

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day

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Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 28:1-10 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. **3** His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. **4** The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. **6** He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. **7** Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **9** Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. **10** Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

"Victorious!"

+ Christ is risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia! +

They found themselves smack in the middle of a struggle of epic proportions. Napoleon came to power in France when things were a chaotic. He quickly strengthened the finances and straightened out the bureaucracy. After raising a large, well-trained army he turned his sights to France's neighbors. Napoleon was able to subdue most of the major powers in Europe before overextending himself in Russia. Pushed back and defeated by a coalition of forces, Napoleon was forced into exile on an island off the coast of Italy. But the threat of Napoleon's military might and strategic battle genius was kept in check very long. He escaped his exile after less than a year, gathered supporters, and resumed power in 1815.

A coalition headed by England formed quickly to prevent Napoleon from reestablishing control over the continent of Europe. They met at a decisive battle near the town of Waterloo in Belgium. The British had high hopes for their army under the command of the Duke of Wellington. The stakes were so high the citizens of every country were waiting anxiously for news of the outcome of this critical battle.

Since there were no reporters on location to record the events and no internet to broadcast results on YouTube or Twitter, they had to rely on even less reliable forms of communication than the internet. One account without much historical support details how the British devised a system of lights that would send signals similar to morse code across the channel back to the island. Right after the battle, a message came back: "WELLINGTON DEFEATED..." and then a fog bank rolled across the channel to block any more

communication. The people of England were heartbroken. Their respected commander and their imposing army had apparently been beaten. Their side had lost. Hope was gone.

There's only one problem with that sadness and despair in their hearts. They hadn't gotten the full message. When the fog finally blew away the lights across the channel continued to flash: "WELLINGTON DEFEATED NAPOLEON AT WATERLOO." Wellington hadn't lost. His army had defeated Napoleon. The full message makes all the difference. That's what we get when we see the good news of Easter. Jesus won the battle against Satan and sin on the cross. On Easter he defeated the final enemy of death. That makes you and me and all believers victorious.

Defeat hung heavy in the air on that Sunday morning following the crucifixion of Jesus. The message was clear when a few of Jesus' most loyal followers watched him breathe his last. Even when the apostles had scattered, Mary Magdalene and a few others witnessed his execution until the finality of Jesus' death was undeniable. They followed Joseph of Arimathea to witness the location where Jesus' lifeless body was laid to rest. Their worst fears had become reality. Defeat descended over their hearts. Darkness consumed their thoughts. All hope was lost with the death of Jesus. When the required rest period of the Sabbath had passed, they brought that darkness and defeat with them at the first light of dawn on Sunday morning. All they really hoped to do was be able to see the final resting place of Jesus and pay their final respects.

But once they got to the burial site, they received a surprising sight that gave them the more complete message. They didn't find what they expected at that tomb: **"There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it."** (Matthew 28:2) The tomb was empty. No lifeless body of Jesus occupied that space. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The barriers that held Jesus inside had all been overcome. No stone to seal the opening of that rock-hewn tomb. No guards to exert the power of the Romans or the religious leaders pulling Pilate's strings. If death couldn't hold Jesus, then no other obstacle could hold him back either. But that wasn't clear to the women at first.

Have you ever been on such a losing streak that you didn't think it would ever end? My sophomore year of high school we had one of the worst basketball seasons imaginable. The fact that someone like me who could have been nominated for mediocre player of the year was even on the bench for the varsity team should signal things could not have gone well. But when the losses started to pile up, it became demoralizing. Midway through the season we were suffering a particularly painful loss. The coach swapped out all the starters so that even Sophomores were on the floor. But the game kept getting more out of hand. When we went into the locker room at halftime, we were all hanging our heads. Coach walked through the door and simply announced: "You guys stink." At least it was the shortest half-time speech I ever heard. The rest of the season was a nightmare.

Sometimes we act as if a fog bank has rolled into our lives and obscured the complete message. A string of defeats leave you feeling like a loser. You can't do your work. You don't feel productive or useful or like you're providing any value to your family. Or you have extra

work to do and fewer resources to get it done. You have more people depending on you and more pressure and you can barely keep your head above water. Or your entire routine has been flipped upside down and you are still trying to figure things out. You're barely getting by with the basics while it appears from social media that all your friends are turning themselves into gourmet cooks and learning new languages and starting to write that novel.

Once, Martin Luther was in a dark place. Kidney stones were killing him. Armies intimidated and pope threatened. Depression was closing in. Nothing anyone said or did could help. So his wife, Katie put on a black dress. Luther noticed it and asked, 'Are you going to a funeral?' 'No,' Kate replied, 'but since you act like God is dead, I wanted to join you in your mourning.' Luther got the message and recovered."¹ Sometimes God's people act like God is still dead.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to see the complete message. Victory is ours in Christ. Confusion, doubt and fear too often win battles over our hearts. We look around us and see only defeat. Darkness gets the upper hand. Earthquake, angel, stone all tell the same consistent message. The earthquake shakes you to attention. The stone revealing the empty tomb announces victory. The angel make the message more clear: "you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified." What really causes fear is the darkness inside we can't escape from. The defeats we register every day against temptation. The darkness lurking in our hearts caused by sin. The battles we lose against worldly influences. The times we have deserted our Lord and abandoned the field of battle. Yes, Jesus is still crucified. Yes, he really suffered for our sin. His crucifixion hasn't been cancelled. But there is more to the story. Everything now points to one clear and coherent message: "**He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.**" (Matthew 28:6) Jesus has won the victory over fear. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

And then, just in case the message needs to be more more concrete, Jesus himself shows up. This is victory that can be touched and worshiped. Jesus links his promises with our current reality. The resurrection isn't just something you trick your mind into believing. It's not some fairy tale you've conjured up to convince yourself life isn't as bad as it seems. It's not the metaphorical rising that empowers your life with positive vibes proclaimed to you by someone from the church of Oprah. Add up all the pieces of evidence. The rolled away stone. The absence guards. The heaven-sent messenger. Not Jesus himself. Jesus who can be grabbed onto. Victorious in his physical resurrection from the dead.

The reality of Jesus' resurrection changes daily life. Jesus says: "**Do not be afraid.**" (Matthew 28:10) Stop being afraid. Of the angel. Of Jesus' enemies. Of your own failures. There is no place for fear in this new reality. There is no place for fear in this new mission Jesus gives these very first witnesses: "**Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee.**" (Matthew 28:10) Jesus' victory makes the Marys messengers. They have a mission. And the resurrection victory of Jesus turns traitorous disciples into brothers. They have reconciliation with the resurrected Jesus. They have restoration through his defeat of death.

¹ Rudolf K. Markwald and Marilyn Morris Markwald, *Katharina Von Bora: A Reformation Life* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 139-140.

They are transformed into missionaries and called to a new purpose. The victory of Jesus changes everything.

Did you know the Gideons are printing as many Bibles? Yeah, the ones planting Scripture in hotel rooms and public places are cutting back on that activity. Some things have changed. They now have a huge backlog of Bibles already printed. And the number of hotels accepted Bibles has dropped by 20% over the past decade. But giving out Bible was never really their primary mission. It was actually just one method. See, the Gideons were originally formed to teach Christians to be witnesses for their faith.² Handing someone a Bible usually was one way to get a faith conversation started. But sometimes the methods get confused with the purpose.

What is changing for Christians this Easter? It's probably easier to answer what hasn't changed. Actually, we still have our mission, don't we? We need the Easter victory as much now if not more than ever. How about your friends and family? How about the people who have as much defeat and darkness if not more than you? How about the people who are finally waking up to deeper spiritual issues in their lives? How about people who can't seem to get their lives back on track because of all the things that have been taken away? Do they need the victory of Jesus? Do they need to know Jesus came to carry out the demands of God perfectly in our place? Do they need to know God has a solution to our inescapable failures that put Jesus on the cross? Do they know that Easter is more than chocolate and bunnies? Do they know Jesus gives away his victory? That he shares his success with every soul who trusts in him? And even if you can't simply invite them to church, can you still carry out God's new purpose for you? Can you share victory through Jesus with them? Can you use all the technological resources at your disposal to let them know about their victory in Jesus Christ?

After Wellington and the British led coalition defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, Europe enjoy a long period of relative stability and peace across the continent. Not all the developments were good, of course. But no major conflicts broke out for nearly four decades. On Good Friday the spiritual forces of evil thought they had finished off God's Son. Their plan backfire. The death of Jesus was the deathblow to evil forces. In the ultimate display of power, God brought Jesus back to life. When fears and doubts attack, the victory of Jesus over sin gives peace. When defeat seems to be on a roll, forgiveness gives you a secret weapon. When confusion fogs your heart, the promises of God give you clarity. Jesus rose, and death has been defeated. Jesus rose, the angels announce it. Jesus rose, the dead will not remain in their graves. Jesus rose, life rules. Jesus rose, you share in his victory. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

² Silliman, Daniel. "The Gideons Stop the Presses." Christianity Today, April 2020.