



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter Sunday
April 4, 2021

The First Look

St. Mark 16:1-8

¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! It’s Easter Sunday, beloved. “This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.” Martin Luther once exclaimed: “You can’t speak of Easter without rising to your feet. Hearing its message is like Jacob hearing that Joseph was still alive. It’s almost too good to be true.” But Jesus *is* alive! He has risen from the grave and death is swallowed up in victory!

We stand in awe today; we’re amazed, like the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning. And, as we take our “first look” into that vacant crypt, we do so – at least initially – as they did: with a heavy heart and a sorrow that pervades our whole being. After all, what do we expect to find there? What did the women expect to find there? They brought spices with them to anoint the body of Jesus, which means they expected to find death there. For us, too, what do we always expect to find at a grave? We expect to find death!! We expect to find finality, separation, decay, pain, sorrow, loss, emptiness, loneliness!!

Oh, we can try to deny the realities of death – some do, you know, somewhat successfully . . . until it strikes close to home and they can no longer avoid it. The women who came to the tomb that first Easter were prepared, at least in a meager way, to face death. They were ready to stand over Jesus’ lifeless body, to weep, to mourn, to grieve. They were ready to feel the sting of death. They were ready to say their sad goodbyes.

But, when they got there, their “first look” into the tomb alarmed them, because what they found was not what they expected. What they saw was a “young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side of the tomb.” Mark says “they were alarmed.”



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Yeah, they were! You would be, too! Remember, they expected to find death, and yet, they didn't. Jesus' lifeless body wasn't there. Instead, there was a young man who said, "Don't be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here!"

Now, whether or not these women fully understood the young man's words, life for them was irreversibly changed. They expected death, they found instead the sign of life. "You seek the dead, but He has risen! He is not here!"

You see, life changes forever when you take that "first look" into the empty tomb of Jesus. Death has always been your great enemy, and no one escapes it, because it's the wages of sin and we're all sinners. Death can make life seem so meaningless, devoid of purpose. But, when you take that "first look" into the empty tomb of Jesus, you begin to recognize that in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, death has lost its grip on you. It's lost its power to hold you in fear and in bondage. "I am the resurrection and the life (Jesus said). He who believes in Me, though he may die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Sickness may be in your future, and death may be at the end of that, but, thanks be to God, He has given you the final victory over death.

"You can't speak of Easter without rising to your feet," Luther said. The joy of a life that conquers death is a joy that pervades our very being. For you, Christian, it is no longer death to die, for in time the door to the grave that entombs you will be forced open and your body will be taken to be with the Lord. "Now no more can death appall, now no more the grave enthrall; You have opened paradise, and your saints in you shall rise. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

But, what do you do when the sense of joy and excitement over your "first look" into that tomb begins to fade? Where do you go when the image of that corpseless grave becomes clouded over by more immediate concerns? The old Spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when God raised Him from the tomb?" The short answer is no, you weren't there, and in part, the mere fact that you weren't there makes it difficult for you to have and hold on to the joy and excitement of that "first look." When your vision is obscured by your circumstances and that "first look" is nowhere in sight, where do you turn? You turn in simple confidence to the only thing you can really count on: the confession of what God has done for you in the Person of His Son. Some people call that "dead orthodoxy," others might call it "blind faith." But Christians call it an unshakable confidence in what the God of grace and mercy has done for our sinful world.

In the early part of the last century, before the Communists seized control of Russia, it had been a long-established custom for relatives and friends to exchange Easter greetings. A priest once availed himself of this to win a debate. A Bolshevik commissar delivered a public lecture in a large university auditorium. He said that the Christian religion was now completely overthrown and that the Bible could easily be disproved. He felt so sure of himself that he challenged anyone in the audience to find a flaw in what he had just presented.



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A young priest came forward, turned to the audience, and said, “Brethren, Christ is risen!” With one accord the vast audience cried out, “He is risen indeed!” “I have finished,” said the priest. “I have nothing more to say.” The meeting was closed at once. The Bolshevik leader’s eloquence and flowery language had availed him nothing. The Christian confession of faith was embedded in those people and was not going away. And, after nearly 70 years of systematic repression of Christians and the Christian Faith, the Soviet Union collapsed. Guess what was still there and is still living in the hearts of many Russian citizens? A vibrant faith in Jesus, the Son of God and only Savior of mankind!

There are those in our society who would like to claim that the Christian religion is completely overthrown and that the Bible can easily be disproved. While there are many arguments that can be made to refute such claims, one of the strongest looks back at you every morning from your bathroom mirror. For, you, my friends, share this age-old faith and confession. Whether you would describe yourself as a strong believer or a weak believer, whether you think of yourself as solidly Lutheran or perhaps not as convinced as others of the Lutheran doctrine, the fact remains that you believe in Jesus Christ and His saving work for your salvation. By His Word, God has planted that confession in your heart. He has given you faith to believe, though all the world would offer you cause to doubt. He’s given you His own body and blood, that you might confess a hope that transcends even your grave. He’s washed you with the water of Holy Baptism, that you may confess a purity that, though it was His, is now yours. Through these gifts God has given you your own “first look” into the empty tomb. You’ve peeked into the grave of Jesus and what did you find? You found what the women who went there that first Easter found. You found it empty, and you found a Word of promise that reverberates in your heart, whether you like it or not: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here!”

Oh, beloved, “this is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.” Join me again, I beg you, in the chant that echoed even through the halls of a communist institution. Join me in the confession that took martyrs singing joyfully to their graves. Join me in the confession that has sustained the faithful through the ages, even when no joy or excitement could be mustered in their battle-wearied souls. Join me in the confession that ascribes victory to the cross, that assures you of the forgiveness of your sins, and that can fan your flicker of faith into a raging inferno: Christ is Risen!! He is Risen Indeed!! Hallelujah!! In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.