

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

April 4, 2021 (Resurrection of Our Lord)
Luke 24:1-12

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” the angels said.

William Sangster was one of the great preachers of the 20th century. Toward the end of his life, he became quite ill. His vocal chords were paralyzed and he was unable to speak. (By the way, for a preacher, that is just about the WORST thing that can happen to you.) On the Easter Sunday morning just before he died, he painfully printed a short note to his daughter. In it he wrote these poignant words: "How terrible to wake up on Easter and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen!' but it is FAR worse to HAVE a voice and not WANT to shout."

As you have heard me say many times, we never GOT to have a FULL Easter last year, so this has been the longest Lent ever. What a terrible year we have endured.

Earlier this year, an old couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to come for a visit over the holiday AFTER all. "The grandkids say hello," he said feebly. They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone, they didn't dare look at each other, knowing that what they'd see would be too much to bear.

Earlier this year, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company, and they had to let her go. "So sorry," he said. She cleaned out her desk, packed away her HOPES for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her KIDS.

Earlier this year, someone heard the words, "I don't love you anymore."

Earlier this year, someone received terrible news from a physician.

Earlier this year, someone's whole world died. And the darkness is overwhelming.

These are the NIGHTMARES of our OWN Good Fridays. Earlier this year, HOPE was crucified.

In many ways, we are LIKE those FIRST disciples. We're like those women coming to the TOMB that day. They'd HEARD the promise of Jesus that on the third day, the Son of Man would be raised from the dead by the Power of God. They'd HEARD his promise to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." They'd HEARD Jesus teach, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will never die." But on that morning when they came to the GRAVE, what did they EXPECT to see? When they came to Jesus' tomb, in SPITE of ALL of Jesus' promises, they came EXPECTING DEATH. The angels said, "Why do you look for the living among the DEAD?"

You and I are LIKE those women. And we are LIKE those DISCIPLES, who HEARD the proclamation that the tomb was EMPTY, that Jesus had RISEN on the third day, JUST as he had PROMISED, and did not, COULD NOT BELIEVE it. "These words seemed to them an idle tale," it says.

We come to our OWN graves – our nightmares, our shattered dreams, our dashed hopes, our OWN Good Fridays – and like the women and the men on that FIRST Sunday morning, we EXPECT DEATH. For deep down in EVERYONE'S soul is a pessimism, a CYNICISM, that believes that THIS is ALL there is.

We FEEL ... EMPTY. Watch this.

(Watch video Empty)

Easter is the LAST thing we expect.

But THIS is NOT an EMPTY TALE. The empty TOMB is the ONLY time when EMPTY means LIFE. This day is NOT about bunnies, springtime and NEW Easter CLOTHES. It's about INFINITELY MORE – more HOPE than we can comprehend, more PROMISE than we DARE to BELIEVE.

Years ago, there was a story in The Los Angeles Times of a 4½ year old girl named Katie Sleeman, a patient at Children's Hospital, who was dying of cancer. She had originally been diagnosed as a SEVEN-WEEK-OLD BABY with retinoblastoma, a cancerous tumor in the eye. She LOST BOTH eyes, and DESPITE the BEST that medical science could do for her, a NEW tumor appeared near her brain that could NOT be removed. So Katie SUFFERED MORE hardship in her brief life than most of us do in a LIFETIME. But despite her hospitalization, all of the TREATMENTS and PAIN she suffered, she RADIATED love and joy. She was like a LIGHT on the 4th Floor West of Children's Hospital, even though she was fully aware that she might DIE at ANY TIME.

As she neared the END of her life, Katie talked a lot about going to Heaven. Because she couldn't see, TOUCH became one of her PRIMARY means of communication. One of her FAVORITE things was to snuggle close to her mother and rub her mother's ear. Not long before she died, Katie said to her mother with a smile, "When I'm in Heaven, and you feel a tickle on your ear, it will be me telling you 'I love you, Mommy.'"

The risen Christ says to us, "Because I live, you shall live also." This is the HEART of our Easter faith. Because Jesus OPENED for us the GATES to eternal life, little Katie could BELIEVE what she said. The empty TOMB is the ONLY time when EMPTY means LIFE – FULLNESS of life now and ETERNAL life to come.

I know many of you have EXPERIENCED something like that after a loved one passed away – a moment, a SIGN, a "tickle on your ear" – that spoke to your heart and REMINDED you that YOU ARE LOVED.

But even if you HAVEN'T experienced that, it's ENOUGH to know that our loved ones who have died in Christ, BELIEVING in him and TRUSTING him for eternal life, are looking DOWN on us, WAITING WITH Christ to WELCOME us when it's OUR time to go home.

Because HE lives WE shall live also. Christ has DEFEATED death and OPENED the way to life everlasting.

But do you realize what this MEANS? If there is HOPE EVEN in death, then there is hope for our NIGHTMARES TOO. Because the NIGHTMARE of Good Friday was TRANSFORMED into the EASTER DREAM, there is a way to END ALL nightmares and DREAM NEW dreams. The Resurrection means that Christians can:

- DREAM of plenty even in the MIDST of poverty;
- DREAM of compassion in the midst of rejection;
- DREAM of justice in the midst of inequity;
- DREAM of holiness in the midst of hell;
- DREAM of love in the midst of hate.

Easter isn't JUST about an empty tomb; it's about the POWER of HOPE ... in a world of LOST hope. It is about knowing that NO situation is BEYOND God's REDEEMING power.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." And because HE lives, YOU shall live also.

This is WHY on THIS day we SHOUT what Christians have shouted for THOUSANDS of years: CHRIST IS RISEN!

HE HAS RISEN INDEED!

AMEN.