

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Easter Festival Service
April 1, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Easter is a big deal
—Mark 16:1-8

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were ready to go at the crack of dawn. For those faithful women, so loyal to their Lord Jesus, getting out to the tomb as soon as possible was a big deal. They had wanted to get out there ever since late Friday, when they saw where Jesus was laid to rest. But the Saturday Sabbath intervened, and so Sunday morning was their first opportunity to get back out there. Their minds were occupied with spices, a grave, and—oh yeah, that huge stone! They bought the spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, to cover up the odor of death and give him a proper burial. They were going to the grave to remember. After all, that's really what a grave is for, so those who remain have a place to go and remember the departed. With all that was on their grieving minds, it seems they forgot one small detail, a detail that was actually a pretty big deal. Here they had done all this preparation and put such love and devotion into it, but now how were they going to get into the grave to anoint him with that huge stone in front of it? These were the concerns on their minds.

But once they got to the cemetery, their concerns quickly evaporated in reverse order. Somehow, by someone, the stone had been rolled away. The grave was wide open, so they walked in. Any thought of remembering the dead quickly departed when instead of feeling grief, they suddenly felt alarm. *They saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side.* It was an angel of the Lord. Clearly there was no dead body in sight to anoint. So much for the spices.

Easter has a way of dissipating our big deals. I am not criticizing those women. It was a big deal for them to get out to the grave, and they certainly meant well. But the Lord had something much bigger in mind for them that morning than placing some spices on a corpse to remember the dead. It's the same with us. We have all these things that we think are such big deals at the moment. We can't see the big picture. We can't see past tomorrow—well, forget about tomorrow, we can't even see past today. We think too small. We forget about things that really matter, and we make small deals into big deals. Easter has a way of dissipating our big deals. The shining sun of Easter melts those supposedly big deals of ours into insignificance. I'll never say that God doesn't care about something. Considering that he feeds the loneliest bird and he puts a blossom on the remotest plant, he cares, and he cares about the smallest details of our lives, too. But the Lord Jesus once told us that the matters we worry about and the situations we fret over are often just not worth it. Coming to church, coming to Easter, has a way of rearranging our priorities. We remember what the really big deals are.

Death is a big deal. Jesus' death on Good Friday was a big deal. The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, God himself died that day. His death was not a peaceful passing after a long and full life. He was cut off from the land of the living in the prime of life. He was crucified, a horrible death that had a way of searing its image into the minds of the mourners. For the two Mary's and Salome going to the grave that Sunday morning, the look of a dead body was seared into their memory. They were there when Jesus was hanging on the cross. They heard his last loud cry. They saw his corpse being removed from the tree. They saw him laid in the grave. They were mourning a death, the death of someone they loved more than anyone else on earth.

You may relate. Many of us have the image of a death seared into the memory. The image of a dead loved one seared into the memory. A dead dad. A dead mom. A dead brother or sister. A dead son or daughter. A dead child. A dead friend. If the death was especially traumatic, the image of a dead loved one may haunt our memory. With any death we must deal with, people around us may perhaps act like it's not really such a big deal. I have a memory of a young hospital worker giggling with a group of friends in the room while the doctor was trying to resuscitate the man whose wife I was standing next to. People around us may act like the death we are dealing with us isn't such a big deal, even if they don't mean to. That afternoon or the next day after the funeral, they go back home and go back to work, back to a pretty normal life, and they don't mean anything by that. But for you, well, life has changed. Your life is never going to be quite the same again. One woman I knew was mourning the tragic death of her 8-year-old boy. She said that about a week after the funeral, she was feeling more depressed than at the funeral. All the flowers people had bought her to cheer her up started dying and wilting. Instead of bringing cheer, those wilting flowers became a potent reminder of her son's death. Death is a big deal.

Easter is a big deal, too. *"Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."* The big deal of death goes head-to-head with the big deal of Easter. And what do you get? "It was a strange and dreadful strife when life and death contended. The victory remained with life; the reign of death was ended. Holy Scripture plainly says that death is swallowed up by death. Its sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!" Praise the Lord! (CW 161:2). *"[Jesus] has risen!"* the angel said. Now that's a bigger deal than death. A bigger deal than Jesus' death on Good Friday. On Friday, sensing God's wrath against sin and feeling the emptiness of eternal death in the depths of his soul, Jesus was crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But now, *he has risen!* On Friday, the women had seen Jesus' lifeless shell laid in the grave. But now, that spot was empty. *He has risen! He is not here.*

Easter is a bigger deal than any death we have to deal with on this earth. Jesus' rising from the dead can erase and replace terrible memories of death. Jesus' rising from the dead can soften the blow of mourning the loss of someone who has died in the Lord. The soul of the Christian believer dies and goes to be with the living Lord Jesus, while the dead body sleeps in anticipation of being raised back to life on the last day. Christians will rise to life just as Jesus Christ did. So Easter can even turn tears of sorrow into tears of joy. It has that kind of power. And it lasts a whole lot longer than flowers after the funeral. Some may be asking, "Well, that's fine for a loved one who died in the Lord, Pastor, but what about when I have to mourn the death of someone who probably died an unbeliever?" I will grant: there's nothing sadder than that. That is truly tragic. Yet even then I will contend that Easter is bigger than that death, too. Where you stand in relation to Easter makes all the difference between death and life. It was the risen Jesus who announced, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The death of someone who died an unbeliever is still a potent reminder of what a big deal Easter is. Believe it for yourself. Don't lose out on its blessings through unbelief. Use whatever opportunity you have to speak of it to those you love. Finally, Easter is also bigger than our own death. Our dearly departed are not here today, but Jesus is right here. He still is risen. He will stay alive forever and ever. And even when we must face death for ourselves, we face it hand-in-hand with a risen Jesus who already contended with death for us and won.

Since Easter is such a big deal, we can't leave here this morning without addressing something even worse than death. The worst experience of the human condition. The most terrible thing a person can go through. You know what it is? A guilty conscience. A guilty conscience is a big deal. It destroys all your spiritual well-being. It can make you physically ill. It can lead to hopelessness and despair. The memory of sin that haunts a guilty conscience is the biggest deal of all life's troubles. You need proof of that? The cause is greater than the effect. Here's what that means. Sin causes death. Death has no power over you if you are not a sinner. But if you are a sinner, man, are you in trouble! A guilty conscience tells you that. To know that is to detect death and to have a notion of hell.

Surely Jesus' disciples were feeling a very guilty conscience. It was one thing on Thursday to have deserted him and fled the way they did in fear and shame, but to do it right after they had pledged their undying loyalty must have crushed their conscience. Specifically in the case of Peter, it was bad enough to have denied knowing Jesus, but it was even worse that it came hours after he declared he would never fall away. In fact, Peter had even doubled down on that declaration and said he would die with Jesus before ever disowning him. Here was the exchange on Thursday night as Jesus made his way to Gethsemane with the eleven disciples:

Jesus told them, "You will all fall away, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows you will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. We know they did not live up to their words. They disowned Jesus.

Here's what the angel said to the women on Sunday morning: "*Jesus has risen! ... Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'*" Did you hear what just happened? Forgotten are their bold, self-confident claims that ended in disaster on Thursday night. The disciples' words and deeds aren't even mentioned. Easter Sunday brought forgiveness for all that. God's complete forgiveness for all their sins. The only thing recalled from Thursday is Jesus' promise: "*After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.*" "Go tell that to Peter," the angel specifically said to the three women. How gracious God was to one man in particular that Easter morning. Peter was given a message of personal forgiveness through the women who received it through the angel who received it from God.

This is what makes Easter the biggest deal of all. God deals with you personally. He gives you individual care for your soul. Every conscience has some sins on it that don't go away very easily. Whatever your sin has been—maybe a lot of people know about it, maybe hardly anyone else except a spouse, a trusted friend, a pastor, or maybe the only other person who knows about it is Jesus Christ—whatever your sin has been, take great comfort from the angel's words in Mark's Easter gospel: "*Jesus has risen! ... Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee.'*" God's forgiveness to you is personal. It's complete. It's faithful, guaranteed by Easter. And don't think you have to hear it directly from God. When fellow Christians tell you that God forgives you for Jesus' sake, like I am telling you now, that is God's good news for you.

No wonder we have pulled out all the music today. No wonder we have filled the place with flowers. No wonder we have decked everything out in white. No wonder all of you are here today. Easter is a big deal. Jesus lives! Amen.