

Easter 2024

“The Day of Days”

Text: Luke 24:1-9

*He is arisen! Glorious word! Now reconciled is God, my Lord; The gates of heaven are open.
My Jesus did triumphant die, and Satan's arrows broken lie,
Destroyed - hell's direst weapon.
Oh, hear what cheer!
Christ victorious riseth glorious,
Life He giveth--
He was dead, but see, He liveth. Amen (TLH #189)*

Dear Christians, this is the day where our Lord finds us lying prostrate at the foot of the Good Friday cross, mourning over our sins and the damage we have inflicted, and gently takes us by the hand and says, *“Rise, dry your tears. I am alive and your sins are forgiven.”* This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

The text that will guide our thoughts and fill our hearts on this most hallowed morning is found recorded in the Gospel of Luke, the 24th Chapter, beginning with the First Verse:

ESV(Luke 24:1-9) *But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.*

This is God’s Word. In humble and joyful thanksgiving, we ask our God to bless us through these words as we pray, **“Sanctify us – that is, set us apart for holy purposes – by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”** Amen.

Let’s compare days. Has there ever been a more glorious day in the history of the human race? What about the first day of creation, when God by the power of his Word alone brought time and space into existence? Or the fourth day of creation, when God called into existence all that we see in the sky, scattering stars and planets and entire galaxies across unimaginable distances? Clearly not, for we ruined that perfect creation by our sin and it will one day be rolled up like a scroll. Not so this day, for it will shine in all its glory for all eternity. What about the Last Day – God’s great Day of Judgment when Christ will return in power and glory, attended by rank upon rank of mighty angels, and all the dead will be summoned from their graves? No again, for without *this* day, *that* day would hold only terror and foreboding. Without *this* day, we would have nothing to look forward to but God’s immutable sentence, **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”**

There is no greater day. This is the day of days. Treasure it as that which it truly is. Let it fill you continually with the joy and comfort that only this day can provide. Jesus Christ is risen today! Hallelujah!

Too often we take for granted even the great truths of our faith. Too often we assume that even the greatest and most precious elements of our Christian faith are well known to all. To assume that the true meaning of Easter Sunday is known to all is to condemn countless souls to the ignorance of unbelief. We are even fully capable of robbing *ourselves* of the full meaning and importance of this day if we fail to consider and internalize. So this morning we give voice to the hope that is in us by reexamining just what exactly is the true meaning, the value, the importance of Easter. We remind ourselves why, in other words, this is the day of days – the greatest of all Christian holidays – and why we place such joyful emphasis on this sacred morning.

The majesty of this day is really all about finality and completion. Easter is God the Father's final answer to the question of man's sin and to the dominance Satan held over all fallen sinners. Most days require the day or days that followed. Christmas was just the beginning of Jesus' long and tortured journey. Palm Sunday was just the beginning of the end. Maundy Thursday required the sacrifice of Good Friday. Not so this day. Jesus offered the sacrifice on Good Friday, but the tomb was the great and final test, established by God himself. Had Jesus remained in the tomb past the third day, all creation would have thereby been given notice that he had failed in his mission to provide the satisfactory payment for our sins. Had the body of Jesus lain in the tomb on the fourth day following his death, God's decree would have been known: *"The debt of sin remains. All mankind stands condemned."* If, on the other hand, the tomb was empty on that third day, then too God's decree over against sin would also be known: *"Not guilty! Payment received in full."* That's how and why Easter serves as the final chapter in the great, epic struggle between Jesus and Satan. The fact that the tomb was empty stands as irrefutable evidence that Satan's power over sinful mankind has been broken – for every single sinner and for all time and eternity. The barrier that separated the sinner from his God has been removed forever. God the Father has declared the sin debt for every single sinner to have been paid in full by Jesus Christ.

That is the meaning of Easter morning and the empty tomb. Jesus Christ, our Champion, our Substitute, has triumphed over sin, death, and Satan. Nothing is left to do. *His* victory is *our* victory – as also the Scriptures teach: ***"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."***^{ESV}(1 Corinthians 15:57) Again the Holy Spirit writes through Paul in that same 15th Chapter, ***"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."***^{ESV}(1 Corinthians 15:17-20)

This is indeed the source for Christian joy on this great day; yet that is not to say that all understand, nor that all have always understood. Having come to know and believe, our time of grace on this earth is lengthened for precisely this reason. You and I have been called to dispel the confusion that still today surrounds Jesus Christ, the meaning of the empty tomb, and the pure simple gospel of salvation through faith in him alone.

Satan has been enormously successful in clouding these great truths, in sowing confusion among the masses. This confusion not only identifies our calling, it is anything but new. Confusion reigned during and for a time after the original Easter morning. In our text we find obvious evidence, first in the form of a simple question asked by a heavenly angel of the women who had come to the tomb, expecting to there find and anoint the dead body of their Lord. They found angels instead; angels who asked simply, ***"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"*** Easter morning was nothing like the women expected. Nor did the message of the angels dispel their doubts and questions. The angels explained: ***"He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."*** The women, upon hearing the words of the angels, ***"remembered Jesus' words,"*** yet not even then did either the women or the disciples whom they then told immediately understand the significance of the empty tomb.

The question of the angels was absolutely fitting and appropriate – as one would certainly expect from holy angels. Their question exposed the silliness of the task the women had so dutifully undertaken – the anointing of Jesus' body. They came looking for death and found only life. Jesus had made no secret of either his death or his resurrection. Nor did he cleverly disguise his words, revealing them only in parables or mysterious allusions or insinuations.^{ESV}(**Matthew 17:22-23**) ***As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.*** It's not hard to figure out just where the disciples stopped listening, which is how confusion is often born. They would not have been ***"greatly distressed"*** had they not stopped listening at ***"they will kill him."*** The ***"and he will be raised on the third day"*** evidently didn't register.

The angels obey their Lord without question, without hesitation, without reservation, and without doubt. That is exactly why we pray, *“Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”* When the women heard the angel ask *“Why do you seek...?”* their human logic answered, *“Why not look for our dead Lord here?”* They had seen the Lord Jesus die. No one that was there doubted the fact. The thrust of the soldier’s spear would have been a killing blow in and of itself had Jesus still been alive. The Centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail was well acquainted with death. He himself assured the governor that Jesus was not only dead but had been for some time. There simply was no doubt, and the women had been there to see all. They had also witnessed Jesus’ burial by Joseph and Nicodemus. They took careful note of where the body – the *dead* body – had been laid.

The point here is that the angels asked their question to these women, and it would have been most natural for them to answer, *“We saw Jesus die, and here his body was laid. Why not look here?”* Logical enough, but why then did the angels ask as they did? Why ask such a question when the answer must have been obvious.

The answer is found in the difference between man and angel, and in the very different approach to God’s Word. For sinful man, the truth is often hidden by our own expectations of truth. To the women, that which was obvious and therefore *true* was that which they saw. To the angels, that which was obvious was that which Jesus had *said*. The angels recognized the absolute power and authority of their God, and the utter certainty of his Word. They understood that the very laws of nature held no sway over the One who had created those laws. The angels were therefore in no way influenced by the physical death of Jesus – an event they too witnessed. Jesus had said that he would be raised on the third day, and that then became absolute, immutable truth for every angel. Jesus was going to die, because he said so. He was then going to rise from the dead, also because he said so. There was then, to the angels, absolutely no possibility that Jesus would be found among the dead on the third day. Such a thing was simply not possible *because he had said that he would be raised*.

Make this very personal. You and I tend to walk as did those women – guided by our own fears, our own logic, our own experience. What we *want* is to walk like the angels, in absolute unshakable confidence in God’s Word and promise. Anything less robs us, in part or in whole, of the joy and comfort of this day of days. It robs us, in part or in whole, of the peace of knowing that we exist under the continual care and protection of our Savior-God. It robs us, in part or in whole, of the certainty of the heaven Jesus has prepared for us. The empty tomb is itself evidence that we have a Savior whose word can be trusted, whose word deserves our full acceptance without doubt and without reservation.

What form then is this trust to take in us, his mortal servants? What, we ask ourselves on this Easter morning, is the best and noblest form this unquestioning and uncompromising reliance should take in our lives? The answer is that the very Savior who can be trusted to keep his word about rising from the dead, can certainly also then be trusted when he says to us, ***“God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son; that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*** This is the same Lord and Savior who said in John 14:19, ***“A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also.”*** Jesus has promised eternal life in heaven for every single sinner who trusts in him as Lord and Savior. He has promised that ***“whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”*** As the angels believed and acted upon Jesus’ words of promise without question, hesitation, or doubt, so we too honor our God *best* by relying upon these promises with equal conviction.

Good Friday taught us something about the horrible consequences of our sin. The empty tomb now teaches us something about God’s mercy and love, of the full and complete payment for sin made by Jesus Christ. On this sure promise we entrust our eternal futures. Though human expectation might fear God’s vengeance on the Day of Judgment, the declaration of the empty tomb assures us of forgiveness and reconciliation. Our time of mourning is at an end. Rejoice and celebrate on this day of days. Your sins are forgiven and your Savior lives. Amen.