**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Death and Dying? It’s Not That Serious.”**

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“*And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.’ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”* (Mark 16:5-8).

The charge against Jesus was treason. There’s nothing to that, of course. Jesus wasn’t interested in armed insurrection. His calling, His aim, was to die for us, in our place, as our substitute. Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6).

After His death, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus, went into Pilate’s office and asked for the corpse. He wanted to give it a proper burial. It’s a potentially dangerous request. Jesus was executed for treason, and it would be easy enough to round up His followers and do the same to them. But Pilate isn’t interested. He orders the body to be released, and Joseph, with the help of Nicodemus, takes the battered corpse, and hastily wraps it in a linen shroud. They do their best, but time is short. It’s a Friday, and the sun is already dipping into the horizon. The Sabbath will soon begin when no one can work. So, they quickly place the body of Jesus into Joseph’s own tomb, which was carved out of a hillside. They roll a stone in front of the entrance. These were large, thick disks several feet in diameter that were rolled into a depressed groove in front of the tomb’s entrance.

The Sabbath begins. Saturday is a quiet day.

On Sunday as the sun rises, three women set off for the tomb. They intend to finish the job. They want to pull the body out, wash it, anoint it with spices, and wrap it up again. Clearly, these are strong women. Still, they’re worried about that stone. How are they going to move it? It’s one thing to roll it into the depression; it’s quite another to muscle the thing out. They don’t have a plan, but as they draw near, they find the stone has already been rolled back. Stooping to look inside, they are startled to see a young man sitting within, dressed in a white robe. Matthew identifies him as an angel.

“Do not be alarmed,” the young man says. “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.” The women, trembling and confused, flee from the tomb. They say nothing to no one, for they were afraid.

There are no Alleluias, no Easter lilies, no trumpets or egg bakes or baskets full of chocolate. There is not even a hint of celebration. Jesus is risen. The angel has done his job. The message has been faithfully proclaimed. Still, they are afraid.

And so it is for us. For two thousand years now, the church has fulfilled her vocation and faithfully proclaimed the message of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Still, each of us, because of sin and doubt, struggles with fears, especially fears orbiting around death and dying. Even those with strong faith have fears about death that are not undone by the Easter message. Plus, life assaults us relentlessly with other fears. What are yours?

Will I outlive my savings?

Will a stroke rob me of the capacity to walk or talk and live independently?

Will I ever be able to pay off my student debt and buy a home?

Will my marriage survive this present darkness?

Are we racing towards ecological disaster?

Are those cancerous cells on the loose?

What are your fears? Fill in the gaps. I can promise you this. Whatever I say this morning, even if you have strong faith, it will not be enough to dissolve or undo your fears. But I can also promise you this: you will not go away empty handed, even as the women did not flee from the tomb empty handed. They heard the message. They were given the promise. And with time, that Word of God was enough, and they would come to believe the young man’s words who said, “He is risen!” This factchanges everything for those who believe. It may not remove our fears altogether, but it will temper them.

A number of years ago, I was visiting with a member: David Hasslinger. This was shortly before his death. He had just signed onto hospice care. At some point, I asked him if I could inform the people here that he was now in hospice care. . . “so they know it’s serious.” “It’s not that serious,” he said. (He said it with a smile on his face, the kind that nearly made his eyes disappear.) “It’s not that serious.” David was not in denial. He was not rejecting his prognosis. He was confessing his faith. It was the Hasslinger way of saying, “I know my Redeemer lives. . . and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God!” (Job 19:25ff). It was Wisconsin speak for asking, “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:55). Death and dying? It’s not that serious, because Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn. 11:25-26).

Hear me: We never, ever want to take matters into our own hands and prematurely end life. That could undo everything. Instead, we commend ourselves into God’s care and let Him number our days knowing “precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints” (Ps. 116:15). We trust His will is best for us, also at the end of our days.

What about those left behind after someone we love dies? It can be hard, but it won’t last forever. It’s not that serious, because we do not “grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him” (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

What about having to move into a nursing home? It’s not that serious, because “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), and Jesus promised there is ample space for us all. “In my Father’s house are many rooms . . . and I am going there to prepare a place for you” (Jn. 14:2).

What about a stroke robbing you or me of the ability to talk or walk? It’s not that serious, because a day will soon come when Jesus will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body” (Rom. 6:5).

What about some ecological disaster such as global warming? God has charged us as to be good stewards of His creation. Control what you can. Reduce, reuse, recycle and all that. But no need to fearfully fixate on it. After all, God did warn us this would happen. Isaiah 51, “The earth will wear out like a garment and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; **but**(!) my salvation will be forever” (v. 6). He promised also to make “new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or even come to mind” (Is. 65:17).

What about those uncontrolled cancer cells? He tells the seas, “This far and no further. Here shall your proud waves be stayed” (Job 38:11). I can imagine Him saying similar things to rogue cancer cells. They cannot hide from His eyes. And if He should use them eventually to take you home? It’s not that serious. Paul wrote, “We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (Rom. 6:4-5).

Folks, the news and promise of resurrection changes everything for us. It means for every problem, for every fear, there is an expiration date. Whatever it is, it’s not going to last forever. Either God will see us through in good order, or He will raise us from the dead and give us new life.

The resurrection of Jesus may not eliminate our fears, but they need not debilitate us either. Let your fears drive you back to the promise proclaimed by the young man in the tomb. “He is not here. He is risen! You will see Him just as He told you.”

Death and dying? It’s not that serious. Why?

“Christ is risen!” **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**