

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Sunday • April 12, 2020¹

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 28:1-10 (Colossians 3:1-4)

“Deliver Us, Jesus, From Death”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! **Easter is about resurrection.**

I like a good story. And right now it seems like people are hungry for good stories to keep them going while stuck at home. Here in our area, you've got options: you can pull favorites books off the shelf or download them from the library, stream brand-new movies and television series right to your living room, or play through some epic video games without leaving the house. Across all their different forms, many of these narratives have an antagonist, a “big bad” that's working against the central characters. That antagonist, whoever or whatever they might be, is doing something to keep life from being the way it really should be.

So let's look at the story of your life. Who's the antagonist there, the “big bad” that's kept things from being the way they should be? I'd understand if you're feeling as if it's the people you've been cooped up with since stay-at-home orders went into place. Or, you could be thinking it's this novel coronavirus that's upended life for people around the world. But those aren't ultimately the problem, are they? Any discomfort that other people or viruses bring are merely byproducts of the real antagonist, the true “big bad” in the story of your life: death.

We live in a world that's dying. And it's trying to take us with it. While the virus that's caused the current pandemic might be novel, the “big bad” of death has been around since humanity went into exile from Eden. It's been part of our story since early on. Human beings weren't created to experience death. And even though we try to try to push it out of our minds or ignore it the best we can, that's our reality. It seems like death is here to stay.

Easter is about resurrection. But here's the thing about resurrection: **resurrection requires death.** You can't come back to life without first being dead.

Right now, we – along with the rest of the human race – are facing an unseen antagonist, an enemy that actively seeks to separate us and drive us apart. No matter where you are on the planet right now, the threat remains. Our antagonist is working to change the world, to keep life from being the way it really should be. And it's been around far longer than the coronavirus. This “big bad” is the same one who first tempted humanity to doubt God's grace, to doubt each other. In the Scriptures, he's given the title of “the accuser.” In Hebrew, that's “Satan.”

You and I can't defeat this enemy. Social distancing won't help. Satan *wants* us to be separated from other people: not physically, but emotionally and spiritually. The accuser will keep reminding you of your faults and failings while at the same time prompting you to see faults and failings in the people around you – especially in those times when you're cooped up with them! Don't get me wrong; death is certainly a problem. But death has come into our lives as a symptom of the real disease, the real problem that separates us from God and each other: sin. Our enemy is inside us, in our hearts and in our minds. We're all infected.

So how can we win? How can we overcome the antagonist in our story? How are we going to get victory over death when it rules our world? Well, here's some good news: we don't do it. You and I, **we're not the heroes of the story.**

Early in the morning of that first Sunday after Jesus' death on the cross, some of the women who had followed Jesus went to go and see the tomb where he had been buried. Matthew tells us of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, both of whom were there on Friday when the stone was rolled over the entrance of the tomb. They were witnesses to Jesus' death and entombment. But then, on that Sunday morning, they witness something altogether different. With an earthquake, a heavenly messenger touches down on earth, rolling aside the great stone that had covered the tomb. Now the angel doesn't do this in order that Jesus might leave the tomb, but to proclaim Jesus' victory over it. The angel even goes so far as to *sit on the stone* when the women see him, showing who's really been pinned down. And so we don't overlook this point, Matthew also clues us in to the irony here. The guards who were guarding the dead are made to seem dead; yet, the one who was dead has been made alive.

Easter is about resurrection. It celebrates that new life has begun. Jesus has defeated the enemy. Death couldn't keep him down. Satan, our accuser, has been robbed of his victory. He doesn't get to write the ending. Not to Jesus' story. Not to yours.

Unlike our antagonist, Jesus' work has been to restore life to the way it really should be. He's changing the world, for good. **Jesus delivers us – rescues us – from death by breaking its power.** And he does that by dying.

Easter is about resurrection, and resurrection requires death. **Easter requires Good Friday.** Jesus, the crucified, died to defeat the enemy. He took our place up on the cross. He took the full force of God's holy judgement against your sin and my sin, the pandemic that has infected every human heart and mind. Jesus was driven apart from God his Father, experiencing the ultimate consequence of Satan's vision for humanity: separation from our loving Creator. Around three o'clock on Good Friday, the enemy's power broken, the servant hero's mission accomplished, Jesus died. The women came to see the tomb on Easter morning, not expecting anything of what was about to happen. They'd seen Jesus' dead body laid in a new grave after it was taken down off the cross. They thought that Jesus' story ended with death, just like everyone else's. But then they saw the angel and heard the message: the true hero, the Author of Life, had forever changed our story.

Jesus delivers you from death. He's broken its ultimate power over you. **Death can't keep you down, either.** God has forgiven all your sin for Jesus' sake. Even now, you are reconnected in life with your Creator, life that won't end when death comes for you.

You can look ahead in hope even in this time of pandemic and economic uncertainty. You can share the angel's message to the women at the tomb that Jesus is risen. He is alive, for you and for me. He is alive for our dying world. We might not be able to bow down to take hold of his feet to worship him. We might not even be able to gather together in a sanctuary to worship him. Yet you and I may still celebrate Jesus' resurrection this Easter. **You who believe in the resurrection – Jesus' resurrection and resurrection you have in him – do not live as if you don't!**

Our antagonist is raging against us right now, calling us to live in fear, to doubt God's grace. We may still live in a dying world, but that's not the end of our story. The big bad doesn't win. Listen again to St. Paul's message from today's Epistle reading: *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* (Col. 3:1-3) As people who follow Jesus, people who look in hope to resurrection, we get to share God's grace with our world. The people in your life need connection, especially in times like these. We Christians get to build connections and restore relationships, giving to others what we have in Jesus. We don't have to follow the script of separation that Satan sets before us.

Easter is about resurrection. Death gives way, because Jesus makes it so. You are raised with Christ. This is the new story of your life. This is the story of Easter.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. – Colossians 3:2