

Exodus 15:18-21, Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday: He Has Triumphed Gloriously
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Mike Anderson got a second chance at life. This Missouri man was convicted of armed robbery as a young man and was sentenced to 13 years in prison in St. Louis. And 13 years later, when it came time to process him and release him from prison, his name came up. When they went to look for him in the system, they couldn't find him. Turns out, there was a clerical error and Mike had never actually been summoned to show up for jail. He'd been told they would contact him, but as it turns out, they never called.

So what did Mike Anderson do? He kept on living. He didn't run, he didn't avoid the department of corrections; he just started correcting his life—fix what was broken. He got a job, became a master carpenter, got married, had a couple of kids, volunteered to coach soccer and football. He even became an usher in church.

Mike Anderson was a new man, but his new life was a terrifying and exhilarating thing. Thinking that it could all come crashing down at any minute, he was constantly looking over his shoulder, wondering if anyone was on to him. He was living on egg shells. He felt like he had something hanging over him every day for 13 years. Every time he'd get stopped for running a red light, or not stopping completely at a stop sign, and they'd run his information, he was terrified that this would be it, that he'd be found out. "I'm sorry Mr. Anderson...you're going to need to fix that tail light." Pfffew! Live to fight another day!

New life can be a terrifying AND exhilarating reality. This is what the women who went to the tomb that morning experienced. It was an earth shaking reality...and that takes some getting used to. How can this be? We saw him crucified on Friday. We saw him taken to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea—there was no clerical error there. Our Lord was dead—and not just mostly dead, but *dead* dead.

Who knows how many times these women had been to the tomb in between Friday and Sunday. This past week, I was in Minnesota for the funeral of my Uncle Rich, a remarkable and humble man whose legacy will leave an indelible impact on our family. Multiple times between when the burial took place and today, family members have gone to visit Rich's gravesite. Losing someone we love is traumatic and disorienting—as it must have been for these women.

But on that third day as they approached the tomb at first light, wrapped in their grief, something happened. An earthquake shook the foundations of the earth and there before them was an angel (whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothes were white as snow). "Do not be afraid," the angel said. (Angels are always saying stuff like that.)

Lightning and earthquakes and an angel saying, "He's not here; he's risen." The women didn't respond: "Oh, how nice, we knew that would happen." No, they were terrified. But

hey, at least they were conscious; the guards, they passed out. But why would they be terrified? I mean, they saw Jesus die, they watched it all unfold in all its horrific nature. Why was this so traumatic? Because if Jesus died and is now alive, then they don't know how life works. And that is a terrifying thing.

As a pastor, one of my most serious and sacred duties is to be with people in times of death. And if there is one thing that far too many people are far too comfortable with: it's death. We all believe in death. In fact, I think some of us are far too comfortable with the subject. But not just the eventual death of our bodies. We have become complacent of death when it takes place within our lives. The death of a relationship with a friend. The death of a career. Believing that there's nothing left for a person once they're no longer working. The death of a business hope that didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. Some of us believe that our life can no longer be good, and so we accept the death of our hopes and dreams. We believe in death.

And how we face death affects the way we live the rest of our lives. We will either live with a constant state of fear for what lurks around the corner – and so miss the good opportunities – or we will see our lives as a ticking clock and take everything we can as fast as we can, because she who dies with the most toys wins. We can see death as something to be feared with crippling side effects, or we can see death as something to do all we can to avoid.

So when the earth begins to shake and lightning flashes, you can imagine why the women were fearful. They didn't understand death. Easter is an event that turns our worlds, turns our perceptions, turns our priorities upside down. If the loss of stuff and the deterioration of our bodies are not life's great enemies, then who are we fighting?

Easter is not a springtime sentiment about hope and nice feelings. It is certainly not about bunnies, decorated eggs, or little girls in cute dresses. It is about these women with their dresses hiked up to their knees running in terror out of a graveyard. "He is not here. He is risen." The women were right to be terrified. Everything that we assume about life has just been turned upside down. Our morals, ethics, and mission in life have to change. If the story doesn't end with death, then life can no longer be about taking care of yourself while you can. Now life is going to have to have a holy purpose.

Throughout this season of Lent, I have asked this question time and again of you, because it is the same question I believe the Scriptures ask the Israelites upon their liberation from captivity in Egypt and deliverance to the Promised Land: now that you have your freedom, now that you have liberty, now that you are able to practice your faith freely, so what? What difference does liberation make? What difference does Resurrection make?

A Gallup Pole says that 87% of Americans believe in the resurrection, but that's not the most important question. The more important question is, since Jesus is risen, what difference does that make? What difference does it make when you're struggling to find hope in a desperate situation? What difference does it make when your children have turned their backs on you and all you want is to be in their lives? What difference does it

make when your spouse or loved one gets the diagnosis, and it's terminal?

The real question this Easter is: have you discovered the RISEN Christ in your life? And is he changing anything about it? Because sure, 87% can believe, but how many of them would say that he's really not that interested in getting involved?

Do you notice what the angel says to the women in this scene? **He is not here but he is raised from the dead, come and see, then go and tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold he is going before you to Galilee.**

This is a powerful image. The angel is telling the women to go back and tell the people that Jesus is risen and is going before you. Jesus is going before you into the ordinary places of your life: at work, at home, at school, at Modoc's, at Eugenia's, at Kroger. Jesus is going ahead of you there.

The message of Easter is that the story does not end with death. It never did. The risen Savior is waiting for us up ahead, leading us forward. And because it waits for us up ahead, those things you thought were hopeless, never are. That wounded relationship, that unresolved business, that broken body or broken spirit, the question of what will come as wars and terror spread in increasing fashion... there is always hope, because Jesus is waiting up ahead.

On the morning of March 10th 3019 the Dawnless Day began, it would be the last stand of the city of Minas Tirith. Osgiliath, the garrison city along the river fell first. Farimir summoned his men to retreat back to the White City where the siege continued. The gates were breached, the walls began to crumble the enemy was pouring in upon the great city, it was despair and certain death ahead. But just as the people were beginning to give up and accept the death that was before them. The morning sun broke through the clouds and all of Minas Tirith looked to the hills and there, ready to defend their lives were the men (and women) of the West, the Rohirim.

This, of course, is JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and as the Men of the West sat on horseback on that hill, their king, their leader, Theoden King of Rohan stood before them and gave this speech:

*"Arise, arise, Riders of Theoden! Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
Spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered, a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun
rises! Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!"*

Now that death no longer has the last word, and now that Jesus goes before you, what will you do?

Another thing you might do is what Miriam did in Exodus chapter 15. As she came to understand the reality that God was going before the Israelites and that salvation had come, she danced, she celebrated, she sang for joy.

The Lord is my strength and my song, he has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise him. Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, thy right hand, O Lord shatters the enemy. Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them on thy own mountain...the Lord will reign forever and ever. Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.

Sing to Christ this Easter, for he is going out ahead of you, because he has triumphed gloriously. Amen.