

Pastor:

He has risen.

Congregation:

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Hallelujah. We proclaim that with great joy and celebration, and yet that wasn't always the case for Christians. In fact, the first ones who heard about the resurrection didn't react quite so positively or enthusiastically. It's interesting. Listen to the way the gospel ends. "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid." Now, obviously we know that's not where it stopped, but you can imagine their response. You are going to anoint a dead man's body. He's dead. And as most of us know, most people don't become alive again. Once you die, you stay that way, and yet they're going to this tomb. They're mourning, they're crying, they're expecting to anoint their loved one and pay their last respects, and suddenly the tomb's open, there's some strange guy sitting in there and He says, "Don't be afraid." Because that's what angels always have to say whenever they show up.

"Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus the Nazarene. He's not here. He's risen." And they're going, "Yeah, right. Uh-huh. Sure we believe you." I mean, seriously. Think about that. Even though Jesus explained to everybody pretty much He was going to die and then three days later He was going to rise, nobody really believed Him or understood what was going on. It was just like, "Oh yeah, okay, He's saying this, but He's not going to die, first off. He's going to rule. He's going to become leader and we're going to be with Him for the rest of His life and our lives." So they discounted what He said until the Holy Spirit came in Pentecost, nobody really understood all the significance of what was going on. So they were bewildered. They were afraid. They didn't say a word.

But eventually the fear was overcome by the joy, the joy of their salvation, the joy of the hope. As Jesus appears multiple times to various different people throughout these next 40 days, people begin to realize the significance of what is going on, that their sins have been forgiven. That on this mountaintop, as Isaiah says, Mount Zion in Jerusalem, "God has prepared a wonderful banquet and He has destroyed the shroud that enfolds all people, the sheet that covers all nations." And what is that shroud and that sheet? It's death. You notice when Paul is writing about all these witnesses, I mean 500 people at one time, plus the Apostles, plus Peter, plus everybody else, they saw Jesus alive. And after the ladies got over their shock and their fear of what had just happened, they began to talk. They began to talk about

what had happened, and everybody began to talk about it when they'd seen the Lord. And when they understood the significance of the forgiveness of sins, there was one.

And so if you were a non-Christian at the time and you heard somebody read Mark and you heard that the ladies were silent and they were afraid, your next step would be what happened next? How did this end? Because obviously this isn't where it stopped. And then you had the opportunity to say, "We've seen the Lord. He has risen from the dead." I mean, you could literally ... If you didn't know what the events that were going on for many years after this, you could go and find somebody and say, "Were you really there? Did you actually see Jesus Christ risen from the dead?" And they would say, "Yes. We were actually there. We actually saw them." And they wrote that testimony down so that you and I can be sure and certain that what they saw was true. They saw the risen Christ.

Not only did they see the risen Christ, but they received the benefit of that resurrection. They believed the words that were given according to the scriptures, that Christ died for their sins. On the cross, He died. He didn't just swoon. He didn't just faint. That was the whole point of the spear going into His side, the blood and water flowed. He was dead, absolutely positively dead. He did not faint and wake up a couple of days later going, "Man, where am I? And what happened?" He knew exactly what was going on. When He died, He went down to hell, not as part of his punishment, but that was His victory lap. He was walking through hell declaring that He had won, that He had authority over heaven and hell. And that authority, He exercises for you and for me.

Now today, we celebrate that resurrection because we know that these witnesses' testimony is true. I mean, we celebrate today here in South Africa, in South Sudan, in Venezuela, in all parts of Asia and Australia and throughout the world, people are celebrating the same thing. But you know what? It's greater than that. It's greater than all people throughout all the world, throughout all history. Because not only are we who are alive praising God, but you notice some of those witnesses, it says, Paul says, "Some of those witnesses have fallen asleep."

Now what does Paul mean by that? They're still in bed and they forgot to set the alarm, so they didn't make it to church this Sunday? They're still asleep. No, it means when he says that they some have fallen asleep, it means that they have died. But you see, for a Christian, death is not the end of all things and a fearful thing going into the vast unknown. For a Christian, death is about as scary as falling asleep at night. In other words, not at all. Because we know that we're going to wake up. Every night when you lay your head on your pillow, you know you're going to wake up the next morning. And that's true for the last time we lay our head down to rest. We're not going to end it, but we're going to wake up the next

morning. Only this time we're going to wake up with Christ himself, with the heavenly host and all the cosmos celebrating the resurrection and the surety and the certainty of everlasting life.

See, that's what the witnesses proclaimed, that "Even though they die yet shall they live." And that is the foundation upon which you and I stand. We will live for all eternity. We will not die. We will sleep, and then we will join the angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven in this great feast that Isaiah was talking about, this great wedding feast, this banquet of wonderful meats and wines and great food. We will celebrate for all eternity the joy of being together. And we have begun to do that celebration right now in our daily lives. Every Sunday when we gather together and we receive the body and blood of Christ, what do we say it is? It is a foretaste of the feast to come. It is a small sampling of the great benefits that we receive and that we will participate in, in the new heavens and the new earth. We are already a part of it.

And in the meantime, we are strengthened in our journey by that foretaste because this world is full of trials and struggles and tribulations, and sometimes we can act like those first ladies. Terrified, bewildered, and afraid, uncertain of what's going to happen next. And yet we can find comfort in His Word, the word that we can stand firm on, that He has forgiven our sins, that He has taken them away from us, and that He has been raised to new life. And that we in our baptisms, in which God calls us by name, has not only buried us with Christ in our baptisms, but He has also raised us to new life in our baptisms. We are His, we are His children and we are sure and we are certain of our salvation. And we get to proclaim that every day of our lives.

Now that we know, now that we stand firm, now that we are part of that great heavenly host, let us rejoice and give thanks and to look for each and every opportunity to declare the wonders of a God who has forgiven us our sin, who has promised us life after death, and who has defeated all that we are afraid of. Sin, death, hell, Satan himself are all under His dominion. He has authority overall, and He uses that authority to call us His children and to bring us home to be with Him. May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore because He has risen.