

An Easter Witness

Easter, Year B – Mark 16:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 5, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! And your answer: The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Oh, it is *fine* to hear such a wonderful response!

Those of you who make it more than once or twice a year may remember that I didn't grow up an Episcopalian, but in a little Holiness denomination, and that my Daddy was a preacher – sometimes full-time and later during the summer – in churches sprinkled throughout west Ohio farm country. My preaching is generally not *nearly* so animated an experience as the tent-meeting-style preaching I heard from my Daddy and others in my youth, and our interaction is usually not nearly as... *interactive* either.

But a few years back, I engaged y'all in a little participation on Easter Sunday morning. Even those of you who make it just a couple of times a year may remember. In order to make sure I was getting my major points across, I stopped periodically and asked to you to affirm that you "got it." Get it? <Got it.> Good. Watching TV here recently, I was reminded of *another* time-honored technique for coaxing participation: I had landed, fairly unintentionally, actually, on some big evangelical church service, and I noticed that when the congregation was not fully interacting, in order to make sure the people were with him, the preacher would ask, "Can I get a witness?" Now, that congregation – it looked like a few *thousand* – that congregation responded in a *variety* of ways. But I know most of you are new at this, so I'll give you a script. When the preacher asks, "Can I get a witness?" the crowd responds with, "Amen!" Are you ready to try? Can I get a witness? <Amen> Y'all are a little rusty, but we'll work on it as we go along.

First the basic background. After a night-long mockery of a trial and a sneering sentence of death, Jesus was nailed to a cross and crucified. He hung there at the place called the Skull between two thieves, and it was late Friday afternoon when he finally succumbed to that cruel, torturous death and a handful of women and a couple of near-strangers took their friend and master down from the cross. Okay, here we go – Can I get a witness? <Amen> Hmmm, not bad.

In fact, it was *so* late when they took him down from there, that they had to rush to get his body in the tomb before the Sabbath started at sunset. There wasn't even time to *properly* prepare his body for burial. So very *early* Sunday morning, the two Marys and Salome headed for the tomb to finish anointing Jesus' body. On their way, they were worried about how they were going to get the stone out of the way so they could do their job. But to their amazement, when they got there, the tomb was open. The stone was already rolled away! Can I get a witness? <Amen> Better.

Inside the tomb, the women were met by a man dressed in white. They were scared! But he said, "Don't be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here!" Jesus was not in the tomb that morning. He was alive! He had died on a cross, but now he lived again! His heart was pumping blood. His lungs were breathing air. His brain was actively comprehending its environment! All his vital organs were functioning properly! Jesus who had died on a cross was a living, breathing, walking, talking *person* again! Can I get a witness? <Amen>

But from what our lesson tells us, the two Marys and Salome just didn't *get* it. An angel tells them not to be afraid, and gives them specific instructions. But instead of being excited, they ran in *terror*. They were so afraid, Mark tells us, that they didn't tell a soul. Maybe they didn't get it because it was early and they hadn't slept well – I can relate to *that*. Maybe they didn't get it because the eeriness of the graveyard spooked 'em. Maybe they didn't get it because they flat out

didn't *believe* what the messenger had said. Whatever the reason, the women left there in terror and amazement. Can I get a witness? <Amen> Stick with me, here.

On the other hand – maybe they *did* get it. Imagine that someone very close to you falls critically ill, perhaps a spouse or a parent or a child. Now imagine that you *watch* them die. The doctor pronounces them dead and they take the body away. Then, the morning of the funeral, you go to the funeral home for a last look at the body. You go to the room where the night before you had received comfort from friends, and there stands an open and empty coffin. Beside it stands a man in a white suit. He doesn't *look* like any of the funeral home employees. "Don't be alarmed." he says, "You are looking for So-and-So who died of cancer" or "heart disease" or "in an accident." "She is not here," or "he is alive!" Do you think you would be glad? Do you think you would run out and tell everyone you met, all your friends and family and neighbors? Or do you think you would be struck dumb by the enormity of what just happened, the overwhelming scope of this event? Can I get a witness? <Amen> You bet!

Maybe those three women "got it" better than most of us generally do. Maybe they realized the enormous, *cosmic* significance of what they had seen. And maybe they were awe struck at having witnessed it. Amen? <Amen>

You see, something *more* happened in that tomb early that Sunday morning. Something *more* happened than just the resuscitation of Jesus' lifeless body. Easter is about something *more* than one man rising from the dead. Easter is about a *victory!* Amen? <Amen>

The Scriptures tell us that we were *all* dead because of our sins. The blackness of that death had cut us off from God. Cut us off from any possibility of making it right again. Cut us off from all *hope* of life. But through the resurrection of Christ, the power of death and sin over us has been destroyed. We are no longer dead, but alive! We have been made alive together with Christ because of his undeniable, unstoppable, unquenchable love for us. *That's* what Easter is all about. Amen? <Amen>

Easter is about breaking down the barriers between us. <Amen> Easter is about our Lord denying *for all time* death's hold on creation. <Amen> Easter is about the promise of God, that each and every one of us who believes in Jesus Christ will have *eternal* life. Can I get a witness? <Amen>

The Good News of Easter is not *merely* that the tomb was empty that morning, is it? <Amen> The Good News of Easter is not *just* that Jesus rose again, is it? <Amen> The Good News of Easter is the good news of our *own* resurrection, <Amen> the promise that *every* person – *every* man... *every* woman... *every child* who believes in Jesus Christ – *will* rise again. <Amen> The story of Easter is not just about *Jesus'* new life, it's about *your* new life – and it's about *mine*. <Amen>

Now, don't be alarmed. Don't run out of here this morning in "terror and amazement." Whatever you do, *don't* keep that kind of Good News to yourself. Because when the Good News of Easter is realized, it's meant to *change* your life. Go *tell* someone. Tell them the *real* story of Easter: that not only is Jesus Christ alive, but that Christ brought *you* alive too! Tell them that you are alive to a *new* life filled with the *hope* of Easter. Tell them that you are alive to a *new* life filled with the *promise* of Easter. Tell them that you are alive to a new life *filled* with the assurance and the joy and the *power* of Easter. Can I get a witness? <Amen> Good.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!