

Sermon – April 12, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “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 they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Good morning. It is Easter morning. Normally on Easter morning I would start the service by calling out “Christ is Risen” and wait for those gathered to respond. This morning, I am going to ask that we do that electronically. When I call out “Christ is Risen,” please go to the comment line and type your response. Ready? Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! I want to thank the band for all of their support during these weeks of online worship. They have been a blessing. Thank you, Barbara, for working to bring music into our online worship. Thanks to everyone who is live with us this morning and who will join us later in the day. Christ is Risen! He is Risen in deed!

Let’s spend a few minutes this morning and join Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they go to the tomb. Let’s join with these two women who are witnesses to the events of the first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have gone to the tomb, not to care for

Jesus' body but just to be closer to where he was laid to rest on Friday. They are returning to be as close as they can to his resting place. They know where it is as they witnessed the body being laid there. They also know that a guard has been placed and that the tomb is sealed with a very large stone. They saw it rolled into place when the tomb was closed. They know they cannot get into the tomb or past the guards, but they can go and see the place where Jesus is laid. They can simply be present in that place. And so very early, as the first light begins to come into the sky, the new light of a new day, on this the first day of the week they have journeyed to the garden to find the tomb. They can see the tomb and the guards. And then, suddenly, there is an earthquake, and an angel descends from heaven, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. At his appearance, fear has spread through all present. The guards are lying on the ground paralyzed in fear. The two women are filled with fear at this sight.

And then the angel begins to speak to the women, not to the guards. He tells the women, "Do not be afraid." They are released from the fear that has overwhelmed them at the appearance of this divine messenger. Their description of his clothes being as white as snow are the words in the New Testament describing a divine messenger, an angel. With these words, the women are able to move, to speak, and to look. The angel continues to speak. He tells them, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." This messenger from God knows why the women are present at this early hour. They have come looking for Jesus who was crucified. The angel also tells them key information about Jesus, "He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said." Jesus has been raised? Jesus is alive? How can this be? How can we believe this news? How can these women believe this news? Don't miss the last words of the angel's message, "As he said." These women have also heard Jesus' words. They also have been with him and have heard him speak of being raised. These women are disciples of Jesus. They have heard Jesus speak of being raised. They did not understand what he meant then, but now, with his death, those words bring new insight. The angel has now reminded them of Jesus' words in the context of a tomb that is no longer sealed, a stone that has been rolled away and guards present but lying on the ground in fear. This tomb is open. The angel invites them to see an empty tomb and then tells them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee; and there you will see him. They are invited to come and see where Jesus lay, to come and see that the tomb is empty. They are invited to be witnesses to the

absence of Jesus' body that is no longer in the spot where three days ago they saw it laid in death. Now his body is gone, the tomb is empty. Jesus has been raised from the dead.

The presence of the angel is key to understanding what has happened at the tomb. God has sent a messenger to tell these women what has happened to the body of Jesus. These witnesses do not go to the tomb and find Jesus' body gone and come back and tell the disciples the tomb is empty. Not only have they seen the empty tomb, they have been visited by an angel and given words to help them understand what it means that Jesus' body is not in the tomb. They have not been left to develop their own ideas of what an empty tomb means. God has told them what the empty tomb means. Jesus is alive. He is risen.

These two women do as the angel tells them and then leave the empty tomb quickly with fear and great joy. The fear is from being in the presence of a divine messenger. The joy is at the empty tomb they have witnessed and the message from God they have received, Jesus is alive. We should remember an earlier visit of an angel to shepherds who proclaimed to them the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem. We should remember the joy of the shepherds and how they went to tell others of Jesus' birth. These women have been led to the tomb this early morning so that another angel might tell them the good news of the resurrection of Jesus.

Notice that the women are running as they leave the tomb. They are in a great hurry to find the disciples and share this good news. And as they run, they meet Jesus. I love the way that Jesus greets these women. Hello. Nothing special about his greeting. It is as if being alive is expected. Jesus is saying, "I am alive!" Mary Magdalen and the other Mary see Jesus, recognize Jesus, go to him, fall at his feet, and touch him. Jesus is real. If he can be touched, he must be real. And then they worship him. These women's understanding of the news the angel shared with them is clearer and it will become clearer still with time and more meetings with Jesus. All of Jesus' teaching will become clearer in light of the news given to these two witnesses on this early Sunday morning. Jesus sends them on, telling them, "Do not be afraid: go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

This is the first of many encounters that Jesus' followers will have with him over the next 40 days. He will appear to the disciples and followers first in Jerusalem and then in Galilee. As the angel said, "He has been raised from the dead." Jesus has been resurrected.

We have the witness of these two women to an empty tomb and the message of the angel from God that explains that the tomb is empty because Jesus is resurrected. We have the witness

from these two women that they have seen Jesus, touched Jesus, and worshiped Jesus, but what does resurrection mean? What does this mean to us as followers of Jesus? We have seen Jesus suffer and die for our sins on the cross, but what does the resurrection mean for us? Years ago, the famous theologian and church doctor, Thomas Aquinas, summarized the necessity of the resurrection. Let me share the points of that summary this morning. First, justice required that the humbled be exalted. Jesus humbled himself and died on a cross, but the end of his humility is not death, but exaltation. Second, by his resurrection, faith in his divinity is allowed to begin. We see this with the two women as they worship Jesus on Easter morning. They have begun to understand Jesus is God. We can have faith that Jesus is God and will deliver us from our sins because he has been resurrected. He has been raised from the dead. He has the power to take up his life again, and will do the same for those who have faith in him. Third, because Jesus is alive, we have hope that as believers we too will rise again. We will all die, but for those who believe in Jesus as their savior, because he lives, we too will live. Fourth, by the power that raised Jesus from the dead, we too may die to sin and walk in the newness of life. In this resurrection power, we are set free from the bondage to sin. As John Wesley says, sin no longer reigns within our hearts. And the fifth and final point is that through the resurrection, God's saving work on the cross is confirmed. We can have assurance through the power of a risen Lord that what was done on the cross is confirmed as complete, and that all that is necessary for our salvation is in place. That is a short summary of what Jesus' resurrection means for us as believers.

Now I understand those are theological points about the resurrection. Let's take another minute and look at what those theological concepts mean to us as we live in the here and now of an in-breaking kingdom of God. You see, if we think about what it means when we say, "Christ is Risen!" and reply, "He is Risen Indeed," we will discover it means more than just knowing what the response is to that call on Easter morning. We are Easter people and we live in the light of a resurrected Lord. It is through the perspective of an empty tomb and our lives lived in that perspective that we become changed people, people of the resurrection. Our careers begin to have not a short-term perspective, but an eternal perspective. Our plans for retirement take on eternal goals. We have new priorities, a hunger for God's will, a new priority for the use of our time and finances, and a whole new concept for what success is for our lives. Our marriages become a covenant where we share life with a fellow disciple of Jesus with whom we seek to

live and support in order to fulfill God's calling as individuals and couples. Who we are becomes new in the light of the resurrection. We also face struggles even in the light of the resurrection. Whether it is our illness, the illness of our parents, the illness of our child, the death of our child, or our own sudden battles with cancer or the COVID-19 virus, we are able to face all of these struggles, any struggle, in the light of a resurrected Lord. We are people not with a view for the moment but people whose lives are refocused by the hope of eternal life. We live in our struggles not as people without hope, but as those who focus on eternity with a risen Lord. The battles are just as real, the pain is just as great, but the endpoint is radically different for us with a risen Lord. Because Jesus lives, we can face tomorrow with a hope and faith for eternity.

As Easter people, we are those who live our lives with a focus on what the resurrection means. Our goal in living is to be filled with this same power that brought Jesus back from the dead. When we are living as people with resurrection power, we have the strength to accomplish anything to which Jesus calls us – keeping our tempers controlled, being faithful to our commitments, overcoming addictions, maintaining a loving presence as we walk with a parent exhibiting increasing dementia, walking with a chronically ill child, living with cancer, losing a loved one. The list of struggles is long, but whatever life holds for us, an empty tomb and a risen Lord give us the power to live with a focus on eternity, on a life reconciled to God, through Jesus, in the power and strength of the resurrection.

Two women went to the tomb early on a Sunday morning and came back with fear and great joy, news of an empty tomb, words from an angel, and a witness to a resurrected Lord. The world changed that morning and we can change today if we will believe in the risen Lord. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Pray with me: Father, thank you for those who have the courage to go to a tomb they cannot even get close to and yet become witnesses to a risen Lord. Guide us, Lord, to encounter you as our Lord, as our Messiah. Lord, fill us with resurrection power that we might be changed into people who live as you would have us live. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.