

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Easter, April 11, 2010

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Hymns: 200, 206:1-2, 203, 206:4-9, 54.
Lessons: Isaiah 12:1-6, 1 Corinthians 15: 12-23, Luke 24:1-7.
Sermon Text: Mark 16:8
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We continue our history of the resurrection just moments after Mark recorded that the women found the grave of Jesus empty. They were scared. They were confused. They didn't know what to think or how to feel. This is now the first day of the week, Sunday, and they had had since Friday to accept the fact that Jesus, their friend, their teacher, their Lord and now surely their Savior though they may not have recognized it right then, had died. And now their world is turned upside down again. Just as they had had several days to adjust to a new situation, Jesus' death, a new, terribly frightening situation confronted them.

Today let's examine the fact from scripture that

THE WOMEN WHO FOUND THE EMPTY TOMB ARE SCARED

1. **Because the grave is empty, they are *"trembling and bewildered"* and *"afraid."***
2. **They fled and said nothing to anyone.**
3. **How can WE overcome our fears?**

We would never have heard of these women or of what happened on that Sunday if what the angel said had not been true. God's announcement is the truth

These people were afraid. Bewildered. They fled. They ran away. They were afraid to tell anyone about Jesus. They just didn't know what to think or how to feel.

What had happened, what they had observed and been told first-hand by the angel was too marvelous to believe, and the angel's presence was too awesome. They fled from the tomb. Fear filled their hearts, and as a result they didn't race into town shouting "He's risen! He's risen!" They could hardly believe it themselves. Remember, this is immediately after they discovered the empty grave and were told by an angel – Matthew records two angels – that Jesus has risen from the dead.

It should not have been a totally foreign experience to these women that someone had been brought back to life. They probably had some frame of reference, since Jesus had raised others from the dead, most recently Lazarus of Bethany. So they knew what it meant to be raised from the dead. But they plainly didn't believe. This is before Jesus appeared to anyone, before situations such as his appearing in Galilee, as John records in his gospel, and such as St. Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:6: *"After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time."*

Of course, in every other case of Jesus raising someone from the dead, there was a body, now alive, to prove what Jesus had done when he brought people back to life. But now there was not even a body. They hadn't yet seen Jesus.

We might wonder why it was that they didn't believe. If we were there, we might boast, wouldn't we have believed? Their emotions controlled them, which isn't so very strange. These women were afraid. This was real, genuine fear. Most of us can remember some time when we were frightened beyond words. And that fear controlled us, we couldn't react as we should have. I'm not talking about the kind of fear we might experience watching some kind of scary movie, when we can keep telling ourselves 'this isn't real'. What they had seen and heard was real, and it really frightened them. They had seen an angel and the angel had talked to

them. We learn from Scripture that angels often have this kind of an effect on people. People are also afraid of God's invisible beings made visible.

For most of us, our first personal experience with God telling us not to be afraid was probably when we were far too young to remember much. Even now, don't Christian parents and grandparents tell, and sing to their infants when they cry, about God's love for them, and that they should not be afraid? Maybe the first scripture passage we learned that tells us not to be afraid is the Christmas history. Our parents or grandparents might remember how old we were when we first memorized these words: *"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."* Luke 2:8-10 (King James Version). They were *"Sore afraid"*. The New International Version uses the word *"terrified"*. The shepherds were terrified at the appearance of the angel at Jesus' birth. But the angel tells them not to be afraid, and he gives them a reason. *"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."*

The angel who met these women in the empty tomb also gave these women a reason not to be afraid. In the verses immediately before our sermon text we read *"As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"* Mark 16:5-7.

The angel said "don't be astonished". "Don't be amazed." "Don't be alarmed." And then he gives the reason: *"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."* Mark 16:6. *"He has risen!"* You can see for yourselves that he is not here.

Then the angel gives them work to do, just as Jesus himself gives his disciples work to do before he ascends into heaven. They are to tell his disciples, and especially Peter, *'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'* Mark 16:7. But at first they were afraid to say anything to anyone.

So, you might want to tell these women: 'what have you got to be afraid of?' But they were still *"Trembling"*, *"bewildered"*, and *"afraid."* They didn't know what to make of what was going on. They didn't understand. Why didn't they understand? Why did they not believe Jesus or the angel? Had they not listened carefully to Jesus? Everything had happened just as he said it would.

Remember that these women still had the same enemies we have today. They had their sinful flesh which was trying to grasp something outside the realm of normal physical life. They had the devil torturing them and trying to take away from their hearts the words Jesus had told them. And they were also in the world, a world which had just three days earlier murdered their friend Jesus. They were no doubt afraid of that world, afraid that sinful world would track them down and take their lives, too.

The only answer we can give them is the answer God gives in his word: God's messengers tell them "don't be afraid". God has performed a miracle here in bringing Jesus back to life. Jesus himself has performed a miracle in coming back to life. Both those statements are true. Jesus lives. And he lives so that everyone who believes in him as Savior will live eternally, too.

For three years they had heard Jesus talking, preaching, proclaiming, encouraging, exhorting, admonishing, opening the scriptures to them. In short, for three years while he was on earth, his followers were accustomed to having him there. They could always rely on him. And now, he had been killed in a most horrible way. During the Lenten season we saw Peter following Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. He saw Jesus' trial. But did he really expect what was happening?

The women didn't expect what had happened and what was even now happening. Yes, it is an exceptionally upsetting thing. The grave is empty, three days after someone has been executed and buried. Maybe it was some grave robbers? So then you call the authorities, right? What if the authorities are the ones who executed the person whose body is now missing and wanted to do everything they could to prevent his body from disappearing? The authorities were afraid his followers would steal his body and claim he had risen from the dead. They had even asked for a guard to be set over the grave. Matthew tells us those guards were

frightened at the resurrection and fell to ground like dead men. So you can't go to the authorities. They are your enemies, too, just as they were enemies of Jesus.

There is another most significant fact recorded: *"They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* They didn't believe, they were afraid, so they said nothing to anyone. When something frightening, something momentous, something bad happens in our lives we often don't want to say anything to anyone. But doesn't it also sometimes happen that we are just plain afraid to tell about Jesus? Afraid to tell of the marvelous things, the great things God has done for us for fear people won't believe us or won't want to share in what God has done for us? Isn't it sometimes that we are afraid of being ridiculed for our faith? So in some ways their silence is understandable but not admirable. We can be the same way at times.

So what did it really take for these women to get over their fear? Well, Jesus appeared to his followers. He talked to them, reminding them that all was going exactly as it was supposed to happen, exactly as God had prophesied throughout the Old Testament Scriptures that it would happen. Their fear should have been gone by Pentecost, 50 days later. Jesus had been around for 40 days and then he ascended into heaven. But need I remind you, even at his ascension into heaven that there were those followers of Jesus who weren't sure exactly what was going on.

Put yourself in the position of these people who were afraid. Why shouldn't they be afraid? Something really strange had happened and they didn't understand it. They didn't remember all the Scriptures had to say about what was happening. You know, we rejoice in the empty grave, but initially it didn't have that effect on Jesus' disciples. They didn't rejoice at first, but were afraid.

How do we behave when we are frightened? Maybe we don't always behave logically, maybe we don't always have control of ourselves. Aren't we often afraid, just like these women? Especially when we are very young, we are afraid of many things. You may have noticed how loud noises and strange situations frighten infants and little children. Then, sometimes the older we get, the more afraid we get, in some ways. We may be afraid of many things, such as new situations, death, illness and change. These women were faced with a new situation. Their Lord and master could not be found. They knew that he had been dead, and now an angel was telling them he was alive.

We now know what the empty grave means, because we have the whole Bible. We can look at the whole context, and search all of the scriptures and we today have the ability to search the scriptures so much more easily than anyone even a generation ago had ever thought possible, through personal computer searches.

But fear is often part of our lives, for many reasons. We are afraid of what might happen and what might not happen. We are afraid of people and things and weather and poor health and the economy and war and disease and – well, the list could go on and on. Yes, we are often afraid.

So how can we overcome fear? Listen to what God says. Search the scriptures, for in them you find eternal life. (John 5:39) Remember that we are just strangers here on earth. Heaven is our home. More than 60 times in Scripture God tells us "Fear not!" "Do not be afraid!" Starting with God talking to Abram and ending with Jesus sitting on the throne in Revelation, the Bible repeats the words "Fear not!" "Do not be afraid"! And there are many other words, too, in Scripture in which God tells us to rely on him and have no fear. He is with us. We rejoice at Jesus' empty grave with the hymnwriter and sing

"Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand. (TLH) 427:3) Amen.