

Jesus Uncensored Sermon Series:
“JESUS THE RISEN LORD”

Matthew 28:1-10 – Easter Sunday

**Dr. Andrew Wolfe, Trinity United Methodist Church
 Homewood, AL – March 23, 2008**

Matthew 28:1-10: After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “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.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

This week I ran into a piece called: *All I Ever Needed to Know About Life I Learned from the Easter Bunny*. What do we learn from the Easter Bunny?

Don't put all of your eggs in one basket;
 Walk softly and carry a big carrot;
 Everyone needs a friend who is all ears;
 There's no such thing as too much candy;
 All work and no play can make you a basket case;
 Everyone is entitled to a bad hare day.

This is a joyful day, and a little laughter is a good thing. In fact, in the Eastern Church, on Easter afternoon, monks would gather to tell jokes. It's a joyful day. All week long people have been wishing me, “Happy Easter.” As I watched people come in this morning, I saw lots of smiles. We have put aside the minor keys of Lent, and our music is big and joyful, filled with alleluia's. We will all go home, or go out, and sit down to a feast.

Yet, how different this is from the first Easter. At dawn of that first Easter, as the women approached the tomb where Jesus had been hastily laid on Friday, there was no laughter, only tears. The feelings were not those of joy, but of fear.

In Matthew's gospel, the word “fear” dominates the first Easter. There is an earthquake which causes the soldiers who are guarding the tomb to fall down in fear. When the angel speaks to the women, he tells them “Do not fear.” As they rush from the tomb, it is with fear and great joy. And then finally, when Jesus greets the women, he once again tells them, “Do not be afraid.”

Before anything else, the first Easter evoked feelings of fear. Imagine that! Not laughter, but fear! Why it that?

After our Good Friday Service of Darkness last year, a boy about six or seven came up to me with tears in his eyes and said, “That was scary. When it got dark I was scared.” Last week on Palm Sunday that same boy came and told me, as he was leaving, “I will be here next Sunday but I won't be

here on Friday. It's too scary!" I understand what he was saying. Good Friday, with its curses, its hammer and nails, blood and sweat and darkness, is scary. But all that is past, over, done, with the good news that Jesus is risen. So why in the world is the dominant reaction to the news of the empty tomb, fear?

When our son Matthew was a baby, he slept in the nursery across the hall from our bedroom. He slept in a crib; the one that kind of looked like a jail cell. It had those rails that would slide up and down. Each night we would put him into his crib, make sure the rails were firmly in place, and then we would leave and let him go to sleep. Which sometimes took a while. But he would stay there until we came and got him out the next morning.

One night about 2 a.m., we were sleeping away in our room when something woke us up. I wasn't sure what it was. My eyes opened, and peering into the darkness, there was a figure standing by my bed. I yelled, jumped up shouting to Dawn, and looked again. It was Matthew standing there, a smile on his face, looking very proud. He had found a way to escape from his bed!

Imagined being frightened of a baby – your own baby at that. What scarred me? Well, I wasn't expecting to see him standing there. I had put him to bed in that crib, and that is where he was suppose to stay! The unexpected scars us.

On Friday, Jesus was put into the tomb, and that is where he was supposed to stay. The women who first went to the tomb on Easter and found it empty were frightened because they weren't expecting it. They were expecting to find a dead body not an empty tomb. Fear is the reaction when the unexpected happens.

One of the criticisms levelled at Jesus is that the resurrection simply couldn't have happened. It defies scientific explanation. Dead people don't get up and walk around. So what are we to make of the Gospel accounts? The resurrection is central to the story. Either the disciples were suffering from some kind of hysteria cognitive dissonance, so that they talked themselves into believing this story. Or, they simply made it up.

But the problem with this reasoning is that this is not a story they would have thought to make up. It was without precedent. It did not fit the categories of that First Century Jewish world anymore than it fits into our categories. The resurrection was not something they were expecting, hence, the fear.

"A resurrection message that is not in some way terrifying is not the message of the resurrection of Jesus. There is something going on here which, far from reassuring Jesus' friends and making them feel smug in their Easter finery, shakes them to their foundation and sends them running in speechless panic." (Theodore Jennings, Jr., *Loyalty to God*) The source of this terror is that it was not expected.

The Easter message is not one that can be fit into our normal categories, grasped and assimilated. The categories are shattered and when that happens the response is one of fear. As Matthew suggests the resurrection of Jesus in like an earthquake that throws us onto quivering ground and takes away our ability to understand. The resurrection throws everything into question.

One thing that the resurrection throws into questions is our tit-for-tat world – a world that lives by the "Rambo" creed that we have to give as good as we got. There was a song from the sixties with the lyrics:

My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble

You see him comin' better cut out on the double.
 You been spreading lies that I was untrue
 So look out now cause he's comin' after you.

Think about it. If Jesus were to come back from the dead, there was going to be some trouble. He had scores to settle. And for a lot of people that was a frightening prospect.

Frederick Niedner, in *Christian Century*, reminds us that there's a lot of unfinished business that lies around cemeteries. When we die, our sins die with us. When someone else dies, so do the wrongs held in secret between us. Should they return from the grave, they would drag with them all the old hurts, deceits, wrongs.

If Jesus were back, what about the authorities who had lied about him, beaten him and hung him on the cross? They certainly wouldn't be overjoyed at the news that he had risen. They had good reason to fear.

Even Jesus' own disciples had reason for not wanting to see him again. After all, these are the guys who deserted him, fled from the scene leaving him to face death by himself. We know what we would have said to them, "Well, guys, it's about time. Nice to see you. Where have you been? And Peter, do you know me this time?" What would he say to them? We don't have to wait long to find out. Jesus meets the women as they run from the tomb, and says to them, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Tell my brothers to meet me."

My Brothers! After all that had happened, they were still family. "He didn't come back to get revenge or condemn anyone. He returned to *gather* his family. There is no reason to be afraid. Our sins and betrayals died with him. He took them to the grave with him, and now...he's come back without them." (Frederick Niedner, *Christian Century*, 3/11/08) Instead of settling scores, Jesus announces a whole new game. Grace is now the name of the game. Forgiveness trumps fear. Love trumps hate. Reconciliation trumps revenge.

I suppose, if you are locked into the tit-for-tat view of the world, then this is earthshaking news. It's even a little frightening. You may even wish Jesus had stayed in the grave. But if we are to be his brothers and sisters, his family, then we must leave our fear behind in the graveyard – along with our sins and grudges – and follow our Risen Lord who goes before us into this unexpected new world.

The Easter story is also disconcerting, frightening, because it demands a response. James Martin has pointed out that Easter, somehow, has resisted the type of commercialization that covers Christmas. Christmas is about a young couple having a baby in a barn. There's something adorable about babies. Christmas carols are all sweetness and light. There's something quaint about a Christmas card with a mother, father, baby and animals gathered around. Everyone can feel good about that, even non-Christians. But the image of a bruised and broken man doesn't make such a good card. It's not sweetness and light. This story won't be domesticated. It resists being made banal.

Because, if we say, "Yes, I believe that Jesus rose from the dead." Then there are serious ramifications. Martin reminds us that Easter is an event that demands a "yes" or a "no." There is no "whatever." (James Martin, *Slate*) If you believe the resurrection has earth-shaking consequences for all of your life. Because if we believe this story, then we must believe that Jesus was indeed who he said he was, God's Messiah. And, if he is that, then what he has to say about life and our world has a claim on us. In a line from a poem by Delmore Schwartz, it means that "we shall never be as we once were, and

this life will never be what it once was.”

Jesus was not just our friend, our teacher, a healer and sage. He is our Risen Lord who goes before us pointing the way, calling for us to follow. If Jesus is Lord, then we can never settle for the easy, the cheap and tawdry. We are not free to use people as we would things – for our own benefit. We cannot turn our back on injustice. Or, turn our head with indifference in the face of the world’s need. We become a part of a new story, God’s story of redemption. We become a part of what God is doing to heal and restore the world. We don’t settle for the expected. We dare the unexpected!

It’s a good thing that Easter is not what was expected. Because we live in a world where the unexpected sometimes happens to us, leaving us anxious and fearful. Some of you come today having unexpectedly lost a spouse, a child, a parent, over the past year. Grief hangs heavy on your heart.

For some of you, life was good until the unexpected news that you have a serious illness has called your future into question

For others, the unexpected may have happened with your job, your marriage, your kids. Life doesn’t always turn out the way we expect. Hopes lie unfulfilled. Disappointment and despair find their way in our hearts, and fear lurks in the background.

Just as it did on that Easter morning. The women hadn’t expected Jesus to die. They had followed him all the way from Galilee. He had given them reason to hope. But that was before Friday when the unexpected happened, and with it, their expectations of anything more from life died. And that would have been that. Except for the unexpected news, “He is not here, he has been raised.” When the unexpected happens, God answers with the unexpected. We have nothing to fear. Jesus was not defeated, not even by death, and neither shall we be.

In William Faulkner’s novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, Dilsey is the courageous, faithful black woman who stands like a towering rock of strength through the decay and disintegration of the Compson family.

One Sunday morning, the old Black preacher of her church lifts the eyes of this poor, suffering congregation up out of the darkness to see the glory of the Risen Christ. Faulkner describes what happens to Dilsey: “In the midst of the voices and hands,... Dilsey sat bolt upright... crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb. As they walked through the bright noon, up the sandy road with the dispersing congregation talking easily again, group to group, she continued to weep, unmindful of the talk. Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses. Walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.

“Whyn’t quit that Mammy?” Frony said. “Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon.” “I’ve seed de last,” Dilsey said. “Never you mind me.... I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin.” (*The Sound and The Fury*, William Faulkner)

In Christ, we have seen the beginning, and in his resurrection, we have seen the end. The unexpected end that turns our fears to joy!

Jesus shared our human life. He was our teacher, our healer, our friend. He is Son of God and Saviour. But...he is all of these only because he is first...our Risen Lord!