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Easter Day – Matthew 28:1-10 – The Greatest Week of Our Lives

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I'm sure by now you've heard the claim. US Surgeon General Jerome Adams said on Palm Sunday that "this is going to be the hardest and the saddest week of most Americans' lives, quite frankly." COVID-19 has taken the lives of more than 100,000 people worldwide, 20,000 Americans, over 120 Wisconsinites, and it's not done yet. This pandemic has caused fear and anxiety and panic and has changed our lives like very few things have before.

"This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it's not going to be localized, it's going to be happening all over the country, and I want America to understand that," the Surgeon General said. Not since the 1950s has America been shut down and our way of life ground to a halt the way it is right now. People are out of work. Paychecks can be hard to come by, and so are groceries and toiletries and other basic necessities. Loved ones – in many cases lonely already in the first place – now have to be kept entirely apart for their safety. For many people, there's nowhere to go, nothing to do, except to just sit and worry.

Well everyone who thinks this was the hardest and saddest week of their lives would have good company with Jesus' followers after the week they had. In just the past few days, they had seen the opposition against Jesus from the Jewish religious leaders reach its boiling point; Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, betrayed Jesus and sold him out to the Jews and Romans; Peter, the leader of the disciples, denied even knowing Jesus; the rest of the disciples abandoned Jesus and hung him out to dry when he needed them the most; and the few women who were actually loyal to him were rewarded with having to watch him be nailed up to a cross and suffer and die and then having to handle his burial on top of it.

But the hardest and saddest part of it all was that Jesus was the one they had hoped would redeem God's people. But how could that happen now? How could he be the Messiah, the true King of Israel, God's Son and our Savior, if he was rejected and killed? It seemed like such a terrible tragedy. Yes, that was the hardest and saddest week of their lives, I'm sure.

But now back to this week, in our fight against the coronavirus, the Surgeon General did say that there "is a light at the end of the tunnel if everyone does their part for the next 30 days. There is hope but we've also got to all do our part." 30 more days of hand-sanitizing, mask-wearing, and social distancing might finally stem the tide of this virus's spread. But the truth is, us doing our part for the next 30 days isn't going to undo what's been done in the past few months. It isn't going to bring anyone back. But Jesus? He didn't need 30 days. He only needed 3 in order to undo what's been done since the beginning of time and in order to bring back everyone who believes in him forever. What seemed on that Friday like the hardest and

saddest week of theirs or anybody's lives became by that following Sunday the greatest week of ours and everybody's lives, and it's all because of one simple, glorious fact: Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia!

And that's what those women who went to Jesus' tomb that morning needed so badly to find out. See, death is our greatest enemy, and it causes our greatest hurts. It takes away the people we love, and it hounds us every day until it finally takes us, too. That's what these women were going through. They were going to Jesus' tomb one last time to say goodbye. They had lost their dearest friend and their sorrows were almost too much to bear. But when they got to that garden grave, they found an angel of God who rolled back that stone and revealed an empty tomb that couldn't hold Jesus in. He told them, "*Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.*" Christ is risen and death is fallen, he said; that changed everything and freed them from their sorrows. No longer did death have power over their Savior, and so no longer did death have power over them, either. And when they actually saw their living Lord, all their hurts were driven away and he gave them hope like nothing they could find anywhere else. Jesus lives, now and forever – and that promise goes for you too, friends. If you're struggling with sorrows over losing loved ones or even over the prospect of your own death someday, Jesus' resurrection means that you will live forever with him and all of our brothers and sisters who fell asleep in faith – guaranteed, no doubt about it – and you will never have to say goodbye to any of them ever again.

And because Christ is risen, that means we've also been freed from all of our fears. Twice these women were told not to be afraid. It's pretty easy to understand why they were – it's not every day we come face to face with supernatural beings doing supernatural things. But then also, these were sinful women in the presence of holiness. No doubt, they felt completely inadequate before that angel's bright, burning glory, and they were afraid and ashamed because of the things they had done and because of the darkness in their hearts. They and the disciples both knew what had happened to Jesus a few days before and they knew that it was ultimately their sins that sent him to die on that cross. They knew they deserved only vengeance and destruction from God, and that's true about us, too. I mean, have you been careless in worshipping God in whatever ways you *can*? Have other things been more important than strengthening your relationship with him in these last days and weeks and months... and years? Have you been the spouse, the parent, the sibling, the child, the student, the worker, the neighbor, the citizen that you should? No, we all know how far short we fall before God, and we too *had* good reason to fear. But then Christ rose, and his message rang out even to you and me, don't be afraid. See, the reason Jesus went to the cross in the first place was to take away those sins, to bury the hatchet, to rebuild the bridge, and make things right for us with God again. We don't need to be afraid of his holiness because that's exactly what Jesus gives us by faith. Jesus shed his blood to wash you clean of your

sins and grant you his perfect righteousness. Now holiness for us isn't something to fear – it's something that for Christ's sake we've been given; it's our ticket into heaven, and nothing can take that away from us.

That's because Jesus' resurrection is undeniable proof that our sins are forgiven and that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross. Jesus freed us from our sins when he rose from the dead because that's how he showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that his perfect death was sufficient to redeem humanity, and that's how he showed that sin and death and the grave have no power over us anymore. Christ is our Champion, our Conqueror, our Risen Lord, and the devil and all the forces of evil don't stand a chance against him. My brothers and sisters, Christ's victory on Easter morning is our victory, because by his death and resurrection our Savior crushed the devil's head; he emptied sin of its dreadful tyranny; and he took away the terror of death by making it for us simply now the gate to eternal life.

By his resurrection, Jesus freed us *from* our sorrows, our fears, and our sins. But what's maybe even greater is that he freed us *for* joy, for brotherhood, and for heaven with him forever. When that angel appeared to the women, showed them the empty tomb, and told them that Christ is Risen, they *“hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’”*

You know, it can be hard to tell here just what a huge emphasis there is on joy in this story. What it actually says is that the women hurried away from the tomb with fear and *great* joy and when suddenly Jesus met them, he said to them literally, “Rejoice!” No doubt, these women still had some fears and some struggles throughout their lives, and just like those women, we too have worries and doubts that darken our worlds. The coronavirus isn't going away anytime soon, and neither are any of the other effects of sin in our lives that we see all around us. And on top of that, our consciences still try to accuse us and it can sometimes feel like we drag around our guilt like weights and chains. But no more, because Christ is risen, and now we have the joy and the release that go along with it. All the bad things that happen to us here in this world are just the devil's empty lies and temptations and deceptions that are only meant to scare you and hurt you, but they mean nothing, because he has no power over you anymore. We have joy from Jesus that can never be taken away from us, because our Savior is alive and victorious. That means all our sins are forgiven, we are reconciled to God, and we have the certainty of salvation. Our lives have real meaning and purpose now and we don't have to worry about our relationship with God or what's going to happen to us after this life anymore, because we have the unending joy of knowing that Christ is risen.

And don't miss that one awesome word that Jesus uses: *“go and tell my brothers.”* Though we were once enemies of God and slaves under the devil's power because of our sins, when Jesus rose up from the grave, he shattered those chains and threw the devil down in defeat. Jesus freed us from our slavery and made us his own dear brothers. Not just servants, not just disciples, not just friends – his true brothers and sisters! Do you see what that means? We're at peace with God now, and we've become his very own family. And if we are his own family, then we are also heirs of God's heavenly Kingdom – you who may think sometimes that you don't matter in this world, you are heavenly royalty, and that means that you have all the greatest benefits and blessings of being God's very own beloved children. God isn't someone to be feared or to worry about anymore – no, he's your heavenly Father now who loves you more than anything in all creation. You can know that your God is looking down on you with love and holding you in his hands now; he's protecting you and caring for you every day of your lives; he's listening to your prayers and taking them into account as he rules creation for your good; and he's guiding your lives until he finally takes you home to heaven, where he's preparing a place for you right now.

And that's really the greatest thing about Jesus' resurrection. The is the greatest week of our lives because when it was all said and done, after everything Jesus went through for us, the bottom line is that we get eternal life with him in heavenly perfect and paradise forever. What a blessing it was that those women and the disciples and hundreds more witnesses got to see Jesus face to face after his resurrection. They were so overjoyed and he meant so much to them that they fell at his feet, grabbed onto him, and wouldn't let go. And my friends, because Jesus lives, we too have the promise that one day we'll be able to do the same – maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon. When our lives spin out of control, we can cling to Jesus, because by his death and resurrection for us he overcame this sinful world and now he calls us out of it as well – not just to Galilee like he told the disciples, but to heaven. There we too will see our Savior face to face, we'll meet his warm embrace that we've so longed for, and we will never have to let go. We'll fall down before him in worship, we'll be given the crown of glory as heirs of God's heavenly Kingdom, and we'll know that we've finally come home to be at Jesus' side forever.

So it may be true that this was the hardest and saddest week of most Americans' lives. The coronavirus has taken the lives of thousands and thousands of people and counting. That's enough to shake us to our very core. But sin and death have taken the lives of billions and billions more, and not even hydroxychloroquine can cure that. But the good news is we don't need it, because we have a cure that is so much better. On Easter morning, that angel opened that tomb and sat on that stone and proclaimed for all the world to hear: sin, death, and the devil have fallen and heaven for you now stands open, because Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.