

27 March 2005
The Resurrection of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Do Not Be Afraid!”

Text: Matthew 28:1-10 (Colossians 3:1-4)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Fear. It is one of the most powerful and crippling emotions we have. Sometimes our fears are rational and reasonable, like fearing the power of nature; and sometimes they are not, like my fear of heights! Sometimes our fears are disabling, and prevent us from taking part in things with others; and sometimes we can overcome them with a little courage. But one thing is for sure – when you’re locked in fear’s grip, when it has a hold of you, it is a very real and powerful thing, and it can be overwhelming.

And that’s true not only of our personal fears, but the fears that we face in the world. I think of the fear that people living under oppressive dictators must feel. The fear that existed in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or in the Soviet Union, or under Hitler in Nazi Germany. And then there is the fear of the unknown. What does the future hold? What is the doctor going to tell me? What will life be like without my loved one? Will terrorism strike on our soil again? Am I going to suffer? How am I going to die? And when? And what will it be like?

And you know, that’s a lot of fear to deal with! And how much more is there that I haven’t even mentioned! Almost enough to make you wonder how we can live!

Now I guess there are two ways to deal with it. The first way is to ignore it, and just pretend none of that stuff exists. Ignorance is bliss, and if those things make me afraid, well, I’m just not going to think about them. And that might work . . . for a while. But it’s just not that easy to ignore life, and to shut out what we see happening around us. The truth is, this method never works for long, although it seems to be the most popular and widely-used method.

But there is another way, a better way, a *permanent* way, and that is what we are here celebrating today. For it is not to ignore our fears, but to know and trust and rejoice that we have a God and Saviour who has **dealt with** everything that causes us to fear. He has come and conquered everything that is against us. He has come and faced our enemies,

and defeated them. And so He comes this morning, triumphant from the grave, triumphant over death, triumphant over our sins, and triumphant over the devil! And thus victorious, He has a very simple message for us – spoken first by the angel, and then by Jesus Himself. The message of what Easter is all about: **“Do not be afraid.”**

Now you’re probably thinking, *“I’ve heard that before!”* And it’s true, because we often tell each other that, trying to help each other out. But when we say it, it really doesn’t make much difference, does it? We pat each other on the arm, or give a warm smile, and say *“Don’t be afraid”* – but if you’re the person who’s afraid, you’re thinking, *“Easy for you to say!”* You’re not the one facing this! . . . But today the One saying those words is the One who faced our fears. He is the One who confronted whatever it is that is causing your fear, and defeated it. No sin, no wickedness, no enemy, no trouble, no disease, no hatred, no division, not anything in all creation escaped His victory! When Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning, **nothing was left that was not under His feet.** That was not under His control. That was not under His authority and power and His good and gracious will. Nothing. And so when *this One*, this Jesus, our risen Saviour, says **“Do not be afraid”** it does make a difference!

For what causes our fear? Really? Is it not the fact that we are not the ones in control? Things can happen to us that we cannot prevent and that we would rather not have happen. Things that seem too big and overwhelming and frightening. Things that leave us wondering what the future will hold, and unsure of how it’s all going to turn out. And so simply having someone tell us *“Don’t be afraid!”* really doesn’t help because it really doesn’t change anything! . . . But Jesus did change that! In fact, He changed *everything*. And though we are not in control, **He is.** And He is not just as the almighty God – for God’s strength can be quite frightening too! The strength and power of natural disasters, for example, can leave us in fear and awe of the power of God! No, the fact that God is in control because He is almighty doesn’t take away our fear. But the fact that Jesus, as our suffering Servant, as our suffering Saviour, *as a man like us*, is in control – *that is a wondrous thing!* For as a man, as our serving Saviour, He knows our fears – He faced them too. He knows our troubles – He had them too. He knows the pain – He endured it too. He knows the sins and temptation – He wrestled with them too. And He knows much more than we will ever know. The full, all-out assault of Satan against Him. The weight of all the horrors of all the world’s sin on His shoulders. Being completely ignored and forsaken by His Father. Being utterly alone to face our enemy, with no one to help. And then, like us, facing and entering death, relying solely on faith: **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** (Lk 23:46) He faced it all.

And today, He is alive! He could not be defeated, but defeated all – all that came against Him, the full fury of sin, death, and devil. And He won! And so when He says to us

today, ***“Do not be afraid”*** – those are not mere words, but words that do what they say! Words filled with the power of His resurrection. Words filled with forgiveness. Words filled with victory. Words that give us hope – and not just for a life *after* this one, but for our lives already here and now. Knowing that we have a Saviour who is in control. A Saviour who loves us and laid down His life for us. A Saviour who is risen for us and who is ruling all things for us. ***“Do not be afraid!”*** Your King who entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday humble and riding on a donkey, now enters our world and our lives glorious and victorious, with not just palm branches and cloaks under His feet, but with *all our enemies* under His feet!

Now, our enemy doesn't like that truth so much, and so is going to try to convince you that it isn't so. And while we do not need to be afraid of Him any longer, He can still talk a mean game. And He can be pretty convincing. Telling us how bad and sinful we are. Convincing us how great and powerful our troubles are. Getting us to doubt the love and control of our Saviour. *For just look around you, he says! Just look! You don't look so victorious! Its all just talk. Just talk, is all it is. You should still be afraid. I'm the powerful one, after all. . . .* And sometimes it looks that way, doesn't it? As if God's not in control. And we get afraid. And confused. And things don't seem so clear. It happens to all of us. Just ask the ladies who went to the tomb that Easter morning.

And so the words of the apostle Paul from the Epistle are good for us to hear as well. For they help us understand, and see things – not as the devil wants us to see them! – but as they really are. For Paul said: ***“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”***

Your life is hidden with Christ in God. Your enemy wants you to rely on what you can see – the sin and evil in the world, the sin and evil in your heart, the troubles and fears, the confusion and doubts – and he says, SEE! I TOLD YOU SO!

But no! Today we point to the empty tomb, to our risen Lord, and say to Satan: NO, HE TOLD YOU SO! He told you He would crush your head, and He did. He told you He would rise and conquer death, and He did. He told you He would destroy your stronghold, hell, and He did. He told you He would forgive my sin, and He did. You can do nothing. Nothing. You have no power. And although my life, my victory, and my sonship is hidden now, it is real. I know that my Redeemer lives! And I have nothing to fear.

And that, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is the confidence that we have because of this day, Easter Day. And so no matter what you are facing in your life – whatever challenges, whatever fears, whatever doubts, whatever uncertainties, whatever enemies – ***“Do not be afraid.”*** Your Saviour has triumphed. And He is here for you, triumphing still. Here hidden – His body and blood hidden in, with, and under the bread and the wine of Holy Communion; hidden under the words of His Word and Absolution; hidden under the water of His Baptism – but here. Really here. And in control. Forgiving our sin, giving you faith, treading your enemy underfoot, and providing you all that you need. And saying to you, ***“Do not be afraid.”***

Now to close, I have to give an example, and credit where credit is due for this sermon. Oh, I wrote it! But it was really inspired and taught to me by my mother, a few weeks ago. For a few days after her funeral, my father was looking through some of her things, and in her Bible he found a small slip of paper – like this one. (I made a copy of it!) It was stuck in the pages of Matthew chapter 28, the Holy Gospel that we heard today. And on it was written just a few words. It said:

Do not be afraid.
Matthew 28:5-6.
Hospice.

What are you facing in your life right now? What seems too big to handle? Too great to forgive? Too strong, too overwhelming, too . . . what? ***“But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”***

Easter means we have a Saviour who is risen from the dead, who is victorious, who is in control, who has won! Do not be afraid. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
Alleluia!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.