

The Resurrection of Our Lord • April 24, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 28:1-10

“On the Lenten Road: At the Grave – Part 2”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

There's a lot of travel going on this time of year. Here in our area, a number of schools took their Spring break during Holy Week, and others are doing the same next week. Spring can be a pleasant time to travel: you might be visiting friends this weekend or hosting guests from out of town. When I'm traveling, I prefer flying to driving – even when gas prices weren't as high as they've are now. Flying usually gets me where I'm going much faster than driving could. So when I fly, I try to book nonstop flights. Just get me on the plane and get me to my destination – no layovers, please. And while some stops might be more impressive than others with their architecture and pretzel kiosks and public artwork, I'm not flying just to visit airports. I want to get on with seeing friends and family or doing whatever else I traveled to do. Maybe you feel the same way. Traveling can be fun, but sometimes the destination really *is* why you make the trip.

Throughout this season of Lent, we've traveled as a congregation “On the Lenten Road.” That road ends at the grave, as it must. We visited Lazarus' tomb only weeks ago, and now, on Easter morning, we find ourselves at another grave. This is the grave to which the women came to honor their dear friend and teacher with a proper burial after his betrayal, torture, and execution a few days earlier. Our journey leads to the grave. We live and we die. Some people say that you need to enjoy the journey because once you're dead, it's all over – and that's not a destination you ever want to reach. But, really, that's the way it should be for us. Don't you and I fall short of perfection every day? We don't deserve this “eternal life” that is free from the ravages of illness, hate, pain, and hurt. We're more interested in our own wants and needs than we are in showing love to others. Each of us can think of ways that we, through action and inaction, alike, have been less than loving in life. We're not perfect people, so why should we have perfect life, even new life with a loving God? **Our road should end at the grave.**

Have you ever been on a trip where you were really looking forward to getting to your destination, like a vacation that you've been planning for months? There you are, on the plane that will take you to this fantastic getaway, soaring along and dreaming of what you'll see and do when you get there. But then, the pilot comes on over the intercom and announces that you're going to have to make an unscheduled landing due to a mechanical problem. And once you land – at an airport in the middle of nowhere, by the way – you learn that you'll be stuck on this plane, sitting on the tarmac with nowhere to go. There aren't any outlets for you to charge your smartphone or e-reader, not that there's any cell coverage for you to download apps or text your friends. You've already read through the magazine that you brought with you and even browsed through the SkyMall catalog in that seat pocket in front of you. It's just you, cut off from everything that you know. And then the cabin A/C goes out. Imagine being stuck there: not for hours, but forever. That's what death should be for us imperfect people: an emergency landing in the middle of nowhere, separated from everyone that you love and everyone that loves you. And no matter how many times you hit that “Call Attendant” button over your head, there's nothing you can do to change that. Your trip is over.

Forty-some days ago, after Ash Wednesday, we considered the question, “Why do we observe Lent?” Today, as we gather with friends and family and music and flowers and festive festivities, we should ask, “Why do we celebrate Easter?” You might think that most significant holiday in the church year is Christmas, but it's not. Nor is it Epiphany or Ash Wednesday or Pentecost. It's Easter, because today we remember the resurrection of our Lord. That first Easter morning, at the grave, Jesus showed that not even death could contain him. He lives; and because he lives, so will all who have faith in him as the Messiah, our Savior.

For the Christian, death just isn't what it used to be. It's no longer an emergency landing into an existence that's cut off from love, one from which there's no departure. Jesus took the death we deserved

on the cross on Good Friday, suffering separation from God the Father, real death. Through Jesus' sacrifice, you and I are set free, and death cannot hold those whom our Lord sets free. **For the Christian, death has become a layover.** It still isn't a good thing, still not part of how things were meant to be. Death continues to be painful, even though it's temporary. For a time, we *are* cut off from people that we love. We *are* separated from our bodies. But we will rise – we will take off again. We will reach our intended destination, where we have a loving Father who stands ready to welcome us with open arms.

Why do we celebrate Easter? The truth of Jesus' resurrection is central to our faith. As St. Paul writes, "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" (1 Cor. 15:17-19) Easter matters. **The resurrection shines a spotlight on Jesus' identity:** He is the Son of God, the Savior for all people. He is not merely some moral teacher who wanted people to live good lives and be nice to each other. He came into our broken world for no less a purpose than to bring about the rescue of humanity from the power of death and to end our exile from our Creator. C.S. Lewis, the Christian writer who penned the Chronicles of Narnia and many other books and poems, expressed this truth quite nicely in another of his most popular works:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. (Mere Christianity)

Jesus never called himself a great teacher; rather, He claimed to be God. That was what the leaders of the people cited as the reason he should be killed. And Jesus accepted worship, something due to God alone: even in Matthew's Easter account, we hear that Jesus accepted the worship of those faithful women who were running from his empty grave to tell the angel's news. He isn't merely a man. **Jesus is God, for God alone can bring life from death.**

Why do we celebrate Easter? Easter points us to Jesus, to who he is and what he has done for us. Jesus is the Son of God, the One who has changed death from a destination into a layover for his people, for you. Easter is *your* story.

In the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, we see that there is life after Lent. You and I aren't trapped in a journey that has no meaning, one that ends in only sadness and suffering. Instead, God calls us to live as people for whom resurrection is reality. Because of Easter, our journey is transformed. If you take another look at our Gospel text, you'll see that Matthew records that both the angel at the grave and Jesus himself gave the women three instructions: **do not be afraid, go, and tell.** They were in the presence of the *divine* – even the guards passed out in terror at the sight of the angel! – and yet, they were accepted. But they weren't meant to stay at the grave; rather, they were sent out with a mission and a message.

We have heard their message: Jesus lives! You and I are now called by this good news to live as Easter people. In this life after Lent, God changes both your living and your dying. Because Jesus lives, because you are raised with him into life that cannot be held captive by death, **you don't have to fear being in the presence of the divine.** Even though you are not perfect, even though you struggle each day with the desire to live for only yourself by action and inaction, look to the cross and the empty grave as Easter people and have hope. Jesus has come to rescue us from permanent grounding on the tarmac of death by his death and resurrection. He has come to lift us out of our hopelessness and self-centeredness and to reconnect us with God. Like the women going from the grave, you and I called to be witnesses through our living, to go and tell what we have seen. We have a message: Jesus lives, and because he lives, you can live, too. As Easter people, we are sent to give this good news to everyone who is still trapped in fear of the grave. Easter is your story.

As Easter people, we are on a journey with a destination. And while death may wait ahead on that journey, for us it's only a layover. Because one day, leaving the empty grave behind us, we will continue on to the one who is waiting to welcome us into the company of our Father and all those who have gone before us in the faith: our living Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.