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Easter Day – Luke 24:1-12 – Victorious

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“In war, whichever side may call itself the victor, there are no winners, but all are losers.” There are many things that historians say Neville Chamberlain, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom leading up to World War II, got wrong in his day, but that is a sentiment that he got absolutely right. In war, with all that death and destruction and upheaval, how could anyone really consider themselves *winners* except in the most selfish, brutal, inhumane of ways? Or even in a war that is just, even in a war where intentions are as proper and pure as they can be, victory can only be defined by comparison to what could have gone worse. Yes, our people have been killed and driven out of their homes, but at least more escaped the conflict than were engulfed by it. Yes, our cities are destroyed, but at least this conflict didn’t go nuclear. Yes, we have lost thousands of soldiers, but at least this hasn’t turned into World War III. Now that might be enough to rejoice about in the moment when the threat finally comes to an end, but not when it’s time to start calculating the losses and picking up the pieces. “In war... there are no winners, but all are losers.”

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, the war in Ukraine has taken our world’s center stage, and who can argue that it has brought death and destruction and upheaval and its methods and motivations have been selfish and brutal and inhumane? How many citizens of Ukraine and Russia and even their surrounding nations have suffered because of the decisions of their leaders? Much as we like to tell ourselves that our world is getting better as time goes by, it just takes another episode like this one (and all the others that came before it) to remind us that humans are not by nature good. In fact, maybe the most adept observation about the atrocities of war was made by a man who had a hand in plenty of his own, the Union Civil War General William T. Sherman: “War is hell.”

Well if that’s really the case, then our problem is a lot bigger than who stands across from us on a battlefield or what the effects of war will be on our gas prices and stock market. Our problem is that no matter how many wars are fought in this world, none of them ever really defeat the enemy that causes all of them, and that’s our sin and the devil whose temptation trapped us in it. Yes, war is hell for every one of us too, because as the Apostle Paul said, the sinful mind is *hostile* to God – *at war* with God. And because of that, we were by nature *objects of wrath* – *deserving* of hell. But you know, if all we wanted to do was lament about war and its consequences, we could have just stayed home and turned on the news. No, that’s not why we’re here in God’s house today. We’re here in God’s house because our biggest problem has an even bigger solution. Because sin and the devil and even hell itself has met its match. Because the events of that first Easter morning have made us winners now and in eternity. We are here in God’s house today to celebrate our Savior who died to pay for all of

our sins and then rose up again victorious over death for us forever. So today, let’s join the rest of the Church on earth and in heaven to give him the praise he deserves – Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

So our story starts at first light on Sunday morning when a number of women who had followed Jesus all over Israel caring for his needs set out to pay him their final service by anointing his body with spices for burial. The darkness of the morning was only deepened by the darkness of their sorrow, but as the sun came up over the horizon and they approached the tomb, they noticed something odd. The stone was rolled away from the entrance. This tomb was supposed to be under heavy guard, sealed and roped up by order of Pontius Pilate himself, and the stone – really it was a boulder – could only be rolled back and forth in its groove by multiple grown men working together. But as they approached, they found no guard. They found the ropes unsealed. And they found the rock rolled away and the tomb standing wide open, almost as if something supernatural had happened here. They’d never seen anything like it, so they came cautiously to look inside. But to their horror, there was nothing but grave clothes. Jesus was gone.

Luke puts it like this: “*They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.*” What they didn’t expect to find, they did. What they did expect to find, they didn’t. Everything here was the opposite of what it should have been, and that left them very definitely at a loss about what it all meant. But little did they know that that discarded stone and empty tomb were symbols of the victory of life over death that day. The seal the soldiers put on the tomb, the rock that covered it, the ropes that held it tight – all were burst before the almighty power of the rising God that nothing, not even death and the grave, could keep down. The women may not have realized it right then, but what they found proved Jesus’ triumph over the devil and all the forces of evil, and it proves that he is our victorious Savior, that he is the true Son of God, and that his death on the cross really was the perfect sacrifice to satisfy God’s justice, to pay for all of our sins, and to crush the devil’s head forever.

Make no mistake about it: the Easter story isn’t just nice thoughts and words intended to make us feel better about ourselves and the world around us as spring approaches. It’s not just the opiate of the masses, so to speak. No, Easter is the most significant event in all of human history, because it means that our story will continue on into eternity. That wasn’t always a given. See, ever since all the way back in the Garden of Eden when the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, this life has been a slow march toward death that no one has been able to escape. We were lost in our sins, and so we were condemned to die and condemned to hell, separated from God forever and doomed to suffer only his eternal wrath and punishment. Left to ourselves, that’s what we deserve and there’s nothing we could do about it.

Those women felt hopeless as they stood there at the entrance to Jesus' empty tomb. They thought that Jesus was dead and gone, and that meant their faith was futile, they were still in their sins, God's wrath was unavoidable, and hell was inevitable. All was lost. "So what do we do now?" Luke says, "*While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"*"

Not for one more second would God our heavenly Father have his children despair, so like a bolt of lightning he sent his angels to share the news: "*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!*" Tombs are for dead men, but the one you are looking for is alive forever and ever! Jesus lives, the victory's won!

And you know what that means, don't you? Christ is risen for us! Christ has destroyed sin and death for us! Christ has won the ultimate victory over all evil *for us!* If the devil wants to hurt us now, he has to go through Jesus first, and that's not going to happen. He is the Living One, the one who has all authority to live and die and rise again, the one who has shattered the chains of the grave, and the one who lives and reigns for us to reconcile us to God, to intercede with the Father on our behalf, and to give us eternal life and every good thing in Paradise with him forever. Death can't touch him anymore, and so death has no power over us, his people, anymore either. Its sting is soothed, its victory is vacated, and now it's become nothing more for us than the front door we walk through to get into our heavenly home.

Our greatest and most fearsome enemy, fallen before our greatest and most glorious Champion – that's what the Easter story is all about. And the beautiful thing is that now we can have the same certainty about where we stand with God as Jesus did about how he would get us there: "*Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Then they remembered his words.*" Jesus told his followers ahead of time everything that was going to happen. He told them to trust him and that it was all according to God's plan. He was in control the whole time. But yet these women and the disciples were still slow to believe. They tended to focus only on the bad, rather than on the good. And even after all these years some things just don't change, because that's still our tendency, too.

But Jesus' Easter victory *does* change all that. Yes, we are naturally inclined toward sin and fear and doubt. This world can be a scary place! But when our God makes a promise, when our Savior speaks, nothing can be more sure. He is faithful and absolutely trustworthy, and Easter proves it. Because Christ is risen, all your sins are forgiven, all your fears are dispelled, and all your doubts are put to rest. All your guilt, your shame, your disgrace, all your past demons

have been paid for and left in the tomb with Jesus' grave clothes, gone forever and never to return.

So when the devil tries to creep back into your head, do like the women did: remember Jesus' words. Go to the Scriptures, the sword of the Spirit to fight off every evil attack. And no matter what bad things might happen in this broken world, remember what Christ has done to overcome them all. Your parents die? Christ is risen. Your spouse is sick? Christ is risen. Your child is in trouble? Christ is risen. You lose your job? Christ is risen. You've had a bad year, you're worried about the future, and you don't know what to think about where this country and this world are headed? Christ is risen, so nothing else matters. No matter how many loved ones or opportunities you think you might have lost, with Jesus, nothing is a loss. No, the ultimate, final victory has already been won, friends, so hold on, keep going, and fix your eyes on the heavens to see the victory parade coming with life to the full. Nothing is a loss for those who know Jesus as their risen Lord and Savior, so remember his words: our Savior lives, and so we also will live! We belong to him forever, and so no one can ever rip us away and nothing can ever separate us from his love! Because Jesus isn't *here* in the grave, he can be here with us always, and one day we can be there in heaven with him, where he will right our every wrong, fix everything that's broken for us now, and share with us all the joy and blessings of his Easter victory forever.

So all faults and politics aside, without a doubt one of the most impressive aspects of this war in Ukraine has been the strength and resilience of its people. Even as we pray for peace and deliverance especially for our Christian brothers and sisters there, we can echo the confidence once shared by Ukraine's President Zelensky: "Light will win over darkness."

Now I don't know whether that means Ukraine will continue to hold off this Russian invasion, and I don't know that the concepts of light and darkness are quite so easy to distinguish in a political climate that's seen so much instability and corruption and intrigue. After all, in war – especially war borne of human sinfulness and selfishness – there are no winners, but all are losers. But what I do know is that in the end, light will win over darkness, because in fact, it already has. The light of dawn on that first Easter morning revealed that the darkness of sin and death and hell has been defeated and destroyed once and for all. Because Christ rose up victorious, he has made us victorious forevermore. We aren't at war with God anymore; we have peace with God now through our Lord Jesus Christ. Easter teaches us that life doesn't inevitably lead to death. No, death gives way to eternal life with all our brothers and sisters in faith and with our victorious Savior himself. The final trip these women made to Jesus' empty tomb didn't reveal the finality *of* death. Rather, it revealed the finality *for* death. Easter means that death ends in life; it means that your sins are forgiven, that the devil is defeated, and that heavenly victory is yours for all eternity, because – let's say it together – Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.