

Sermon – Matthew 28:1-10
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Grace Lutheran Church
Easter – Year A
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“Running on Empty”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

1. It is not uncommon for me to wake in the morning and grab my phone to see what’s been going on in the world. What’s happening in politics? How are the markets moving? Who won the late baseball games played on the West Coast? I can’t wait until that last question is relevant again. Benjamin Franklin was a habitual morning news-checker as well, although he had to make do without a smart phone and reliable Wi-Fi. He was interested in a different sort of news, having once said, “I wake up every morning at nine and grab for the morning paper. Then I look at the obituary page. If my name is not on it, I get up.” It’s a good line, but one that takes on new meaning in the midst of a global pandemic. While we presumably know whether or not we ourselves are still alive, do we not wake in the morning and check in to see what death has been up to in the night? How many people have died of COVID-19 around the world? In the U.S.? Has it reached my community yet? My family? Will it come for me? We follow projections and prognostications, calling it good news if only tens of thousands die, not hundreds of thousands. We speak of death in the same way we buy our groceries these days. In bulk.
2. In a pandemic or not, death is dependable. Efficient. It shows no partiality. It will come for each of us. So it is the most natural thing for us to check in on its progress, to review its work. This is what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, likely the mother of James, were up to that Sunday morning long ago. Jesus, their friend and teacher, had been put to death just days earlier,

another victim ground down under the relentless Roman thumb. Death had come to their circle, their family. They go to the tomb. Matthew doesn't seem to think the "why" matters. He makes no mention of tending to the body. Perhaps they simply wanted to go to the grave of a loved one. Who among us hasn't done the same? But this much is clear to the Marys: Jesus is dead, his name already published in the Jerusalem obituaries. He will not be getting up again.

3. And then, creation shakes on its foundations. The stone is rolled back. An angel, dazzling, appears. But Jesus? He's already gone. The tomb, designed to contain the certain stench of death, already empty. The angel speaks: "Do not be afraid. Jesus is not here, for he has been raised." And just like that, in the twinkling of an eye, the repeating news cycle is upended, reversed. Where once there was only the unending litany of bad news, of death, now this Jesus has somehow escaped its iron grip. He who was dead is alive, and nothing will be the same. Death has been undone.
4. Death may show no partiality, but God, in response, is not simply impartial – God shows impartiality paired with love, and *that* is an unstoppable force. To be sure, death continues to work in the world. A pandemic might heighten our awareness of this fact, but it's never far from the surface. But now, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, our death has been transformed. While we know that death, in one sense, is still in our future, we hear the proclamation today that the power of death is in the past. We live now, as Martin Luther said, not with one foot already in the grave but with one foot already out of it, moving from death to life. This goes against all evidence to the contrary, but that's just it. Our lives are hidden in Christ's life, St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, just as Jesus hid himself in our death.
5. The resurrection of Jesus does not erase his death from the record. Crucifixion remains the other side of the resurrection coin. We need to die

before we can live, and in Christ we've gotten on with it. Yearning for a false life that looks to what Paul calls the things of earth instead things above, we cling to the ways of death, seeking our own good and gain at the expense of those around us. We remember our baptism daily because the old Adam or Eve in each of us is such a good swimmer. Last night our family celebrated the Easter Vigil at home, as did many of you. We read the Easter proclamation and heard the stories of creation and exodus, of dry bones and fiery furnace, recalling the history of salvation. We moved to the Affirmation of Baptism, beginning with the threefold renunciation. None of the congregants in the Lyle living room had any hesitation renouncing either the devil or the powers of this world. It's easy, really, to renounce evil outside of oneself. But then I asked, "Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?" Torsten, our six-year-old son, looked me full in the face and said, "No!" Nervous chuckling ensued, and I thought – not for the first time – this is what we get for naming our son for the Norse god of thunder. After a beat, he repented and said, "Oh, okay." Laughter all around, but the point was made. We will cling to the ways of sin and death as long as we can, for their grip on us is strong.

6. Or it was. Now it's not. For Christ is risen and our lives are hidden in him. Perhaps this is even more difficult to see this year. Our lives feel shrunken, contained. Entombed. And that's for those of us living in privilege, those of us who have homes to call our own, resources to sustain us, life and health still coursing through our veins. All the more reason to listen to the angel: Do not be afraid. Christ was dead, and now he's not. *You* were dead. And now you're not. All that's left in the tomb is our sin, left for dead, and death itself, rendered powerless. You are alive. There is not a pandemic in the world that can undo this reality. You are alive, and in Christ you will find life not just on both sides of the pandemic but on both sides of the grave. The God who shows no partiality has written your name in the book of life, and that is news that is good.

7. In the seeming emptiness of this year's celebrations, and in the real emptiness of this sanctuary this morning, we find signs of hope, stirrings of life. Easter begins in emptiness. The tomb is empty, and death is an empty shell. Jesus is on the loose and that's where he sends Mary and Mary, these women of faith, to go and to tell. Yes, we long to be together. And we will be. One day back in this room, and another day forever when we will lift our eternal alleluias around the throne of the Lamb. But for today, for now and in this time, you are right where you need to be. Christ is with you, wherever you are, speaking life and love, peace and hope. Christ is with you, using you to bring life and love, peace and hope, to others. The tomb is empty and the world, once filled with death, is now shot through with life. Do not be afraid. Whatever is in the morning paper, the news is good from here on out. Jesus lives and death is dead. Get up. Go, and proclaim the good news that this world so desperately needs. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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