promise that before. I’ll believe it when I see it.” Disappointed? Frustrated? Don’t we rightly deserve a rebuke from our God, just as those women were scolded by the angel? Oh, much more than that, we deserve his punishment for not listening, for failing to trust in him, for not believing in him. Jesus once said, **“The Son of Man will send out his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** Will God really send his angels to do this? He ought to.

My dear friends, your Lord says to you today, “Go to the empty tomb. Listen to the angels tell the story.”

“He’s not here, just as he told you!” It sounds like that angel wanted to cuff those women up the backside of head. Hello! Wake up! How many times did he tell you these things must happen? Listen to my words and be comforted! **He was crucified....** that was a crucial part of his promise. It is necessary that I go to Jerusalem and be crucified. He told them that over and over again. Why? If those women and Jesus’ disciples would have recalled the Old Testament Scriptures they would have realized. Isaiah 53 says, **“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”**

Dear ladies at the tomb, all the bad, horrible stuff that you saw happen to Jesus, and all the stuff you didn’t see happen to him - the emotional suffering, the torments and pains of hell, the abandonment by his Father, the burden that weighed on his soul as the sins of the world were heaped on him. All of this you deserved, but he took it on himself in your place. He was crucified, past tense. But look! He’s not here! He’s risen!

The resurrection proves that Jesus did what he said he would do, to come to earth from heaven to live God’s commandments perfectly, to suffer and die to take the punishment the people of the world earned for themselves – death. Then he rose from the dead, so that he might bring eternal life to all who believe in him. He accomplished this for the world. That means for you and me. And he gives us these blessings through a special means.

A caterpillar spins its cocoon and takes its last look at the bright world for a long time. Its creator then transforms it from a slimy, little worm that crawls on the ground into a soaring, beautiful creature of the sky. It’s traditional in the Easter season to use the butterfly as a symbol of the physical transformation our bodies will undergo on judgment day. It’s also fitting to see in the butterfly our spiritual transformation, which has already taken place. The Apostle Paul explains, **“Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life”** (Ro 6:3,4). Through baptism, you have been given the benefits of Christ’s death – for your sins of failing to trust in him, for having low expectations of your God, he took the punishment

for your sins. Through baptism, you have been given the benefits of Christ's resurrection. Just as Christ was raised from death, so also you, through the washing with water and the Word, have been raised to a new life. Jesus' empty tomb means life for you – eternal life in heaven. Jesus' empty tomb means life for you - a new life right now.

Because there are some days when you and I... well, we wish we could have a new life, or a fresh start in certain areas of our lives. Maybe you'd like to redo the last four months of your life. 'Cause you know what happened on January 1st, 2009...you all made a New Year's resolution, and you were going to keep it. But you haven't. My dear friends, today is time for a new year's resolution – every day is time for a new start.

Everyday, go to the baptismal font, remember your baptism, and drown your sinful nature, with its fears, your sinful lack of trust, and allow the new person created in you at baptism to rise and live to serve Christ with joy. With this new life you will no longer fear the future, no longer will you doubt his Word, no longer will you wonder, "Will God make this work out for my good?" You know he will. You never have to question, "Will God take me to heaven?" Absolutely. For Christ's resurrection means new life for you.

So what kind of artwork do you want on your casket? How about the "Memories of the Hunt" model, *portraying remembrances of crisp, fall mornings and the excitement of opening day. This Art Casket features images by Mossy Oak.* Or how about "The Last Ride?" *This art casket captures the spirit of a wide-open throttle on Route 66, It's the perfect way to honor those touring enthusiasts who prefer wind in their hair, handlebars, and a dashed white line stretching into infinity.* I don't know about you, but I could care less about my "final statement" expressed by some cheesy overpriced artwork. As I lay dead in my coffin, I'd rather have the preacher talk about my Jesus, and how his death and resurrection guarantees that my lifeless corpse is not the end for me, but just the beginning. For at the empty tomb, you and I have new life. For He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen! Easter 2009