

Sermon Text for April 1, 2018

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 25:6-9, Mark 16:1-8
“The stone is rolled away”

It's Easter!! He is alive and because of that we can gather today and say he is risen, he is risen indeed! A friend of mine who is a pastor told me about a little girl in his congregation who was asked to write about a historical figure and turn it in for an assignment at school. Well she got home and didn't know who to write about so the good mother told her, well, why don't you just write about Jesus. She was trying to be, you know a good influence on the kid. The kid looked at her mom with an obvious scowl of disapproval and said Mom, a historical figure is someone who is dead. Well Jesus is alive. We had a very powerful Good Friday service. We left in solemn silence, contemplating this very somber reality that Jesus had died. Then, yesterday morning we had over 175 children and even more family members present for our Easter Egg Hunt. What a contrast. I thought, how appropriate, their voices of laughter are a sign for us of the anticipation, the period of waiting for Christ's resurrection. Brothers and sisters the waiting is over, he is risen!! He is risen indeed!

He has risen! He has risen indeed! We have been following Mark throughout this past week of Holy Week and in fact for all of Lent, and I believe you have to finish something you have started so today the resurrection story comes from Mark. Remember Mark is all about details and preparations. Things go according to plan, Jesus is the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets of old. This morning just when we think it is all over, just when Joseph of Arimathea has buried Jesus, shut the tomb and gone home, we see that the story starts all over again.

Mark always has something that draws our attention and today it is the first evangelists, the first missionaries, the first preachers of the gospel, the same who go to the tomb and that are filled with fear when they recognize exactly what has happened. Usually we hear that if someone has the fear of God in them that's a good thing. I submit to you today that just as the women are paralyzed by fear but motivated by love, today God wants to take the fear of God out of us so that we can be motivated to go and follow the eternal Savior.

How many here have walked down the aisle and accepted Jesus Christ because you were afraid of the eternal repercussions if you didn't? I know I did it once when I was a child because I was afraid. I am thankful that I have loving Christian parents who straightened me out and told me that God does not want us to be afraid of Him. God wants us to love him and we follow God not out of fear, but out of love. Today we will see the effect that fear plays on us and that we should never ever be fearful of our salvation or anyone else's for that matter but rather we should be motivated strictly by the love of God for us as manifested in the resurrection today. Let's look at Mark and see the details that he gives us while try to take the fear of God out of us and the love of Christ in us.

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We ended this past week with the disciples of Jesus making preparations for him. Palm Sunday they are told to go find a donkey, Maundy Thursday they are told to go find a room, Good Friday in John they are told to take care of my mother. But this morning, early in the morning, the preparations are just about over. Jesus is dead and he had to be given a decent burial. Last night the women went out after sunset, after the Sabbath, to buy spices not to embalm the body but just to give it some final respects. These final preparations for their Savior they do without anyone's command. It is of their own initiative.

But there is a problem and that is something that the women could not prepare for. It was so early in the morning that no one would be there to roll the stone away and keep it rolled away. They had heard of women who had gone in to prepare bodies and the stone had rolled back over the entry way and they weren't found until much later. Who will move the stone seems like such a small issue in respect for what they were about to do but it is the focus of their discussions, they couldn't get around this problem.

You know what it is like when there is a burden, an issue in your life, a heavy stone that has worried you, that you have prayed about, that all of a sudden seems to be the only thing that matters. How am I going to be freed from this heavy stone? It will never happen through earthly means. Only God has an answer to immovable stones. Sometimes they are moved by earthquakes such as Matthew, sometimes the stone is rolled away without any explanation as to how. And what we ultimately find is that once that stone is rolled away, once it is removed it is no longer a dead end but rather it opens into the empty tomb, it becomes a highway that leads to eternity.

The women are not shy, they enter the tomb right away. They find a man sitting on the right side of the tomb, the side of honor, and wearing white, the colors of those who died in the faith. Once they take all of this in the Scripture says that they are amazed. Let's be honest, they were terrified. The Greek word is *thambos* which means a state of astonishment due to both the suddenness and the unusualness of the phenomenon and with either a positive or negative reaction. There were two ways that the women could have reacted to this revelation. In a positive way, or in a negative way.

We don't know yet how they are going to react to this fear, this amazement. The first thing that they are told by this messenger of God is "do not be afraid". How many times does God have to tell us not to be afraid, not to fear his revelation, his presence, his love, his miracles? Just think of Abraham, Hagar, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, all of them are told either by God or by angels or messengers not to be afraid when God appears. Don't be afraid of your Savior, he loves you, he wants to protect you, he has saved you. This is the message that we get over and over again in the Bible, and yet we still hear people trying to put the fear of God in others to bring them to salvation.

Jesus the crucified is now Jesus the raised, says the young man. Jesus of lent is now and forever will be the Jesus of Easter. He has been raised, he is not here. Why are you looking for the living among the dead? I'll prove it to you that he is not here. Look

here is the place that they laid him down. You can almost see these poor women as their amazement all of a sudden is trying to evolve into something else. They are trying to decide what their next step is going to be.

The young man is telling the women that if you want to see Jesus, don't look behind where he was, in the empty tomb, but look ahead where he is going, and there you will find him. What a message for the church. Fear causes us to look back and immerse ourselves in that which we know. The love of Christ causes us to look forward to the unknown, to the journey from here to Galilee that isn't always an easy journey. The resurrection gives our feet movement to walk away from the place of death and stagnation and move toward the living, raised Savior.

How many times do we try to lay Christ back down in the tomb of our lives. A tomb locked by fear, hoping Jesus will never break out. The church has at times buried Christ in its institutional way of doing things, or in fluffy meaningless disorder. Theological statements have substituted living experience. Jesus has been imprisoned in stained glass windows, rich in color, but hardly alive. He has been buried and relegated to a book, fearful to be let loose in society to break the bonds of oppression and to set the captives free, to declare that today, this resurrection day is the day of liberty in our lives.

The young man tells them Go, tell his disciples and Peter what you have seen. Isn't it something that the group that was the closest to Jesus and the group that had all turned their back on him, especially Peter, are being called by name to be once again the body of Christ. The family that had self-destructed was now being re-constructed by Jesus' actions upon the cross.

Go to Galilee, go to the place where it all began. Go to the place where he called you from your fishing nets to become fishers of men. Do not fear, he is going before you, just as he said. Remember when the disciples were told to get the donkey and everything was just as Jesus had said. They were told to find the man with the jar on his head and follow him and they found just as he had said. Look at Mark 14:28, we read this on Palm Sunday. Just as Jesus had said, After I am raised up I will go before you to Galilee.

The women respond to all of this in verse 8 by leaving the tomb just as quickly as they came in. The Scripture states so they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Isn't it ironic that in Mark as he goes around the country side healing people he tells people: don't tell anyone about this. But what happens? They are so filled with joy that they do it anyway. What happens here? The exact opposite. The messenger of God tells Jesus' closest followers go, tell, but they were so afraid that they went just as they had been told, but didn't tell a soul.

God is telling us today to go and tell. We have experienced and heard the good news that Christ has risen, he has risen indeed. Christ has rolled away the stones in our lives that we cannot get rid of by ourselves. Christ has told us to look for him ahead as he is creating all things new. Our challenge is not to be afraid, it is to respond to this Good news with joy. We need to hear God telling us over and over again do not be

afraid, love me because I first loved you. Allow the perfect love of my son seen in the resurrection to cast out all of your fear.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once stated that when Christ calls a person, he bids them to die. Jesus said in Mark, earlier when the whole debate over sitting at Jesus' right side was going on: Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. Let us go out into the world now not with the fear of God in us, but rather the love of God which motivates us to live for Jesus and to love those around us. Amen.