

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday: The Angel Said...
Rev. John Crow

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:14-18
Colossians 3:1-4
Mark 16:1-8

Does anyone know how the Church determines what the date is for Easter Sunday each year? Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the March equinox. If you're like me, that formula makes your head hurt. It seems bizarrely complicated. And besides, why would we mark the single greatest day of the Church based on a combination of the Moon revolving around the Earth and the Earth revolving around the Sun? We follow the liturgical calendar, which aims to center our lives on the life of Christ, and to remind us that all of time, and every aspect of life, is under God's domain. The liturgical calendar, is a helpful tool for those who seek to model their lives after Christ, but it breaks down a bit around Easter. I'm going use the words of the angel from today's gospel reading in Mark to show you why Easter transcends the liturgical calendar, and what that means for us as Christ followers.

There are four key phrases I want to focus on that were used by the angel in the tomb when speaking to the women. I want to focus on the second phrase first. “He has been raised from the dead”. Even though the angel said not to be surprised, I think it was very normal for the ladies to be surprised at this. It had been three days. There could be no doubt that Jesus had really and truly died. The Romans were kind of experts in executions—they didn’t make mistakes. And even though this was an ancient society, they knew what death was, and they knew it was permanent.

Every Jew also knew that only God could bring someone back from the dead (though God may work through a prophet to do so), and it didn’t happen very often. And when He did—as remarkable as it was—it wasn’t a sign or precursor of something greater. One very blessed soul received a second chance at life. The resurrection of Jesus, however, was truly a unique event because it was a defeat of death for everyone! As the new Adam, Jesus turned the inescapable enemy of all who live into the gateway to eternal life. “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). With the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the doorposts of our hearts, God spares us.

Another amazing fact about the statement that Jesus had risen is that it wasn't a temporary state. Jesus would NEVER be defeated "again"—by anything or anyone. He wasn't destined to die a second time (unlike Lazarus). Uninterrupted, never-ending life was what Jesus had ahead of him. Jesus had taken the hissing viper of death and turned it into a toothless worm. And if Death couldn't touch Him again, rest assured nothing else could, either.

Now let's go back to the angel's first key phrase, which is, "He isn't here." While this was a statement of physical, imperative fact, it leads to the obvious question, *where is He?* At the time of His resurrection, Jesus was still a man located in a single place. But with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God has now taken up residence in the heart of every believer. All material space has always been under God's domain, but His territory is now specially marked in souls at peace with His—not with flags staked in patches of ground. That means we are never on foreign soil. We take Him with us wherever we go. It also means we may have more in common with the believer living in the jungles of Burma than we do with our next-door neighbor.

Jesus Christ is most visible in His Church. No, I'm not talking about the building. I'm talking about each and every believer in community with one another. When we serve each other, and love strangers in need, and stand up against oppression, we are making Christ visible. This is both a blessing and a burden. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church is empowered for every task we are given. We are the Bride of Christ, and Scripture tells us that not even the gates of Hell can stand against us (Matthew 16:18). He will make us ready for the wedding feast in the eschaton. The burden is to show the World where Jesus is, in other words, to make Christ visible to the World until that final day of history comes. Just because we are promised victory in the end, doesn't make the task easy. The Allies won WWII, but they lost many battles in the process. Our national cemeteries are full of those who came home in caskets. Make no mistake—we are at war with an enemy. The Accuser won't go down without a fight. He doesn't want us to make Christ visible to the World. When we bicker amongst ourselves; when we fail to care for the needy; when we benefit from the oppression of marginalized populations, we are serving the enemy's purpose of making Christ *invisible*. If we let that happen, we lose another battle, and the enemy claims more casualties.

The third remarkable statement of the angel was that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, just as He had promised. This hints at several truths. One is that as our

leader, Christ goes ahead of us, not behind. He doesn't say, "Do this, and I'll catch up later". No, He lays the groundwork for us, much as the concrete must be laid down before the frame of a house is built on top of it. I like to think of it in terms of an old Army story, when a new lieutenant asked his commander why the soldiers had to salute him. The young man knew he hadn't personally done anything to deserve such respect. His commander replied, "In combat, you will yell, 'follow me!' and be the first one in the enemy's sights, just as officers before you. That is why you deserve the salute." Jesus has led the way for us in the resurrection, so that we can know that one day, we too will join Him in the final resurrection. Can you hear it? Jesus is yelling even now, "follow me!"

When the angel said, "as He told you", he was referring to the statement by Jesus recorded two chapters earlier, in Mark 14:28, where Jesus said He would meet them in Galilee after He was raised. This drives home the point that nothing surprises God, and nothing can impede His plans. God has told us quite a bit about the future. We can rest assured, 100% of it will be true. Unlike my March Madness bracket, Jesus won't be just 60% correct. Everything He has said will come to pass, so we need not fear. It's good to be on the winning team. At the same time, we must be careful. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, didn't get it until it happened (or in some cases, *after* it happened). So we

shouldn't be surprised when we get it wrong. Just like the disciples, we can't expect to understand it all until after the fact. We must remain humble with what God has revealed to us, and constantly search the scriptures to improve our understanding.

With the final phrase from the angel, the rubber really meets the road. The angel told the women to go tell the disciples. But what would they tell the disciples? Not just that they would see Jesus again in Galilee—as amazing as that news was—but they were also to tell what they had experienced. The women weren't expected to be able to explain why or how it had all happened. It was enough simply to tell what they had seen. The same is true for us today. One doesn't need a theology degree to be a great witness for Christ. Nor do we have to be Billy Graham. We simply need to be obedient and tell what we've experienced as opportunities arise. I say this because I believe the command from the angel is universal. It applies to all Christ followers in all times. It was not just for the women in the tomb that day. What I mean is that this is a model for all Christians to follow, and a foreshadowing of the Great Commission.

In fulfilling our role as Christ's witnesses, we cannot allow anything to stand in our way. What we have to share is the best news the world has ever heard, better than the ending of a war, or famine; better than solving all environmental issues; and better than worldwide freedom of speech and religion. The Good News is truly the only hope for the World.

Because the Good News is the message the World simply must hear, we cannot let fear keep us from our mission to speak of what we have experienced. Fear is a very natural reaction, however. We fear rejection. We fear ridicule, or loss of respectability. In some cases, we could even fear financial loss. The women who left the empty tomb that first Easter morning also feared. They likely feared for their safety from the Jewish leaders and Romans. But if we don't speak, who will? Who else has your exact social network? Monasteries are all well and good, but none of us live in one. We are in the world. Jesus the Great Physician has invited us to be His emergency responders—the first ones on the scene. Just as we are to make Christ visible as we live in community in the body, we are also called not to hold back when the opportunity arises to share our experience. And remember, He has already laid the groundwork for us, because He is ahead of us, not behind us.

So why does this mean the liturgical calendar breaks down around Easter? Simple: No calendar can contain Easter! If the liturgical calendar is like a loop that repeats itself every year, then Easter is an ever-expanding spiral that rises off the page, stretching towards the heavens. We are an Easter people. As followers of Christ, we are defined by Easter. We live in Easter every day. Death doesn't go back in the box to pop out again like some spiritual jack-in-the-box as we come through the cycle again. Death was defeated for good. When we move into regular time this Summer, it's still really Easter.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, we must be aware, that of all days and all feasts, the Eucharist is truly an Easter feast! If you've been to Epworth for more than about a week, you know communion is more than a mere memorial. It is a means of grace, empowering us for our journey. The death and resurrection of Christ are what gives communion its efficacy. That, and the fact that we share Christ's fate: in death, in resurrection, and in glory, as today's reading in Colossians chapter three makes clear. Exactly how all this works is a mystery, but one we can serenely accept from a Savior and King who has proven Himself beyond any doubt through His death and resurrection.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.