

You all know the story. It echoes down through the centuries even in a culture where for so many today is just another day to sleep in and linger over *The Globe*. Even as Peter Cottontail goes hippity-hoppity back down the bunny trail, we dare to make a claim that takes us to the very heart of the gospel: *Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

You all know the story. It is told to our children on Palm Saturday, and again in the gospel reading we just heard from Matthew. It is told through all of these pent-up alleluias we have been holding in for forty days. It is told and re-told through all of these great familiar hymns that even the most tone-deaf among us cannot help but to join in singing:

- *Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!*
- *'Tis the spring of souls today: Christ hath burst his prison and from three days' sleep in death, as a sun hath risen. Alleluia!*
- *He is risen, he is risen! Tell it out with joyful voice...Christ has won the victory! Alleluia!*

You all know the story. But it is a story best understood not with words alone, but in Word-made-flesh—in a gathered community such as this one where we are reminded once more that we are living members of the risen Christ's Body. All of our past Easter mornings converge here, as once more, among God's Easter people, we proclaim the paschal mystery. Notice that whenever we do that, we proclaim Christ's death in the past tense, and his coming again in the future tense: but Easter is always present tense: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*. Easter is now, for those who have eyes to see. Resurrection is here.

You know the story. So I want to simply call your attention today to the words that the angel speaks to the women at the empty tomb. Remember that literally and most basically, whatever else they may be, angels are messengers: they bring a word *from* God *to* human beings. That is an angel's job. Today the angel offers a word to those women at the empty tomb, a word that I think is still relevant to the women, men and children who are gathered here on this Easter morning as well:

Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you.

Do not be afraid. Go and tell. You will see. And in case there is any confusion, this is precisely the same message that Jesus himself reiterates when he appears to the women: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Do not be afraid. It's interesting to me that the language that Matthew uses to describe the fear of the guards is "that they became like dead men." Because that's exactly what fear does to us. Fear paralyzes us. Fear immobilizes us. Fear keeps us from genuine, abundant life. Fear makes us like dead men and dead women.

Angels tend to sound a bit like broken records: one could almost call them one-hit-wonders. Whenever they show up, these seem to be the first words out of their mouths. As you may recall, when Gabriel shows up to tell Mary she is pregnant, the very first thing he says is “do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.” The angel who meets Joseph in a dream says the very same thing: “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” The shepherds out keeping watch of their flock by night: “do not be afraid, for behold I bring good news of a great joy for all the people.” Maybe it’s because meeting a real angel is a very scary thing. Or maybe it’s because life itself can be pretty scary. Whether our fears revolve around the first day of kindergarten, or middle school, or getting into college, or health concerns or marriage troubles, fear can consume us. It can suck the life out of us.

What are you most afraid of? What keeps you from the full and abundant life God intends for you? Imagine an angel showing up at your house today, and speaking directly to you, into the unique circumstances of your life: “do not be afraid.” Trust that God’s abiding love for you is enough, and let that love cast out all fear.

Second: the angel tells the women to **go and tell** the others what they have seen and heard. This is a difficult word to hear across the ideological divides of our day. So often those on the Christian right—those who have been more likely to take this part seriously—have added a whole laundry list about what it is we are to go and tell. The most recent debates among evangelicals, now on the cover of *Time Magazine*, are about whether or not hell exists. Too often those who are eager to “go and tell” do so without adequately processing the first word: do not be afraid. Sometimes, so-called Christian evangelism is rooted in fear: fear of hell, fear that the end of the world is upon us, fear of the other, the one who is different from us. So before we “go and tell” it is crucial that we really hear that first word: do not be afraid. Only then will the message we have to share with the world a word of “good news.” Only then will we have something to “go and tell” that people are truly yearning to hear.

In contrast, however, too often those on the Christian left (and this probably includes most Episcopalians) spend way too much time and energy wringing our hands and trying to prove (or disprove) that the resurrection happened. The angel says, “he is not here” - but the scholars fixate on what happened in that tomb and whether resurrection is physical or spiritual, and what a resurrected body might look like. Too often, sadly, what is left at the end is so privatized and intellectualized that there is no good news left to share, and certainly not enough to transform broken lives and a broken world into something radically new.

You and I are called, in the promises we made at Baptism, to move beyond that impasse. The promises we made at Holy Baptism, or perhaps promises made on our behalf but renewed every time we celebrate Baptism or renew our vows, includes a promise to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.” Sometimes we may even need to use words when we were sent from this place to do the work that God gives us to do. That probably doesn’t mean passing out tracts on a street corner. But it does mean living like Easter people. As we heard St. Paul telling the Church in Rome, we are called to be alive in Christ. So if we find ourselves talking about Christ being raised from the dead, but we are dead, there is a disconnect there, to say the least.

You and I need to find ways to recapture the joy of going and telling. To be authentic witnesses to Christ's resurrection is first and foremost something we *embody*, not a formula we recite. First and foremost, evangelism is about who we are: and we are a word about the Word before we ever open our mouths. The most important work we can do is to try, with God's help, to get our own lives in synch with the message we have been entrusted to share. (We may discover, by the way, that when we "go and tell" we will also need to "stop and listen" when we get there. Others have their own truths and gifts to offer to us, rooted in their own lives and their own experiences. But that's another sermon, for another day.) I believe that we live in a world where people are spiritually starving, and in the midst of a consumer society that reduces us all to shoppers, too many churches offer the spiritual equivalent of "junk food." We live at a unique moment in human history. And I believe that we really do have a word of hope, of healing, of transformation, of abundant life that is worth sharing with the world. We should never do that by trying to force others to believe as we believe. But if we dare not speak out of the unique depths of our own truth, then we silence the Word that is risen and alive in us.

Finally, the angel at the empty tomb tells the women and the disciples to go back to Galilee—to go back to their lives. Why? Because **there you will see him.** I don't think that this means that Galilee is to become the Christian equivalent of Mecca—a place where we need to go if we want to see Jesus. (Although I will say that having walked around there a year or so ago, I highly recommend doing so if you ever have the chance.) Rather, the point here is simply that for these women and those early disciples, Galilee was home. They had been fishermen and tax collectors and carpenters there. It's where their family and friends were. I think they are told to go home with a new awareness and with wide-opened eyes, in order to seek and serve Christ in the most ordinary of places.

You all know the story. Perhaps you also remember some of the stories that are coming our way as Easter unfolds over these next fifty days: Christ is not in that empty tomb because he's in the garden, and he's on the road to Emmaus, and he's cooking up fish on a charcoal fire by the Sea of Galilee. And Christ is present at our own tables, and on our own roads, in our work and in our play. Easter happens on the way. But too often we are in such a rush that our eyes do not see and our ears do not hear. We have to get to the store, after all—or to school or work, wherever it is we are running to. But when we linger a bit, when we open our eyes, we discover as those early Christians did that Christ is indeed risen. Present tense. Here, and Now.

And so we are called to look for Christ in each person we meet and to try, with God's help, to let the light of Christ shine through us—so that others may see Christ in us.

Do not be afraid...go and tell...you will see. Over the next fifty days there will be more to say, so don't let this late Easter and the spring weather that is surely coming pull you away. Easter is a season, not a day. But for now that is more than enough to go on for now, as we continue the journey from death to life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!