

**Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020**  
**Community Christian Reformed Church**  
**Pastor Carel Geleynse**

Christ is risen!  
He is risen, indeed!

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:1-10**

The word of the Lord!  
Thanks be to God.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

How strange this Easter Sunday morning is! We are used to going to well-attended worship services where there are loud proclamations about the resurrection. We are used to going to worship services where there are many different instruments and many voices all proclaiming that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Easter is the morning we crank up the volume on hymns such as “Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Hallelujah!”

But this year, 2020, we are not finding ourselves cranking up the volume in packed churches joyfully singing our Easter hymns. Instead we are home, each in our own place, some alone, some as couples, some as families, but there is really no one else around – we are isolated one from another on a morning when our compulsion is to be together in large crowds, in celebration. And we are not in our homes because we want to be there or because we thought this might be a novel way in which to pass the time this Easter, but we are in our homes because we are told to stay home. Easter 2020 finds us in the midst of a pandemic and we all hear the Prime Minister’s words ringing in our ears, “Go home and stay home!” “We need to flatten the curve, so stay home!” And so, other than an occasional trip to a grocery store or pharmacy or perhaps to an essential job, our worlds have become very small for we are home. There really is no place to go anyway because everything is closed. In our homes we are watching as the virus has continued its relentless creep, and that relentless creep and some of the projections concerning what could be, has tended to fill us with a certain amount of fear or dread about going anywhere near anyone else. We don’t want to catch the virus. We have no interest in getting ill and so we stay put. Even those who are still working in what have been deemed as “essential services” go to work and come home with a certain amount of fear that they may have caught or somehow be transmitting the virus to their family members. Around the globe tens of thousands have died of the virus, and many of our conversations are about illness and death. Indeed, these are very strange and fear-filled days - days filled with lament concerning all the things that we have lost in terms of lives lost and lost freedoms and abilities to be with each other in person, and so on. The virus has taken so much from us... So we lament.

So as we think about the resurrection gospel this year, we do so in a very different context than in previous years. As we think about the resurrection gospel this year, it is much quieter than in previous years and it is much more intimate. Perhaps our context this year may give us a little bit of a glimpse into what things were like that very first Easter because, for the disciples of Jesus, it

was a very strange, fear-filled, lament-filled time as well. Like us, in a very short period of time they had lost a lot. From freedom to isolation. From normalcy to witnessing strange things. No, they were not dealing with a creeping virus, but, much like us, they were dealing with what seemed to be a collapsing world. That collapsing world caused them much grief and it caused them to isolate from the authorities.

For some time prior to the story we read today, the disciples had followed Jesus listening to his teachings and watching as he performed many wonders and signs. But then came the day that Jesus had been arrested, at which point Matthew records (Matthew 26:56), “all the disciples deserted him and fled.” In terror and fear they ran away. This was not the way things were supposed to go... As we note from the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), they walked home with “faces downcast”. Questioned as to why they were downcast they talked about Jesus being arrested and crucified and dying. “We had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” ...and they don’t say it as such, but they inferred that they were kind of disappointed and maybe wrong in having put their hope in Jesus, and then to top it all off they had now also heard that the body was gone and that those at the tomb had received a vision, something they really did not know what to do with, but certainly everything they had hoped for had gone out the window, all in a matter of days. The disciples were confused by what had happened and they were afraid of the authorities and so they did everything they could to remain out of the spotlight in order to preserve their lives.

As they gathered together, in secret, they must have talked endlessly about what had happened, just like we talk endlessly about the virus that is affecting our world. They had witnessed Jesus being beaten, mocked, tried, and led out to be crucified at the hands of the Romans, all like some common low-down criminal. A number of them had witnessed the final hours of Jesus' life, and it had been a horrible, slow, painful dying process. Those at the cross had been witnesses to the strange darkness that had covered the land as they witnessed their beloved Jesus cry out to God in his agony and they had watched as he breathed his last. Then, as Matthew recorded in chapter 27:51-53, at the time of Jesus' death “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs...”. What was happening? We think the coronavirus is freaky...

Then, in a hurry, in order to meet the Sabbath Day deadline, Jesus had been placed in a tomb and a large stone had been rolled in front of the entrance to the grave. Much like deaths are dealt with in this pandemic, the burial of Jesus was quick and with just a hand full of people present. There was not even time for a proper handling of the body. There was no funeral or memorial service – just a quick burial with plans to finish the task once the Sabbath was over. How the disciples must have lamented what had happened.

Then after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who had been present at Jesus' burial, went to the tomb where Jesus had been hastily buried, to carry out one final unfinished deed of kindness to the one they had come to love as their master and friend. With them they carried the spices and salve needed for embalming. There they went early that Sunday morning filled with grief. They must also have gone with a certain amount of fear

because there must have been times when they perhaps looked over their shoulders to see if they were being followed or to see if Jesus' enemies were nearby.

Even as they traveled to the garden their minds must have been filled with questions. Questions like: Who would roll away the stone and thereby give them access to the body? And what about the guards? Questions like those posed on the road to Emmaus later that day: What had just happened on Thursday and Friday? What had become of the promises of God and kingdom of heaven? What had become of all that Jesus represented? Was Jesus who He said he was? Was He the Messiah? If so, why did he have to die? And, what now?

Their world was upside-down and darkness was all about them. The enemy seemed to be so strong. The Jewish leaders had finally found their opportunity to seize Jesus and get rid of him. Judas, one of their own, or so they thought, had betrayed Jesus, and Peter had publicly denied knowing him. Everything they had expected had come to a grinding halt. The Romans had carried out a simple execution to ensure that there would be peace in the land. Maybe they had succeeded in stopping any sort of riots, but there sure was no peace in the hearts of the women or the other disciples. Instead there was only confusion and fear. What would happen to them? What next?

As they women were traveling to the garden, or perhaps even before they started travelling to the garden, something happened there. There was a violent earthquake and an angel of the Lord came and rolled away the stone from the tomb and sat on it. Matthew tells us that "his appearance was like lightening and his clothes were white as snow." Heaven intervened and the guards could not handle it. They were so afraid of the angel that they shook and became like dead men. The enemies of the Lord fell as though dead in the presence of the heavenly visitor and note that there is no statement to them to not be afraid. They were very afraid, indeed, and they had reason to be afraid. Thinking that somehow a human guard could stop the resurrection of the Lord of lords and the King of kings was ludicrous – enemies of the Lord and of the plan of salvation have every reason to be afraid.

And then, it seems, the women, filled with their grief and questions finally arrived. They were about to get answers to some of their questions but not really in the way they thought they would get them. Something obviously had happened at the tomb, and it became apparent that the spices and salves they were carrying would not be needed, nor would their tears be appropriate, because those are only appropriate things in the face of death, but there was no death here anymore. As they arrived at the tomb the angel spoke to them and brought a message that they needed to hear and a message that they really were not prepared to hear: "Do not be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen just as he said." To his people came the message, "do not be afraid! You have nothing to fear." Yet, the rolled-away stone, the like-dead guards and the angel and then his message must have sent shivers up and down the spines of the women. Angels were frightening enough, never mind a message about someone they had seen die being alive again. Was it possible? Was it true?

"Do not be afraid," the angel told them. In the midst of their collapsed world, in the midst of their hopelessness and despair, in the midst of their wondering about what was going to happen to them next, there blazed a new light, a strong light; a light of comfort. Just when it seemed that all was lost and that there was no hope anymore; just when it seemed that all their expectations had been dashed and when it seemed that God had abandoned or forgotten His people, the Lord made it

clear that such was not at all the case, after all He is the Lord of history. He is the Lord of salvation. On that first Easter Sunday morning the women's darkness was overcome by light. The message of the angel was true, after all. Christ had risen from the dead! Christ had conquered death! Amazing, but true! This was no hoax. No one had stolen the body - Jesus simply was alive again. This was not a symbolic rising from the dead, or a parable of some sort. His was not a resurrection of an idea or an ideology, no; His was a physical, literal rising from the dead. Death could not keep him in the grave! "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said..." the angels told the women. (v. 6)

Having heard the angel's message about the resurrected Christ they "hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy." (Matthew 28:8) Two seemingly conflicting emotions flooded them. And in the context of the events of the past few days, and now with the angel's message it all makes sense. Jesus had died, was buried and laid in a tomb. For the disciples the world had come crashing down. Then the grave was empty and heaven's angels had a resurrection message – of course, the women were filled with fear and joy. There suddenly was a ray of hope. They hurried away. They did not walk, they could not walk after such an encounter, but they ran to tell the disciples. Their joy outweighed their fear, or overcame their fear. I suppose this is something of what the apostle John teaches when he writes in I John 4:18, that "perfect love drives out fear." The love of God for His people, clearly demonstrated in Jesus Christ, makes it so that joy overshadows and overcomes fear.

In 1559 the Scottish reformer, John Knox, wrote a letter to the queen's secretary that told all about the misfortunes, which had befallen the Reformation in Scotland. He summed up his plight by writing, "Disaster stares us in the face everywhere." Yet, in the same letter Knox expressed hope, when he wrote at the very end, "The cause of God never looked better, for we are now completely at His mercy."

Eight years later a Belgian reformer by the name of Guido De Bres, whom we know as the author of the Belgic Confession, found himself in a similar position and responding as Knox had. De Bres was imprisoned for his convictions. With irons on his wrists and ankles, which cut through his flesh to the bone, De Bres was placed in a dark and gloomy, foul-aired dungeon called, "the Black Hole." Unlike Knox, De Bres was on death row. He knew that he would be executed for his faith and that he would never see his wife or family again. Being in such a situation it is perhaps logical to assume that a person would be bitter, despondent, upset, whatever. But in a letter to his wife, De Bres writes, "Your grief and anguish, troubling me in the midst of my joy and gladness, are the cause of my writing you this letter." "I pray you, my dear and faithful companion to be glad with me, and to thank the good God for what He is doing, for He does nothing but what is altogether right and good..."

From the letters written by Knox and De Bres we note that they had similar sorts of experiences. They were caught up in dangerous times and in situations that were unsure, and no doubt, being humans, they too, were filled with uncertainty and fear. And, yet, through the working of the Holy Spirit, they were also told to "not be afraid", after all the living shepherd cares for His sheep no matter what their circumstances.

Today, as we meet in our homes, isolated from one another, and fearful of a virus that is terrorizing and changing the world, we cannot help but think that disaster stares us in the face everywhere. The world is a bleak and scary place, so bleak and scary that we don't even dare to go

anywhere. Yet in the midst of such a world we are reminded that the grave was empty. The dead Jesus is alive again. On this day we are reminded that we have a Lord who broke the power of the enemy and of death. We have a Lord who has won the victory over the grave so that death does not have the final word! We have a Lord who is King! A Lord who provides for His people! A Lord who takes away or overwhelms our fears!

So we can be filled with fear and uncertainty, we can be truly afraid of the course our life is following and yet at the same time we can be filled with joy because we know that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. And we can have this joy, this assurance, which ultimately overcomes any fears we have, by the way, precisely because of the gospel of Easter, precisely because Jesus has won the victory over sin and death, precisely because Jesus lives!

On their way out of the garden to go and tell the other disciples what they had seen and heard, Matthew tells us that suddenly Jesus met the women. He greeted them and said “Do not be afraid.” Then he told them to go and tell others. Oh, their heads must have been spinning. But off they went afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. There was fear and joy at Easter! Christ the Lord has risen today! Hallelujah!

In the midst of the pandemic may you hear the words of the angel and then of the living Jesus himself, “Do not be afraid!” I am the living Lord! And having heard those words may we go forth with joy amidst our fear. Amen.

**Prayer:** Oh Lord, what a wonderful gospel! In the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of our fears and worries and concerns and in the midst of a dark and seemingly collapsing world, we praise you for the gospel of the resurrection. Living Lord Jesus, calm our fears and make us a joyful people. Thank you Good Shepard that you care for your people always, and that we are yours in life and in death. We praise you for your love for us in Christ Jesus and we praise you for the gift of faith. May all those who hear the wonderful message of the resurrection respond with glad hope. To you be the honour, glory, power and praise for you are worthy to receive it. We pray in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord. Amen.

A blessed Easter to all! Go in the peace of Christ! Amen.