

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

When the same thing happens every time, you get used to it, you start to count on it. You expect your car to start every time. You expect spring to follow winter. You expect to hit traffic when you go to the Twin Cities or to Rochester. You came to church on Easter Sunday expecting to see lilies on the altar.

But sometimes the unexpected happens. A loved one shows up at your home, and you actually have time to spend with them. You were fishing for bass, and you landed a big northern pike instead. You expected a regular church service, but a sentence from the sermon opened your eyes, or a hymn verse put across a truth that moved you deeply.

According to today's Gospel lesson, the first Easter started out as expected. *"<sup>1</sup>On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb."* These women had been waiting since Friday afternoon. They were present to hear Jesus say, *"It is finished"* (John 19:30) and then call out in a loud voice, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"* (Luke 23:36). They saw Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus come to Golgotha and take the lifeless body of Jesus off the cross, wrap it up quickly, and lay it in Joseph's new, nearby tomb. Then they all went home to rest before the Sabbath started at sundown. Twenty-four hours later, on Saturday evening, as soon as the sun set, but while there was still enough light to walk, the women went shopping for burial spices—

myrrh and aloes (Mark 16:1). Now it was Sunday morning. It was time to give their Lord a proper burial. Everything was going as expected—for a trip to the cemetery.

But who are these women? We know some of their names: Mary, Salome, Joanna. These women had been dear friends of Jesus. They supported his ministry from their own money, preparing food daily and supplying garments as needed for Jesus and his disciples. These same women stood near the cross when most other disciples had deserted Jesus. Their loyalty in life now wanted to demonstrate itself in his death.

But they were going to a grave. Ugh! Does anyone like cemeteries? Well, maybe **our** cemeteries with their green grass, beautiful trees, landscaping, pretty flowers, and memorial stones. But deep down we know a cemetery is a place for dead bodies. Can we really spruce up death with gorgeous caskets, makeup, and pretty flowers? Could the women back then really beautify Jesus' brand-new tomb with spices? I'm not saying it's wrong to honor our dead. But let's be realistic about what a gravesite is. The tomb loaned to Jesus by rich Joseph from Arimathea held a battered, lifeless body lying on a cold stone slab. What a terrible end Jesus had endured! What a ghastly place for the women to visit their Lord!

No matter. These faithful friends would make the best of it. They would provide Jesus with some human dignity. They would lovingly clean the blood from

Jesus' body, gently sprinkle his body with the spices, snugly wrap his body with clean linen, tenderly place a burial cloth on his face, and leave to him rest in peace. Then they would return to a life that was going to be dreadfully different without Jesus.

That's what the women expected. If Luke ended his account here, we would have a picture of what life is like for people who find no reason to celebrate Easter, just moving through life, trying to make the best of it, creating happiness where they can, ignoring the gaping jaws of death lurking ten steps behind them.

But then something happened that the women did not expect: *"<sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb."* Who could possibly have beaten them out here this early? And who would have opened the grave? I doubt the women knew about the squad of Roman soldiers who had been posted on Saturday to make sure that none of Jesus' disciples crept in overnight, carted off the body, and then claimed that Jesus was alive (Matthew 27:62-66). Did the women see these soldiers? Were they still lying on the ground near the tomb, passed out with fright from having seen the angel who rolled back the stone to show that Jesus was already gone (Matthew 28:4)? Had the soldiers already blown past the women on their rush back into the city?

The empty tomb lay before the women. What was there to do but enter? They had

never seen a scary movie before—there was no audience yelling at the screen, "Don't go in there." So in they went, becoming the first humans to experience anything Easter. Can you see them feeling around by the dawn's early light for the body of the Lord Jesus in order to confirm what their eyes were trying to tell them? "It's gone! What happened to Jesus' body?" *<sup>4</sup>"While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men spoke the three words of truth that changed the course of history: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup>He is not here; **HE HAS RISEN!** Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup>'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"*

"Wait a minute, Pastor. Jesus' body would have been as cold as the stone slab it was lying on. Did you just say that a dead man literally came back to life?" Actually, the angels said it. And Jesus himself predicted it. Why do you ask? You're not having trouble believing in the bodily resurrection of Christ, are you? If so, consider life from the perspective that Jesus stayed dead. Do the facts add up? If Jesus didn't rise, then no one felt that earthquake when the angels came down to open up the tomb and speak to the women (Matthew 28:2). And the Roman soldiers, who weren't afraid of anything, shook and

became like dead men over nothing, and then lied about it. And all those women who claimed to see Jesus alive were delusional—what a misogynistic thought! And the eleven disciples marched across half the world for a lie. And all those Christian martyrs, whose only crime was refusing to put a pinch of incense on Caesar’s altar because they believed that the risen Jesus was their only Lord—all those Christian martyrs suffered horrible deaths for nothing. But we haven’t gotten to the worst consequence yet.

What are you going to do about your sin? Earlier we read what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins*” (1 Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection is trying to make this point: the heavenly Father put his stamp of approval on the redeeming work that Jesus accomplished on Good Friday (compare Romans 1:4 with Mark 17:5). A still-dead Jesus changes the meaning of “It is finished” from “All sins have been completely paid for” to “My life is finished. I’m done.” If Jesus is still dead, what are you going to do about your sin?

You can claim that sin isn’t as bad as the Bible says. You can go so far as to say that there is no Judgment Day. But then why should anyone try to do good? “Maybe ‘doing good’ is just a construct designed to encourage people to donate. Maybe crime does pay.” If everyone moves in the direction of thinking like this, we’re just a few steps away from

anarchy. You’ve seen footage of limited anarchy. Imagine total anarchy where the government isn’t able to curb crime anymore and the church is no longer teaching morality. Do you still want to claim that sin isn’t as bad as the Bible says? Listen to that scary sentence again: “*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*” Deep down inside we all know that sin is a big problem.

But sin isn’t the end of it. Sin leads to death (Romans 6:23). Death is another big problem. If Jesus is still dead, what hope do we have when it comes to funerals? “Well, as long as we remember our dead, they are still alive.” What?! Do they have a pulse? Can we hug them? Ok, ok, the idea is to find some comfort at the death of a loved one. But let’s trace the idea of “we will always remember them in our heart” to its end. How long will it be until we die and stop remembering our dead? How many people do you remember from 1819? Are the people from 1819 finally dead because no one remembers them anymore? There is no real comfort in telling others, “As long as we remember our dead, they are still alive.” No wonder so many people won’t go to funerals or get ready for their own passing from this life. How can anyone face the temporal finality of death without the promise of Jesus Christ ringing in their ears: “*Because I live, you also shall live*” (John 14:19).

If we have no resurrection to look forward

to, then what is the point of living out the rest of this life? Why do we bring children into this world? Why even try to make this world a better place? Now I'm wondering if this is why there are so many grouchy people, or road raged, or depressed, or anxiety ridden people. Are they trying to make it through life without the risen Jesus in their thought processes?

But we have one more step in this line of thinking to trace. What if there really is a judgment that we must all face the moment after our death, and there is no risen Savior to stand beside us? What are you going to tell the Judge about the things you knew were wrong and did anyway? How will you answer when he says: "I gave you my Word so that you could hear it week after week after week. Why did you neglect my Word so often?"

Well, that was just plain ugly. Life without Jesus' resurrection ssssstinks! How valuable the apostle Paul's message in 2 Timothy 2:8? "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.*" Jesus really did rise from the dead, with his same physical body, albeit glorified (Philippians 3:21). The evangelist Luke was reporting the facts that he garnered from interviewing eye witnesses. There were real angels who opened Joseph's now-slightly-used tomb in order to show that Jesus' body was no longer there. Real angels gently chided real women for seeking the living among the dead, and assured them; "HE HAS RISEN!" The women fled the tomb and

ran into Jesus, who showed himself alive to them (Matthew 28:8-10). The ten disciples and others met with Jesus that evening (John 20:19ff). Jesus really did commission us to take the message of 'sins forgiven through faith in him' to the whole world (Luke 24:46-48). There really is a place in heaven waiting for you believers because none of your sins are being held against you. Your life has purpose: you have the rest of one lifetime to learn as much as you can about this Savior God who has washed you clean. And then you get to put God's teachings into practice in your daily life and see how serious he is about blessing those who obey him with a happy heart. You get to pass on the Bible's truths to others, like your children and your friends, before you die and face the Judge with the living Jesus standing right next to you as your defense attorney. This is the same Jesus who has promised to raise all the dead—believers and unbelievers alike—and to give eternal joy to all who count him Savior. You can even plan your own funeral with joyful hope, so that it proclaims to those who attend it: Christ has risen from the dead as the certain sign that you too will rise from the dead. What a great way to comfort those who gather to remember you!

Easter is our Lord's way of declaring that our sin has been forgiven (see Romans 4:25). Repent! Turn to Jesus for forgiveness! "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.*"