

Don't Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

The Resurrection of Our Lord, April 16, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!
So don't be afraid.

And there are plenty of things to fear.

I don't know how many times one of you comes up to me and points out the rise of evil in the world. Many of you do this in various ways and at various times. You all mean the same thing. You are dismayed at the rise of evil in the world.

It seems lately that the rise of sexual immorality is most visible. Many of you are surprised at how quickly promiscuity, fornication, pornography, and homosexuality have become prevalent. Even in the visible Church these things are practiced without rebuke or penitence. I am surprised that you are surprised. Contraception has given us the illusion that the sexual commandments that God gave to us no longer apply. All the current practice of licentiousness tells us is that we were keeping the commandments of God formerly not because we feared God, but because we feared that our actions would produce a child for whom we are responsible and with abortion on demand not even that is a not problem anymore. All contraception has done is revealed that we never feared God to begin with, why should you be surprised by the rise of evil now? And yet you are and honestly so am I. It seems so fast that we have sunk so low. It seems so fast that we have forgotten the sacredness of women and reduced them to combatants sent out to kill enemies along with the men.

But sins against the Sixth Commandment are not the only problem that we are facing. There seems to be a sudden rise in sins against the Eighth Commandment in our country. False news spreads lies which people believe and repeat. We can repeat lies so much faster than we used to on social media. It is harder to get a lie corrected. It was hard enough to get a lie corrected when it was spread only by word of mouth. Now it is much harder that lies can spread instantaneously on the internet.

We are also facing sins against the Fifth Commandment. Our public discourse is filled with more hatred than it used to be it seems. Our politics is filled with more vitriol than it is used to contain. And when someone is elected to President whom others cannot stand there is violence and rioting in the streets. There was no peaceful transfer of power this time. There was violence in the streets. Protests were throughout the land. The president invited such vitriol when he ran for office and the country was happy to give it to him.

And in the end we face godlessness. Attendance at Divine Service continues to decline across the board. In spite of the promise of contemporary worship and church programs of various sorts attendance at Divine Service continues to decline. More and more people are turning away from the Word of God to their own opinions and ideas. Rather than to treasure in their hearts what God has said they have turned aside to myths. The myths are various, but none of them are about God.

It seems that no one fears God. No one fears His wrath. No one believes in His wrath. No one heeds His laws. And we wonder how long it will be before our country dissolves into chaos and we turn to a dictator to save us.

Your Lord, just risen from His grave, declares to you this Easter Sunday, "Don't be afraid!"

Don't be afraid! For He is the Lord of the living and of the dead. Don't be afraid! For He rose from the dead to prove that He is the Lord of the living and of the dead! Don't be afraid! He died and then rose again. He passed from life into death and back into life again and His life will never be taken away again. If He is the Lord of the living and of the dead, then He is Lord over everything in this world of which you are afraid!

He is Lord over the rampant immorality that you observe around you. He is Lord over the lies and the falsehood. He is Lord over the gossip and the slander. He is Lord over the violence and hatred! He is Lord over the bigotry and racism. He is Lord over the selfishness and greed! He is Lord over all of it. And in spite of the fact that people do not believe it, He remains risen from the dead! Their unbelief does not put your Lord back into His grave. Their unbelief does not put Him to death again. Their unbelief does not change the reality that God through His almighty power has created in the world.

He is Lord over it all and He has predicted that all of these things would happen. You read His holy Word. And you repent of your surprise! None of this should have been a surprise to you. None of the rise of evil in the world around us which we observe should have been a surprise to you. Over and over again throughout the apostolic Scriptures your risen Lord has made sure that you knew that all of this would happen. He predicted that it would happen. If He predicted it would happen, He is Lord over it.

And not only does your Lord predict a steady rise of evil and its power and influence as the last days of this world come, He also predicts a final victory for you. All of the immorality and those who impenitently practice it will be thrown in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. But His wrath will not touch you. His victory remains your victory. And in the final day of His almighty power when it seems that the forces of evil have triumphed for good He will stand victorious over His enemies and you will stand victorious with Him. No matter how bad things get or appear to get, the victory remains yours, Immanuel Lutheran Church. Take comfort. Your Lord rose from the dead. Don't be afraid!

Now the real problem with the evil that we see in the world is that we are responsible for it. Sexual immorality is just as rampant in the ranks of the visible Church as it is in visible society. That means that we are unable to point the finger at all of the evil and condemn it without making ourselves into hypocrites. We do not honor marriage as God instituted it. We do not correct our children for their fornication. We indulge our own predilection to lust and greed and covetousness. We show about as much respect for authority as the unbelievers do.

We enjoy a good fight. We like watching a good fight. That is why if a politician in our country runs a campaign without personally attacking his opponent he will lose the election. If he wants to win the election, he must attack his opponent's person. Every time a candidate for public office in this country starts slinging mud at his opponent, his poll numbers go up. We are no better than the ancient Romans. We love a good gladiatorial challenge. How many of you griped about the presidential debates, but watched them anyway? Did you watch them in order to find out where the candidates stood on the issues or did you watch it hoping that you would hear a bunch of zinging one liners? We have the president that we deserve. And if we had elected the other candidate we would still have had the president that we deserved. We ourselves are responsible for producing the political system that we have in place. Not only are we responsible for it we like it the way that it is.

We enjoy the rioting. Look how we can tout our own self righteousness in the face of rioters who protest the president's election. We are not rioting. We did not riot when the previous president was

elected, twice. Look how much better we are than they are. So not only are we responsible for the current political climate, we refuse to take responsibility for it and admit our sins.

We do not acknowledge the wrath of God even if we go to Divine Service all of the time. Jesus has risen from the dead and tells you not to be afraid. Do you take comfort in the fact of His resurrection and His divine word not to be afraid? Or do you listen to your Lord and wonder what on earth He could possibly be talking about when He tells you not to be afraid because you were not afraid in the first place. It does not help you laypeople at all that the vast majority of us preachers have quit talking about hell. Why should you fear the divine wrath against sin when we are not talking about it? But just because pastor isn't talking about it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. If you have cancer, just because the doctor did not tell you that you had cancer because he did not have the heart to tell you, does not mean that you do not have cancer. There is still wrath even if pastor never talks about it. And so we are no better than the unbelievers. Perhaps we are worse off than the unbelievers for we continue to attend a Divine Service that is designed to take away something that we believe does not exist. At least the unbelievers are consistent and act as if the wrath of God does not exist.

How many of you actually sweat your sins at night convinced that unless you repent of them you will go to hell? How many of you have experienced sleepless nights because of pangs of conscience that you experience over the evil that you had wrought? How many of you have noticed the faces and the pains of those against whom you have sinned or taken advantage? How many you continue to self-righteously look your neighbor in his eye even though you have cheated him and justify your actions to yourself telling yourself that it was necessary for the business or for your family's economic survival or for your retirement or for whatever it is. Or do you have those pictures in your mind's eye and it terrifies you to think what God may do with you on His last great day of judgment.

If you have no pangs of conscience the words of our Lord are gibberish to you. But if you do have pangs of conscience, then hear the word of the newly risen Lord, "Don't be afraid!"

When the Lord rises from the dead and meets His disciples it must have terrified them. Peter had denied Him three times. The last time that Peter denied Him, Peter denied Him with an oath. That means that He swore to God that he did not know Jesus. This is as bad as Judas. What makes it worse is that his denial is done in the name of God. What makes it worse is that earlier that same evening Peter had promised Jesus that he would die with Jesus rather than to deny Him. He stabbed his Lord in the back when his Lord needed someone to stand with Him and Peter denied that he even knew Him. The other disciples were precious little better. As soon as Jesus was arrested they took off. They were more concerned about their own lives than they were about their Lord. And even know they had made the same promise as Peter did that they would not deny Him, when push came to shove, they took off and left their Lord to die. They were cowards. They were liars. They all stabbed Him in the back and now He meets them and He is risen from the dead!

Think of the terror! Look what we did to Him and now He is risen from the dead. He has the power to rise from the dead. What other powers does He have? And what will He do with us who have betrayed, denied, and deserted Him even though we said we would not? What will He do with those disciples who stabbed Him in the back? Bad enough that the chief priests and the scribes and Pontius Pilate put Him to death. At least they never claimed to like Jesus, but the disciples had sworn allegiance to Him, but in the end they betrayed Him.

Here is what He does with these miserable, rotten, damnable sinners. He tells them, "Don't be afraid!"

After all what did He rise from the dead for? What was His crucifixion for? If it was not to forgive sins and therefore save from death, what is it for? He rose from the dead in order to forgive. His

cross means everything that He says that it means because He rose from the dead. He is not going to rise from the dead and then withhold forgiveness. That is the purpose for which He rose from the dead. He is not going to go through all of that trouble to forgive people and then not do it! And so He tells them and He tells you, "Don't be afraid!"

Listen to the words in the pangs of your conscience when you know that your sins will damn you. Listen to your Lord when you come to terms with the fact that you are part of the cause of all of the evil that is around, that you have participated in it and in spite of your public protestations you condone it and enjoy it. When that truth enters your heart and you understand the holiness of God and what His justice demands from those who have rebelled against Him, take comfort in these words of the freshly risen from the dead Lord, "Don't be afraid!"

He will not damn you. He died for you. He will not forsake you. He rose for you. "Don't be afraid."

And if He saved you from sin, He saved you from death.

Death brings great fear.

We often speak of death as if it is a good thing, but I have sat through the dying process with families. While there is good that the Lord brings out of that experience, the experience is not good. No one wants to be there. And when we say that people are in a better place when they die, they are only in a better place because Jesus has redeemed death by His own death and resurrection. Death by itself is not good. They are in a better place because they are no longer in the nursing home or no longer subject to dementia or no longer subject to pain and suffering, but they are not in a better place in regards to us. We would rather they be here with us. If we truly believed that death were a good thing we would not grieve the loss of those who have died, but we do grieve them. We mourn their loss. Their loss pains us. We miss them. We want them back.

And so when someone who is close to you is dying it is scary. They are leaving you. If they believe in Jesus, you will not see them again until the resurrection. We do not know how long it will be until the resurrection comes. How long will we have to live without this person? How will we live without this person? Why does this person have to go? Why are his sins taking him now and not later? Why aren't the sins of other people taking them into death? Why am I not dying because of my sins?

And so we cry and we weep. We weep outside of graves that seemingly will not yield up the dead to us so that we may see them again. And because our Lord commands us through His holy apostle to grieve with those who grieve understand that He too grieved outside of the tomb of His friend Lazarus after Lazarus had died. Even though the Lord knew He would raise Lazarus from the dead in just a few short minutes, because of the pain and agony of the separation that death is Jesus stands outside of the tomb of His friend and weeps. And He weeps with you every moment that you have to wait until the resurrection to see your loved one again who has died.

And what we want is to have them back. People we do not want to be souls floating around in heaven. No one, absolutely no one, talks about salvation in this way. Everyone talks about salvation incarnately. Somebody dies and at the funeral dinner or at some other place someone will say to someone else, "Well, she's up there playing cards with Uncle Henry and Aunt Wilma." "He's up there with a fishing pole on a pond." "She is up there with her sister playing the fiddle and the piano on the front porch." That last one was said of my own deceased grandmother when her sister died.

The reason that we say these things is because that is what we miss. That is what we want. But if it is true that the soul goes to be with Jesus, how does a soul do any of these things without a body? Are we talking about ghostly card playing? Are we talking about ghostly fishing? What are we talking about?

How does a soul do the things that we wish they were doing? Well, it doesn't, but a body does! Bodies play cards. Bodies fish. Bodies play fiddles and pianos. Bodies embrace and hold fast. And that is the salvation Jesus promises you. He promises you the resurrection of the body! He promises you the resurrection of the body and He has the power to promise you that because His body is raised! It is upon the basis of His own resurrection that He promises that when He returns He will raise you from the dead. And then you will play pianos and fiddles. Then you will play cards. Then you will fish, but the fish will not die because nothing dies in the new creation!

When Mike Luth passed away in this congregation a certain father in our congregation explained to his little girl who Mike was at church. This little girl knew Mike as the guy who handed out the doughnuts at Sunday School. When she figured out who he was, she burst into tears and exclaimed that she wanted Mike back so that he could give her a doughnut! That is the salvation that Jesus promises you. He promises to give those who believe in Him back to you. And you will do and sing in all of eternity and never be subject to pain, suffering, disease, or death ever again!

Don't be afraid!

And then there is your own death.

Christy recently lost a friend of hers from college. Her friend taught at a Lutheran School in Indianapolis. Christy attended the funeral with some of her college friends. I feel good that I was not the only husband who got left home with the children. Even though I only had one child to watch over. One evening when Christy was explaining to her mother about the funeral arrangements, I overheard Christy tell her mother that her friend was forty-five years old. She was forty-five years old and she had died of cancer. I am forty-five years old. It bothered me. It made me think. It made me consider my future.

Some of you know people your own age who have died of accidents, cancer or whatever it is. Some of you have buried children. And not only do you grieve their loss, you also experience the stark reality of death. One day it will be you lying on the bed and all of your family will be gathered around you. One day you will get the diagnosis of cancer and there will be no cure. One day it will be you in the car accident. You will get on the road that day and you will not come back. One day the hospice nurse will come and check to make sure that you have enough pain killers and then whatever plans you had they will cease. Whatever importance you had in your non family vocation will come to an end. And even in your family vocations people will figure out how to get along without you.

And when you breathe your last the only person who can truly be with you is Jesus. He has already died and knows what it is like. He is risen from the dead in order to be with you on the day that you die. Your family members may be in the room with you, but it is not like you are all engaged in a family activity together. The only person dying will be you.

But the Jesus who is with you in those moments is the Jesus who rose from the dead. The Jesus that is with you at the end of your life is the Jesus who upon the basis of His resurrection and death has forgiven you of your sins and promises that you will be with Him after you die and then when He returns again in glory, promises that you will rise from the dead.

When they put you in the ground and cover you with dirt, that is not your final resting place. The Lord will come with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God and raise you from the dead. You will live a resurrected body perfect, sinless, and glorious. And like I said before you will not be subject to suffering and pain or death. You will see your glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And He will say to you as He will say to you when you die, "Don't be afraid!"

Christ is Risen!

