

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
Easter Day; April 24, 2011

He Is Risen!

Way back at the beginning, when Jesus was but a glimmer in God's eye, an angel appeared to tell Mary that she would bear a child. Naturally, she was startled and scared, so the angel reassured her. "Do not be afraid," he said.

Thirty-three years later, the baby had grown into a man, and not just any man. He had become the one they'd been waiting for, the Messiah who would restore the hopes of a nation. Or so they believed. Now, three days after his death it seems a cruel fantasy. Their dreams are shattered, crucified, and all that remains is grief and despair, as two heartbroken women walk slowly to the tomb.

But just then the earth shakes and an angel – perhaps the same angel – appears at the entrance. He looks into the eyes of Mary – perhaps the same Mary – and speaks the first words of Easter: "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid. Our instinct is to fear what we don't see or understand, but the angel calls forth courage and faith because the angel knows something. The angel knows, as did that first angel, that God has intervened. New life, new birth, a new creation has sprung forth from the empty tomb.

Do not be afraid, the angel says, for he has been raised – or in the King James Version, "He is risen." Which brings to mind a story. When I was in college I woke up one morning, one Easter morning, to find the whole campus transformed. Overnight, a particularly zealous group of Christians had taken pastel-colored chalk and written "He is risen!" on sidewalks all over campus. It was an impressive logistical feat, not to mention a daring and fairly offensive tactic at a religiously diverse school.

That night Andie and I were at dinner with some friends, none of whom were Christian, and the subject came up. "Do these people just assume that we know who He is?" one of them asked. Another girl agreed, and said, "You know, it's not even proper grammar. It should be 'He rose' or 'He was raised,' not 'He is risen.'"

It's a fair point. My word processor didn't like it either, and yet we are here today because that grammatical error makes all the difference. 'He is risen' puts the resurrection in present tense. It is not simply a past event; it is on-going. The victory that Jesus won, the love and life that he wrestled from death wasn't just for the disciples of his day or the saints of a future heaven, but for us, here in this life and this world. He is risen for us.

We need to remember and proclaim that truth, because we too live in the midst of fear and uncertainty. We too huddle outside the tombs in our lives, weeping over dashed hope and lost love. We too witness injustice and cruelty. But if we look and listen, if we are faithful as the Marys were faithful, we will find that God continues to intervene today. Not always in the ways we want or expect, and not even in ways we understand but in life-giving ways nonetheless. Make no mistake, there are signs of resurrection all around us, and even and especially in the midst of despair angels still come to whisper those words of hope and promise: "Do not be afraid. He is risen."

Because he is risen, we are able, we're invited to view the world through a different lens. And I don't mean rose-colored glasses or pastel-colored chalk; the joy of Easter doesn't take away the sorrow of Good Friday. But it does transform it. It rolls away the stones in our lives and in our world. It calls forth moments of resurrection, moments large and small that remind us that in the present as in the future hope dispels fear, life emerges from death, and love conquers all. He is risen. Alleluia and amen!