

Sermon – Mark 16:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
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Grace Lutheran Church
Easter – Year B
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“Which Way Did He Go?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

1. We go once more to the place we know all too well. With Mary, Mary, and Salome, we go to the tombs. As they had been reminded on Friday afternoon, hopes can be dashed in a moment. Death breaks in. We go, and find ourselves in Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, in Los Angeles and Boulder, where death has broken in these past weeks. We go, and find ourselves in Memphis, 53 years ago today, recalling the too-soon death of Martin Luther King, Jr. We go, and find ourselves in the midst of this ongoing pandemic, which has now claimed the lives of more than 550,000 Americans. Last year at Easter, that number had just crossed 20,000. That seemed like so many people; that *is* so many people. We could not yet know what the coming year would bring. Death rolls on, finding us where we are. We still live, of course, but the world is dimmed when viewed through grief; it is a landscape bleak and barren. We go, with Mary, Mary, and Salome, despairing but certain. They had hoped for so much more for Jesus, for themselves. But the body needs tending, so they go.
2. And then, as the rising sun dapples the garden, a wonder: The stone had been rolled away. A young man (an angel?) speaks. Jesus is not here. He has been raised. These women had watched Jesus suffer and die when the men had fled. They had watched as Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus' body in the tomb

and sealed it up. Heartbreaking but certain. Jesus was dead. And now he is not? The one place they were certain they could find him was the one place he wasn't. He wasn't in the tomb. He isn't dead. He has gone on ahead into Galilee, into all creation. Out of death and into life. The one certain thing was certain no more. Who can blame Mary, Mary, and Salome for fleeing in terror and keeping their mouths shut? To be honest, awed silence is not the worst response to an unprecedented inbreaking of the holy into our broken world. Certainly, they told their friends eventually of this great good news: We went to tend a corpse and instead were confronted by mystery and promise. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

3. We are so accustomed to death that the resurrection is hard to believe. For as much energy as we put into avoiding death, at least it's dependable. Resurrection doesn't fit our view of reality. If this is true for those of us in the twenty-first century, it was true for those in the first century, too. The Christians in Corinth were struggling to believe in the resurrection from the dead, that Jesus who had been buried was alive. Neither their doubt nor ours changes the reality of the proclamation, thanks be to God. For without the resurrection, as Paul writes later in this letter, our faith and hope have been in vain, our sin remains unforgiven, and we of all people are most to be pitied. But Christ *is* risen; he is the first fruits of the resurrection and in him our hope is secure. We go with Mary, Mary, and Salome to the tomb. Instead of tending to death we are called into life, following this Jesus who joins us in our grief and sorrow but will not leave us there. Always, always, he calls us forward into newness of life. As the sun rises on Easter, Christ breaks forth over the horizon of death, revealing life abundant and eternal, in this world and the next.
4. Our resurrection hope is something that can neither be demonstrated empirically nor reduced to symbol or metaphor. Resurrection, first for Christ and then through Christ for us, is simply now the singular fact of our reality.

Resurrection is the enactment of God's identity, for God is the One whose love for us and this whole world is stronger than sin or brokenness or death. Death may be dependable, but not when compared to God. God we can depend on, for God the Father sent the Son to live and to die for us, and then to live again.

5. A bit earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus engaged the Sadducees in a debate about resurrection. God, Jesus declares, is the God of the living, not the dead. God, after all, declared that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not that God was their God. For God to be God, life needs to triumph over death. God will stop at nothing to make sure life wins out. Earlier this week, I was reminded by the preacher Kathryn Schifferdecker of a book I read in seminary by John Polkinghorne, the English theoretical physicist and Anglican priest. In *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity*, Polkinghorne writes, "The point is that if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob mattered to God once – and they certainly did – they matter to [God] forever. The same is true of you and me. God does not just cast us off as discarded broken pots, thrown onto the rubbish heap of the universe when we die. Our belief in a destiny beyond our death rests in the loving faithfulness of the eternal God ... a God who will not allow anything good to be lost." Dr. Polkinghorne died last month, secure in the same hope that has sustained Christians since the women went to the tomb and found it empty; in the same faith that Paul shared with the Corinthians; in the same grace that us sustained us here at Grace throughout the years. God is a God of life, a God who loves us so much that Jesus Christ was willing to suffer for our sin and enter into our death to bring us with him back out the other side. God loves us, broken though we are, dead though are on our own. God simply will not allow anything to be lost, no matter the cost. Where is Christ? He is not here in death. Where did he go? On ahead of you, into life.

6. After Easter services a few years ago, Pastor Johansen and her family were invited to join the Jones family for Easter dinner. The pastor and her family were delighted at the invitation; the Joneses were well known for their generous hospitality and their excellent cooking. Five-year-old Timmy, the pastor's son, went through the elaborate smorgasbord line and sat down with a plate full of good things. He immediately picked up his fork and started to eat. Mr. Johansen gently tugged at his arm, whispering, "You can't start eating yet, we haven't prayed." "But Dad," Timmy responded, "we don't have to pray today." "Timmy, you know we always pray before we eat at home," Timmy looked his dad straight in the eyes: "Well, yeah. We *have* to pray at home when you cook. But we don't have to pray here; Mrs. Jones knows what she's doing!" I considered telling this joke in the first person, but Easter Sunday doesn't seem like the best day to test the limits of my family's good nature.

7. We still pray, of course, even on Easter. But we do so in praise and thanksgiving of the God who has delivered us from sin and death and all that could truly harm us; the God who sets before us now the generous, abundant, excellent feast of life, set by the Savior who knows what he's doing. We come this morning with Mary, Mary, and Salome. With Paul and Peter. With all the saints who have gone before us. We come to a place that looks the same, only to discover that everything has changed. God would no longer abide losing anything God had made. God would not let death have the last word. And so, through the suffering and shame of Jesus' passion and death, we find ourselves in a brand-new world. Like the women, we tremble in a fearful awe. And then we exhale and laugh at the wonder of it all, this divine lark of grace. Christ has joined you in your suffering and sorrow, but he will not leave you there. He has gone on ahead and beckons you to follow, sheep chasing their shepherd over verdant hills into the joy and freedom of abundant life. God is the God of life, and life has won out through Christ. You who were dead in sin are alive in Christ. Let us marvel silently. Let us praise

resoundingly. Let us proclaim with faithful hope. Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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