

Sermon – Matthew 28:1-10
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Grace Lutheran Church
Easter – Year A
9 April 2023

“He Is Not Here”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I still remember the first time I presided at an interment, speaking the words, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” I remember because it was my grandmother being lowered into the earth. I don’t recall why the pastor who presided at the funeral didn’t do the committal, too, but I’m sure at some point someone in my family said, “hey, it’s okay; we got a guy now.” The guy being me, a seminarian. My Grandma Lyle wasn’t the first person I knew who died; she wasn’t even my first grandparent to die. But she was the first person to die whose absence was palpable to me. She was a small woman, but she was very much alive. She took up space in the best ways. Her hands moving Monopoly pieces around the board at the small kitchen table in the otherwise roomy house. Her feet walking next to mine as the two of us explored used bookstores. She not only cultivated my love of reading. She taught me to love books, which is an altogether different kind of love. And at the end, her mind, long since ravaged by dementia, her body outliving her understanding of who she was. But who she *was* was my grandmother. Mildred. Millie. And then, on a sunny day in rural Wisconsin, she was placed in the ground. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I went back once to see her grave. The dirt had been broken through by grass, trimly kept. But of

Millie there was no sign. Not that I was expecting one, of course. That sort of thing doesn't happen in this world in which death claims to have the last word.

2. On that Sunday morning, after the Sabbath had passed, the Marys – bolder than the boys – go to see the tomb. To hear Matthew tell it, that's their only reason. To go and see. No spices to carry, no anointing to complete. Perhaps they simply missed him. His presence. His physicality, the way he took up space. His hands that stilled the storm. His feet that carried him to Lazarus's tomb. His voice that taught them how to talk to God, his voice, itself the Word, casting a new vision of God's reign. All of that – all of *him* – had been put to death on Friday. He'd been laid in a tomb, and that was that. The Roman Empire, the strongest force on earth, had even posted guards at the tomb just to make sure death did its job. The women could come and see the tomb, but what else could there possibly be to see?

3. What else? As it turns out, the most amazing thing. A great reversal begins. Jesus' death caused an earthquake on Friday, the death of the divine causing creation itself to shudder. But now, the Creator begins to right the ship. The earth quakes once more. Tectonic plates of grace slide back into place as the world is put to rights. Among the many moving stones, one stands out. The women see it roll away, but the occupant of the grave is already gone. The one place Jesus was sure to be is the one place he isn't. With fear and great joy, they go to tell the story, these women who are the first evangelists. But before they can reach their friends, Jesus reaches them. The women do what anyone who has ever lost a loved one yearns to do. They take hold of him and hang on for dear life, for their life is now found in him. Suddenly, the world itself is broken open, turned upside-down. If Jesus is alive, what now is not possible? He is raised, and in him life is restored to this dying world. Without him, love – no matter how noble or powerful – has a limit. Love ends at the grave. But in Christ, through Christ, it is the grave itself that has reached its

- end. Death swallowed up in the victory of our God. In Christ, through Christ, love lives on and on and on.
4. A member of Grace told me of a conversation they'd overheard not too long ago after a funeral here at Grace. Apparently, as a group of friends was walking out of the sanctuary, one woman exclaimed, "That was wonderful! Between the sermon and the songs, I heard so much about the resurrection!" To which another replied, "Yes, the proclamation was so clear." Hearing the story so far, I confess I was feeling pretty good about myself. Until the other shoe dropped. "Yeah," said the first speaker. "In fact, I think I heard so much about the resurrection that I don't even have to go to worship on Easter." To which a friend replied, "As if you were going to go anyway!"
 5. Well, this unknown person may not be here this morning, but *you* are. Why? Why do you keep coming back, if not Sunday after Sunday at least Easter after Easter? There are probably a million reasons, but underneath them all is a simple truth. We need the hope, the promise, the life, that only resurrection can give. And Christ is alive! The angels declare it, the women proclaim it, the earth itself bears witness to it. And thank God. For is not death still on the prowl? We hear so much bad news, from the streets to our city to the front in Ukraine to the secret sorrows of our own hearts. We hear so much bad news that it can be hard to hear the good. So, hear this: Christ who was crucified is alive. He has gone on ahead of you and will meet us here today.
 6. To be sure, we still wait, yearning for that day when Christ shall come again, when God will be all in all. But we need no longer wait with fear or uncertainty or anxiety. For today we hear that all is well. As Frederick Buechner could write, "I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as all its glory, who has known one way or another

what it is like to live separated from God.” He continues, “In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life.”

7. Friends, the stone is rolled away, and so one day shall all tombs be disturbed, when the earth itself shall quake and death and hell will give up all those to whom they have falsely laid claim. As Christ took on our frail flesh and died, so for his sake will all those we love take on Christ’s lot and live. Not as a memory carried in our hearts, or as souls floating through the ether. They shall be raised, and they shall live. Whole people made holy, restored to life. And so shall it be for us. May we, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead to eternal life, step out of our tombs and into life today, for the sake of him who gave himself for us. Friends, come and see. Death is dead. Christ is alive and so, too, are you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!