

AMAZING GRACE: HE IS ALIVE!

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

April 9, 2023 – Easter Sunday

TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10

It was a dark night in the year 1761. A musician named George stumbled blindly down a dark street in London. He had fallen on hard times. He was depressed, hopeless and filled with despair. Jealous rivalries, ill health, and a series of devastating misfortunes had brought him to this low ebb. He felt empty, dejected, lonely, hopeless and miserable. Nearing the age of 60, his income gone and his health shattered, George felt certain that his life was over.

In this defeated frame of mind, he returned that dismal night to his shabby home. When he arrived there, he found a large package at his door. In the package he found the words to a new sacred piece of music and a letter from a friend, asking George to write music for it.

Still in despair, George began to leaf carelessly through the pages. Suddenly his eyes fell upon a passage that captivated him. It read, *"He was despised and rejected. He looked for someone to have pity on him*

but there was no one." George resonated to those words written originally about Jesus, actually describing what *he* was feeling at the moment - despised, rejected, and alone.

With a glowing sense of kinship, George read on, and he found these words, "*He trusted in God and God did not leave him...God gave him rest.*" Now the words began to come alive and to glow with meaning for George. They stirred his soul and warmed his heart. He read on. "*I know that my redeemer liveth. Rejoice! Rejoice! HALLELUJAH!*"

George could feel the creative forces resurrecting and surging within him once again. Wondrous, incredible melodies straight from heaven rapidly tumbled one after another into his mind. He grabbed pen and paper and began to fill page after page with amazing confidence and swiftness all though the night. He wrote day after day. Sometimes he became so moved by what he was writing that he wept and shouted. At last, he finished. Exhausted he fell onto his bed and slept peacefully for seventeen hours. But on his desk was the musical score of one of the greatest and most beloved pieces of sacred music ever written: Handel's Messiah!

I can just imagine that on that first Good Friday – the day that Jesus died on the cross – the disciples and followers of Jesus were feeling a lot like George. They knew true fear and despair as they watched the crucifixion. When Jesus died, they were overcome with grief.

For three years they had been following Jesus – believing Him to be the Messiah. When Jesus was alive, the world was filled with light. But now that Jesus was dead, the whole world seemed dark. They lost all hope and forgot all of Jesus' promises that he would be raised from the dead. So, they huddled together behind locked doors, fearful for their own lives. Like Handel, I think they were feeling empty, dejected, lonely and hopeless.

But all of that changed on Easter morning. Let's read what happened in our passage for today found in the gospel of Matthew. I invite you to get your Bibles out and follow along as I read Matthew 28:1-10. Matthew is found in the New Testament, the very first book.

Follow along as I read from the New Living Translation:

¹ *Early on Sunday morning as the new day was dawning,*

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb.

² *Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it.*

³ *His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow.*

⁴ *The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. ⁵ Then the angel spoke to the women. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. ⁷ And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you.”*

⁸ *The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel’s message. ⁹ And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”*

Two women go to a tomb to pay their last respects to their dead friend. Just imagine their thoughts and feelings as they approached the garden tomb. They had been some of the faithful few that stayed near Jesus and saw Him die on the cross. They were there when His body was buried in the tomb. You can just imagine the heaviness on their hearts – their pain and grief.

We read in other gospels that as they were walking to the tomb, they were wondering to themselves, “Who will move the stone away for us?” You will remember that the Jewish leaders asked that the tomb be sealed for 3 days...so that no one could get in and try to steal the body and then claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. (see Matthew 27:62-65) Pilate sent guards to seal the tomb and then guard it. The tomb was sealed by stringing a cord across the stone that was rolled over the entrance. The cord was then sealed at each end with clay. And the guards stood in front of the tomb.

As the women were walking toward the tomb, all of the sudden an earthquake shook the very ground they were walking on. An angel came and rolled away the stone and sat down upon it. It must have been

a dazzling sight to see, with his face shining like lightning. When the guards got a sight of this wondrous angel - they fainted dead away. But this angel had a message to share – the good news of resurrection – and the two women named Mary would be the first to hear it.

Notice that the first words of the angel are “Do not be afraid”! The angel understood their sadness and despair and quickly spoke of hope and assurance. *“I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He has been raised. Come and see!”*

Now some have thought that perhaps the stone was rolled away so that Jesus could get out. But I really don’t believe that was the case. I think Jesus would have risen and appeared to His followers, whether that stone had rolled away or not. No, I think the stone was rolled away so that others could go in and see that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, just as he had promised. In fact, I think the stone was rolled away so that you and I could see – He is not there! His tomb is empty! He is alive!

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go into the tomb and see it is exactly as the angel said. Then the angel tells them to go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women left frightened and yet full of great joy. And as they were going back to the disciples, who did they run into along the path? The risen Lord – Jesus! Can you just imagine the thrill and amazement at seeing Him face to face!

Jesus' first words to them were "Don't be afraid!" He knew that they still were frightened. He offered to them His own peace for their troubled minds and hearts. God had rolled the stone away and Jesus was alive! It was a day of great rejoicing – not of fear and trembling.

And then Jesus gave them a command. He said: "Go and tell". This great news could not be kept a secret. The women were called to share their great joy! They were called to spread the news that Jesus was alive.

The news rang out loud and clear: "He is alive! He is risen!" And that news changed everything. The disciples changed greatly --- from a weak and cowardly band of people to a strong and hopeful group

of Christians who began the church. The Easter event turned their blindness into sight, their despair into hope, their fear into courage.

All throughout Lent, we have been studying about 24 Hours that Changed the World. You know, I think a better title could have been “72 hours that changed the world!” – because I believe that the death of Jesus AND His resurrection is really what changed the world. Jesus’ resurrection shows that He is the victor over death. Satan tried to steal and kill and destroy Jesus. He thought he had won the victory on that Friday when Jesus was crucified. But on Easter Sunday, Jesus rose up from the grave and truly won the victory. By His death on the cross, He defeated death. Death couldn’t hold him in the grave. Christ indeed is the Victor!

Because of that resurrection power, the disciples were enabled to come out of hiding and started spreading the good news of Jesus all over the world. They turned from the pit of despair to a great joy and reason to live boldly for the Lord.

So the question before us today is – does the resurrection make any difference in our lives? Are we like the disciples, scared and doubting, overwhelmed with the pressures and stress of life? Are we facing times, just like the disciples, when we feel we can't go on --- that the burdens we bear are just too heavy? The good news today is that Jesus is ready to meet you along that pathway you are walking. He will come and meet us and tell us: “Do not be afraid! Rejoice, I have overcome death. Because I live, you also shall live!”

Not only can God bring back His Son to life, but God can also change our dead and dreary lives into renewed and hopeful lives. God can take our lives and change them through resurrection power. Because Jesus lives, we have a love that never dies. Because Jesus lives, we can have a peace beyond all human understanding. Because Jesus lives, we can have all the strength we need to live.

And with this resurrection power, we are empowered to “Go and Tell” others the resurrection story. We can boldly proclaim God's love for all and God's victory over death.

Sometimes it is so difficult to see this resurrection power at work in our lives. We celebrate the resurrection power at Easter each year --- and then we go back to our jobs the next day, unchanged. Often times we proclaim the news of the resurrection on Easter and then the following week we go back to the same old prejudices and sinful ways. It is as if the Resurrection didn't make a difference.

My great prayer is that the Resurrection can take hold of us and change us. For I believe you can't go away from the empty tomb unchanged. Just think about Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. After they saw the empty tomb – and saw the risen Lord along the road, do you think they went back to the upper room the same way that they had left it? Were they still full of despair and sadness? Absolutely not! They were full of joy and praises to God! I imagine in my mind the two women running as fast as they could to get back and tell the disciples the good news.

Our challenge for Easter is to open ourselves up to that Resurrection Power and claim it for each new day here on earth and for our hope for the future.

When you are facing too many worries in life and can't seem to find a solution, turn and look to the resurrected Lord. Cast all your anxieties on Him for He cares about you. You have a risen Lord who will carry you in the difficult times and will give you peace instead of worry.

When the challenge seems too great and you start to feel weak and inadequate, turn and look to the resurrected Jesus. His grace is sufficient for you. In fact, where you are weak, He is strong! Because His tomb is empty so your life can be full!

When your wounds seem too deep and the pain seems to control you, turn and look to our resurrected Lord. He too knows what it is like to be hurt -- to be betrayed and denied -- and to suffer. He came out of the tomb, not in a perfect glorified body, but a scarred body. He has the nailprints in his hands still. He understands your suffering. Look to Jesus for by His wounds we are healed.

When you are tired and stressed out and weary from the week's responsibilities, look to our risen Lord. Jesus says: *"Come to me, all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest."*

Because the tomb is empty, we can have a full and abundant life. We don't have to wear ourselves out, trying to "make a living" because Jesus has already given us life. We just need to learn to stop controlling and start depending.

And when you are standing in a cemetery, staring at the cold earth of the grave, turn and look to the resurrected Lord. Our loved ones are not there....just their worn-out bodies. The real person we loved is in heaven with God....all because Jesus rose from the dead.

That's the promise of Easter --- that Christ will walk with us every moment and will walk with us after we die.

We serve a risen Savior; He's in the world today! He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own! His tomb is empty and He is alive!

PRAYER

INVITATION

My friends, because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone! Go and tell the good news! He is alive! He is alive!

Make a commitment today to live for Him! Open your heart and allow His Spirit to work within you. Make your confession of faith and let Him rule on the throne of your heart. Join with this particular group of believers and serve the Lord through First Christian. Re-dedicate your life to live with the power of the resurrection. God is calling you today. What will be your answer?