

# Easter Sunday—2013

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI

## *“God on the Loose”*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).*



## **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

The day Jesus died Joseph of Arimathea went into Pilate's office and asked for the body of Jesus. He wants to give Jesus a proper burial. It's a risky business. Jesus was executed for treason, and it would be easy to accuse the friends of Jesus of the same. But Pilate isn't interested in pursuing the matter. Pilate commands the body be handed over. So Joseph of Arimathea, with the help of a man named Nicodemus, take the battered corpse and hastily wrap it in a linen shroud. They do their best, but time is short. It's a Friday and the sun is already dipping into the horizon. The Sabbath, when no work is allowed, is about to begin. So they hurry to place Jesus in Joseph's own tomb which has been carved out of a hillside. They seal the tomb with a stone. These were disks several feet in diameter that rolled into a hewn groove in front of the tomb's entrance. In verse four Mark notes this stone was particularly large. It would have required at least two or three men to move.

The Sabbath begins. Saturday is a quiet day.

At sunrise on Sunday, three women set off for the tomb. They intend to finish the job Joseph and Nicodemus had begun. They will probably pull the body out, unwrap it, wash it, anoint it with spices, wrap it up again, and tuck it back into the tomb. Clearly, these are strong women. Still, they are concerned about that stone. It's early. Who will help roll that thing up and out of its groove? As they draw near they see the stone has already been rolled back. Stooping to look inside they are startled to see a young man sitting within, dressed in a white robe. Matthew identifies him as an angel, and the first thing angels always have to say is some version of "Fear not." "Do not be alarmed" this one says. "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has

risen; he is not here . . . Go, tell his disciples.”

Did you notice the reaction of the women? They sure didn't start singing Easter hymns. They didn't even do what the angel commanded and go tell the disciples. Verse 8: “They fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Imagine! They just received the world's greatest news ever. They alone are the custodians. But there's a problem. They don't buy it. They know that's not how the world works. Dead people stay dead. They don't understand this angel thing, but they know enough to be afraid. So they flee from the tomb, and say nothing to anyone.

By the way, that's how Mark's Gospel ends. That's the last sentence. That's where the curtain falls on his book. They women are terrified. They flee and they say nothing. It's a rather abrupt ending, don't you think? It leaves the reader absolutely unsatisfied. “There must be more” we think.

Now, if you look in your Bibles, you'll see there is more, an additional eleven verses. The earliest copies of this Gospel, however, do not include these verses, and so most scholars believe they were added later, to give the reader some sense of closure. Most agree Mark's original book ends with the women fleeing and saying nothing. But *why* would Mark have ended his book this way?

There are all kinds of theories. Some speculate that a piece of the original scroll was intentionally torn off by someone who didn't like it, and that Mark actually had written a more proper conclusion.

Others say that because Mark was writing during a time of intense persecution, he had to be careful about the ending because the authorities wouldn't tolerate any talk of resurrection.

Some even whimsically suggest that Mark foresaw what we would do with Easter . . . how we would mix a generous portion of pagan fertility rites

into it and turn it into some sort of bizarre spring flower festival with jelly beans and those chocolate eggs which I love, and bunnies whom we respect and admire for their remarkable capability to reproduce. I appreciate the snarky commentary on our secular Easter, but it seems a bit of a stretch to say that's why Mark ended his book so abruptly.

I think Mark ends his account with a thunder-clap because that's the nature of the news. It's stunning. It's incomprehensible. And more importantly, it leaves us, the readers, longing for more. *He's prompting us to look into it for ourselves.* Mark is like your old mathematics teacher after school who refuses to solve the problem set for you, and makes you do the work.

Mark offers no simple closure to his book. He simply lets us know, something big happened out there, really big, and you probably want to check it out for yourself.

I love the simple integrity with which Mark recounts this story. No one out there is anticipating a resurrection or even hoping for it, even though Jesus had on numerous occasions foretold it. In chapter eight, for instance, Jesus pulled his disciples aside and said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests . . . and killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly" (v. 31). He says it again in chapter nine, and again in chapter ten, but the disciples, quote, "did not understand this" (it's not the way things work) and "they were afraid to ask him about it" (9:31). End result? No one is anticipating resurrection.

Of all the Gospels, Mark gives the most negative description of Jesus' early followers. He paints no halos over these people, but repeatedly talks about their hardness of heart, which is, of course, how the Lord described Pharaoh in the exodus. He paints them as a skeptical lot who are slow to believe anything Jesus tells them, sort of like you and me. That is, Mark's

gospel prompts you and me to do a little internal inspection of our own.

For example, do you really let this news sink into your heart? Or does it mostly bounce off due to a familiar hardness of heart?

Does the resurrection inform your views of suffering and death? Or do you mostly give the resurrection lip service and carry on as those without a whole lot of hope?

Do you share the good news as commanded? Or do you keep quiet out of fear?

I know you **observe** Easter year after year after year. Do you celebrate it in your lives?

I love the simple integrity with which this story is recounted. The first ones to receive the news of Jesus' so immersed in their own reality, their own world-view that they cannot even consider another, and that just sounds very honest, very human and very consistent. And Mark is not going to try to strong-arm anyone into the faith. He's simply recounting what happened with unvarnished integrity and saying, here you have it. The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. And the message? "He is risen."

You know what? The tomb remains empty. Not one bone of Jesus has been found, nor will one ever be found because Christ is risen!

His resurrected appearances to Peter and the Twelve and to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time and to James and to Paul (1 Cor. 15:4ff) . . . his resurrected appearances changed the world like no other event in history. And his resurrection is still changing the world because it's not just about one man cheating death. It's about the Son of God defeating death *for us*. On Good Friday the one who truly became your sin and mine, died for it. Jesus satisfied God's demand for justice. God doesn't wink at it. He deals with it. Jesus paid the price for our sin. And because he is the Son of God, death could not hold its grip on him. He rose from the dead, just as he promised repeatedly that he would. He rose victorious and now promises life and salvation to all who believe.

That is, we receive this victory by faith, or we reject it by

unbelief. But know this, the day you cease to believe in our resurrected Lord is not the day that God dies. It is the day that something very important within you dies, something you will need more than anything else. Run the race to the finish, Paul taught. You can run a good race all the way to the home stretch and then get discouraged and drop out and be disqualified. Run the race to the finish. Fight the good fight of faith. Don't let it happen. "Be faithful unto *death*" Jesus said, "and I will give you the crown of life."

The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. God, we might say, is on the loose. Not to stir up trouble and seek revenge. No God is on the loose in a gracious way because he is a gracious God. God is on the loose where you live and move and have your being. No one can keep God in a box anymore than Jesus could be kept in the tomb. No one can assign God the times and places he should be. No, he is working in your life at all times.

God is on the loose in your Baptism, where he has marked you and keeps you as his child. God is on the loose in his Word with which he enkindling the fire of faith in you and with which he helps it grow. He is on the loose in this Supper, washing you, forgiving you with his blood, life-giving blood.

The tomb is empty. He rose as promised, and now promises life and salvation to those who believe. This means one day there will be many more empty tombs. He is the "first fruits" of the resurrection. There will be countless more, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. He promised, "Because I live, you too shall live" (Jn. 14:19) and until then, nothing can separate you from his love. His tomb is empty, and God is on the loose. Thanks be to God. Amen.



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