

“I Believe in the Resurrection of the Dead!”

Each Gospel has an account of the Resurrection, and, although they get the point across, they all have a different kind of slant to it. In John's Gospel, you have brave Simon Peter and the “other” disciple going into the tomb. What did Mary do? Stayed out in the garden weeping. In Luke's Gospel the women went into the empty tomb, did not find the body, and according to Luke - “while they were puzzling over this, two men in dazzling garments appeared.” Then the women went from being puzzled to being terrified. Mark's Gospel is slightly different. The women go into the tomb, and Mark says: On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed.

But this year's lectionary is from Matthew. This account hasn't been used as much as the others. I think that might be because men use to set the lectionary. This account doesn't hold the men in good light. You find the two Marys going to the tomb. When they get there, there is an earthquake, then an angel appears like lightning! The angel came from heaven, rolled the stone away, and sat on it. What did the brave Guards who were posted there to keep the disciples from stealing Jesus' body and claim that Jesus was risen do? They shook and became like dead men. So much for the Male being the stronger of the species. The Angel told the women to go into the tomb and look around! Then go tell the disciples, who by the way, are hiding safely behind locked doors, that JESUS IS RISEN! And Matthew says they left with “Fear and Great Joy!!!”

Fear and great Joy! Now that's the way to go through life! Fear alone keeps people from doing so many things. On that Easter morning, it kept the disciples from going to the grave to see their lord's body. But great joy makes it possible to overcome the fear.

Can the Easter story do that for us? We're in a world with an unstable economy with a sliding stock market, and rising gas prices; an unstable sense of security and safety with the constant threat of terrorist attacks; a world with diseases for which there is still no cure. We live in a world where our youth shoot each other, and drugs can destroy a life the first time they are misused. No wonder the disciples wanted to stay behind locked doors. Ushers! Go lock our doors. Let's stay in here, smell the flowers, sing more hymns, forget our fear! We'd have to be crazy to go back out into a world like that! But we are in here, hearing the news that can give us joy in the midst of our fear!

Fear and great joy! That's what the women had. It's okay to have the fear, because it can be overcome with great joy if we hear the Easter Message - or rather, if we LIVE the Easter message.

There are a lot of people - a LOT of people - only observing Easter with Easter Baskets, colored eggs, and marshmallow chicks. They are living in a fearful world without the "Great Joy" that comes with Easter. It's surprising how many people Don't know the real story of Easter. In their Easter preparation work in Sunday School, the teacher asked each student, "What does Easter mean to you?" One kid replied: "Easter means, egg-salad sandwiches for the next two weeks."

Okay, it was a bad answer. But it was a good question. What does Easter mean to you? How does it change your life? Does it mean something more than an opportunity for a new spring outfit, a family dinner, and an excuse to bite the heads off all those annoying little yellow and pink marshmallow Peeps? Does knowing the Easter Message make a difference in your life?

I was thinking of this when I wrote this month's "Pastor's Corner" message in the newsletter. I told how I was one of those people who heard the story of Jesus being "crucified, died and was buried" and how on the third day rose from the dead. I was in Sunday School as a kid hearing the story. I sang the Hosannas and Alleluias in the Children's choir. Week after week I recited the Creed that says: We look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." I said it, but did I BELIEVE it?

Do you really believe the Easter message? Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead? "Fear and Great Joy!" The things we fear are made more bearable by the great Joy we find in the Resurrection of our Lord. As my newsletter article said, the first time I seriously asked myself if I really believed, was at the time of the death of my father when I was 14 years old. Here I was face-to-face with death. What did I believe? I didn't have the empty tomb in front of me or an Angel descending from heaven. But I did have the Holy Spirit working through people, who during those first 14 years, have been telling me about the great joy they had because of Jesus Christ. That made it possible for me to face the fear of death, with the great joy of the promise of the resurrection of the dead! The Easter event does make a difference.

It's the Easter event that makes it possible for me to be your pastor. People like to joke with me - (at least I *THINK* they're joking) - and say they'd love to be a pastor so they could take all the vacations I take. I tell them that's fine. I'll call them the next time I have a funeral to do. Some have said they don't know how I can do funerals. It's because of Easter that I can do funerals. Because, "I believe in the Resurrection of the dead!" And at funerals I get to share that news with other people who believe in the Resurrection of the dead.

I am now in my 12<sup>th</sup> year of being the pastor here at St. Peter's. It's not possible to be involved in your lives for that long and not feel an attachment. Just in these past few years I have asked myself, "How am I going to get through the funeral of Al, Andy, Millie, Clare, Norm, Marian, Bette, Tony - and be able to bring comfort and hope?" How? Because of Easter! Because "I Believe in the Resurrection of the Dead!"

This past week I pulled out the Parish register and counted the number of Baptisms I have performed here at St. Peter's. 132 Baptisms - 132 times that I had the privilege of bringing a person into the family of God - making it possible for them to have the promise of Eternal Life so they too can "Believe in the Resurrection of the Dead!" I can do that because of Easter!

Fear and great joy! Both are a part of life. But we can't have the great joy until we let go of the fear. A man named Jack was walking along a steep cliff one day when he accidentally got too close to the edge and fell. On the way down he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror saw that the canyon was more than a thousand feet straight down. He couldn't hang onto the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff. So Jack began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear him and lower a rope or something.

"Help! Help! Is anyone up there? Help!" He yelled for hours, but no one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice. "Jack. Jack. Can you hear me?" "Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!" "I can see you, Jack. Are you all right?" "Yes, but...who are you, and where are you?" "I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere." "The Lord? You mean, GOD?" "That's me." "God, please help me! I promise—if you'll get me down from here, I'll stop sinning. I'll be a really good person. I'll serve you for the rest of my life." "Easy on the promises, Jack. Let's just get you down from there; then we can talk. Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully." "I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do." "Okay. Let go of the branch." "What?" "I said, let go of the branch. Just trust me. Let go." There was a long silence. Finally Jack yelled, "Help! Help! Is anyone else up there?"

Easter tells us to let go! Let go of the fear! Let go of the fear of death! We believe in the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come! Yes, there is a lot to fear in life and that's okay. The women at the tomb had fear. The disciples locked in that upper room had fear. Those of us in this world fighting addictions, unemployment, a struggling economy, the responsibility of raising a family, friends in the military, those lying in hospital beds, those facing Death, we have fears!

But this is Easter! Let go of the Fear! The empty tomb tells us that God is still in control. We don't have to fear death or anything else! I know that my redeemer lives! I believe in the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ while, like you, I live with fears, I have GREAT JOY! That's why we can sing Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Amen