

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Easter, April 4, 2010

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Hymns: 188, 189, 191, 193, 199.

Lessons: Job 19: 23-27, First Corinthians 15:51-58, Matthew 28:1-10.

Text: Mark 15:47-16:7.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In his sufferings and death, Jesus Christ was fighting against the powers of darkness and seemed to lose the battle on the day we call Good Friday.

Today we see the end of the fight.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

The strife is o'er, the battle done;
Now is the Victor's triumph won;
Now be the song of praise begun.
Alleluia! (Hymn 210:1)

The fight is now over. The final battle has been won.

Today we review the final round of this battle for the souls of all mankind and look at

JESUS CHRIST Versus ALL THE POWERS OF DARKNESS

- 1. What really happened on that first day of the week after Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried?**
- 2. What does the empty grave mean to me?**

On Friday just before sunset Jesus was placed into the grave, dead. We confess this fact when in the creed we state that Jesus was “crucified, dead, and buried.”

What had happened up to that point?

The struggles of Jesus in the last days of his life might possibly be compared to a boxing match. Before we look at what happened on this resurrection day, let’s review what has happened up until today, the “*first day of the week*”.

Judas Iscariot decided to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and Judas went out into the darkness on Maundy Thursday evening. He did not receive the forgiveness of sins in the Lord’s Supper. He was going to meet the enemies of Jesus to whom he had promised to deliver Jesus.

Jesus’ disciples had all promised they would never leave Jesus. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ disciples all ran away when his enemies would come to take Jesus prisoner. Peter had been the most vocal of them all, vowing he would never leave Jesus and would even die for him. You know what happened to Peter. He denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed twice in the courtyard of the high priest.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father when his “*soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*” He didn’t just suffer on the cross. He suffered before that time, too. He suffered horrible anguish and his sweat was even like drops of blood because of the stress and pain of suffering for the sins of all mankind.

Under cover of darkness, a large crowd of Jesus’ enemies took him prisoner. They were lead by Judas Iscariot, who approached Jesus and kissed him, normally a token of affection, but on this occasion it was a token of betrayal.

In an illegal night-time trial before the Jewish Council of religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, Jesus was found guilty, and then hauled off to Pontius Pilate because the Jews did not have authority to put anyone to death.

Very early in the morning – at the end of the long night of mockery and beatings – Jesus’ trial before the Roman government began. Pilate found no guilt in him but did not succeed in setting him loose. The Jews insisted he had to die, and kept demanding that Jesus be crucified.

During the three hours before Jesus died, the sun stopped shining, and darkness covered the land. Jesus was crucified and the people were in darkness for three hours before he died. Jesus also suffered on the cross, and his final words, loud and strong were “It is finished.”

At that point, during our Holy Week worship service several days ago, we heard that Jesus appeared to have lost. He died. Death, Satan, and the powers of darkness had conquered him, or so it seemed.

The first verse of our text today tells us that *"Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid."* We left these women on the day Jesus was buried. Can you image what was going through their minds? Their teacher, their Lord, the one they had believed in and were following was dead. Six days before this he was being welcomed into Jerusalem as if he were a conquering king, although because he was riding on a donkey his humility was the most prominent feature. Now he was dead, in a grave, and they had observed it.

"When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body." They wanted to show at least some respect to their Lord, the one many of his followers had believed would *"restore the kingdom to Israel."* Acts 1:6. Most of his followers didn’t understand what he, the very Son of God, had really come to earth to do, and were afraid, as we shall talk about next Sunday, now that their leader was dead and buried. His body had been horribly disfigured because of his sufferings and death although no bones had been broken. They didn’t even have time to properly prepare his body for burial on Friday, the day before the Sabbath. They would have thought that Jesus’ body would eventually decay but that wouldn’t prevent them from honoring him by anointing his dead body with spices to help delay the decay, or at least help overcome the stench of a body that had now been dead for three days.

"Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb." They didn’t waste any time getting to Jesus’ grave. No work was allowed on the Sabbath, on Saturday, so they had gone home and prepared spices and perfumes to be used on the third day. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. On this first day of the week, they didn’t wait to leisurely have their morning coffee and breakfast and look at the morning newspaper, but they got right to what they wanted to do. In their haste to be about honoring their Savior they put us to shame. How often don’t we skip worship services if they aren’t at just the perfect time for us and don’t fit our schedule? These women were up and at the task of worshiping their Savior with their gifts *"very early"* in the day.

But there was a problem. *"They asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'"* Is this something they hadn’t thought about before? The stone was heavy. They now realized that it would have been necessary for some strong men to move the stone so they could access his body, laid in the tomb, probably on a cold stone shelf, inside the cave-like grave. But they went ahead, perhaps thinking that God would find a way. How often don’t we pause in doing something for the Lord, thinking we aren’t strong enough for the task? When St. Paul pleaded with the Lord to take away his unknown *"thorn in the flesh"* he writes by inspiration of God *"But [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."* So too, our strength is made complete and perfect in our weakness through the strength of God working through us.

But God had taken care of the heavy stone. *"But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away."* Something strange had happened. This wasn’t what they expected. Had someone stolen Jesus’ body? Had someone taken the body for reburial somewhere else? Had someone been there already and done something horrible with the Lord’s body?

“As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.” Now things are getting even stranger. *“A young man dressed in a white robe”* was sitting in the tomb. With this man’s words, they recognize this man as an angel, a messenger from God.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” This is the heart of the Resurrection Gospel: *“He has risen! He is not here.”* The angels in effect are asking the women: Do you ladies now remember how he kept telling you what would follow his sufferings and death in Jerusalem? You are looking for Jesus from Nazareth. But you are looking in the wrong place. You are looking for someone who is not here. This is a place for dead people. Yes, we are talking about the Jesus who was crucified. Yes, we are talking about the one who was dead, and was buried here three days ago.

In Jewish usage a part of a day was counted as a full day, and so, today, the third day after he died and was buried, is counted as three days.

But the angel doesn’t just tell them Jesus has risen from the dead and is now alive. His message continues: *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”* The angel says to tell his disciples that he will meet them in Galilee. Jesus had promised this and now it will come true. Do you notice the concern for Peter? Peter is singled out in this message. Peter, who denied his Lord, and went out and wept bitterly but still believed that Jesus could forgive this terrible sin is named in the message of the angel. This means that no sin is too great for Jesus to forgive. Just as Peter repented, we, too, can and must repent of any and every sin. Jesus died for ALL sins.

So what else does the empty grave mean for us? Believe Jesus. He never lies. He said he must suffer and die and that he would rise again on the third day. His word is as good as gold – all of it, every word from Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 through Revelation chapter 22 verse 21! The tomb was really empty. We could try to explain it away, we could look at it in a symbolic, or mystical way and try to explain it away if we choose not to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, as many, even many who claim to be teachers of the Bible do, but Jesus really lived, really died, and really rose from the dead. The last chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and First Corinthians record many appearances of Jesus, even to more than 500 people at one time! We can believe and trust God’s holy, inspired Word. There is no reason to doubt God.

The certainty of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is emphasized in many places, such as this from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christians:

“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” 1 Corinthians 15:12-23.

Jesus came to earth to suffer and die and pay the price demanded for the sins of all mankind. And then he rose from the dead to prove that everyone who believes in him shall rise from the dead and receive the gift of eternal life too.

Yes, it looked during the lessons of the Lenten season as if Jesus Christ was losing the battle. But he willingly gave up his life for us, so that we might live. And today we celebrate his taking that life back, right out of the hands of the devil and all the powers of darkness. Yes, Jesus lost some rounds in this battle of the ages. But he didn’t really lose, he gave his life so that we might have life eternally. Let that be the greatest joy of the empty grave for you. Amen.