

## Matthew 28:1-10

I think that most of us like to have things clean and tidy...the vehicle we drive, the home we live in--our kitchen, our garage, our work space. This is not to say that everything in our life is always clean and tidy, but we prefer it that way. This also is how we prefer to keep the Christian Faith--clean and tidy. We prefer Easter over Good Friday because on Good Friday Jesus is wounded, weak, bloody, ugly, but on Easter all the messiness of Good Friday disappears. Easter presents us with a clean and tidy Jesus.

It's this way everywhere. On Good Friday churches are sparsely populated, but on Easter Sunday, even though it's early in the morning, people pack the pews to celebrate a clean and tidy holiday. Church-goers do not hesitate to invite friends and family to church with them on Easter because all the offensiveness of the cross is gone. Who would not like Easter lilies, Easter greetings, and Easter hymns?

I recall one particular Easter service in Nebraska. We began the service the way the Good Friday service ended. The chancel was bare, the organ played somber music, the lights were off, there were no flowers or colorful banners, I came out dressed in the black of Good Friday. This is how the women came to the tomb on Easter morning--still in the mindset of Good Friday. Only after the angel's message of Jesus' resurrection did we quickly and dramatically change the church from Good Friday to Easter. But while the church was dark we had to post ushers at the light switches to guard them because members kept trying to turn them on. When people come to church on Easter Sunday, they want Easter, not Good Friday.

But did you notice how we began the service this morning? We began with Good Friday. The Invocation was made with the sign, not of the open tomb, but of the cross. In our Confession of Sins we returned to that cross, saying in effect, "It was my sinfulness which put my Lord up there." And in the Absolution I declared that the Almighty God "has given His Son to die for you," and again I made the sign of the cross. So which is it...Is this Easter or Good Friday? Is Jesus on the cross, or did He leave the tomb already?

Before we answer that question, let's look at what the unbelieving world does with this day. To the world, last week was not Holy Week, it was a week like any other. The world would never consider attending church on a Thursday or a Friday. Even coming on a Sunday is a rare thing for unbelievers. But Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, to the world, are things done by that "religious crowd over there." And Easter? It's bunnies and chocolate, pastel-colored dresses and family get-togethers. And in some places Easter is now called "that Spring Festival," and the Easter egg hunt is the Spring sphere hunt.

But this should not shock us very much. There has always been a marked difference between the church and the world. Look at that first Easter morning. There is a big difference between two groups of people. First the women. They came to the tomb, but the appearance of the angel did not drive them away. To them was given the good news of the resurrection. To them was given the command, "Go and Tell." They came in sadness, but they left with joy.

But the unbelieving world was also there at the tomb that morning. The second group--the soldiers guarding the tomb. When the stone was rolled away and the angel sat on it, they "became like dead men." Their ears were deaf to the angel's message. The empty tomb meant nothing to them. Their hearts were deadened. They did not rush home to tell their wives and children, "Guess what we saw

this morning!” They went to the Chief Priests and accepted a bribe to spread the lie that Jesus’ disciples stole His body. These soldiers have no life in Christ. They have no desire to meet Him, and they never do. But the women see Him. He greets them, they worship Him, he comforts them, and sends them to tell the disciples.

Both of these groups are still around today. Those who rejoice in the good news of the resurrection, and you can tell, because it makes a difference in their lives. And those who are like dead men to the whole thing. Some in this group may even show up in church on Easter, but the message falls on deaf ears. It does not affect their daily life. It does not bring them back to church for more of the good news of Jesus again and again.

Does all this bother us--we who are the group of believers? Perhaps a little. I imagine that the soldiers lack of belief bothered the women, but it did not prevent their joy. It did not prevent them from worshiping Jesus. It did not prevent them from telling the disciples about the resurrection. And for us, too. Who really cares that a school teacher in Seattle, Washington told her children that they were having a Spring sphere hunt! Who cares that bunnies and chocolate are the main focus of most people today! Who cares that there are those who will not see their neighbor in church again until next Easter! Like these women, this day for us does not lose even one bit of its meaning as a result. This day is still the Resurrection of our Lord. This day gives you comfort and hope because, as Jesus lives, you who truly believe in Him will live also. This day sin, death, and hell are defeated, and nothing that the unbelieving world does can prevent that for you.

Does all this mean that from now on, because of Easter, all our days will always be happy, positive, and full of joy? Let’s come back down to earth; we’re not in heaven yet. Look at these women. When they left the tomb they did not just leave with joy and a positive attitude. It says they departed with great joy and with fear. St. Mark tells us they left trembling. Easter, for them, was not all clean and tidy. There were loose ends hanging everywhere. They had some confusion. They even did some weeping, and not for joy.

Fellow believers, do not expect your life to be all clean and tidy because of Easter. You have a lot of sinning to do yet, as do I. Not that we want to, but we’re weak, we fall too easily. As with these women, we will have days when our Easter joy will be overshadowed by fear and trembling. We, too, will have days of weeping. Are we clean and tidy Christians? I hardly think so! There is no such thing. We’re a bunch of wretched sinners who have lives that are all messed up, relationships that are a mess, too. Nothing about us is clean and tidy.

Which is why, in answer to our question from before, although, yes, this is Easter...and yes, Jesus is truly alive, we dare not take our eyes off His cross. We need it, you and I. We need what He did there--His sufferings and death. We need His blood shed for us. We need His body broken and given for us. We need His forgiveness. All that happened at the cross. “The word of the cross,” says St. Paul, is what saves us. Easter is glorious, but without death there can be no resurrection. Without Good Friday there can be no Easter. For us, without the preaching of the cross and all that it means, there can be no faith in the risen Savior.

There is nothing about the Christian Faith which is clean and tidy. It’s a religion of blood--God’s blood for us. Sinners who think their hearts and lives are clean and tidy do not need Jesus and His church...not more than once or twice a year anyway. But if this is not you. If your heart is not without sin. If your life has gone in all the wrong directions. If you need forgiveness--then you’re at the right place, for this is the House of Blood. Here you are baptized into it. Here you see it, by faith,

running down the cross for you. Here it is given to you--the blood of Christ which cleanses you of all sin.

You and I do not need a clean and tidy Easter holiday. We need a God who was willing to be beaten to a bloody mess for our sin. We need a God who came to suffer and die for us. And we need a God, who through His Word and Sacraments, freely gives us the fruits of His cross. And this is your God.

Dear Christians, you who are not in any way clean and tidy, as I'm not either, God forgives your messed up lives. God forgives your filthy hearts. He dove head-first into our dirty world so that pardon, and peace, and real life are now yours in Christ. He makes you clean within by removing your guilt. He gives you a clean heart for He cancels your debt of sin. He declares that you are holy and innocent because He died for you...He washed you in your baptism.

All this is why those women left the tomb with joy. All this is why you will return to God's House of blood again and again. All this is why we love Him who died for us, and why, on this Easter morning, we say with confidence, "Christ is risen!" ("He is risen indeed, Alleluia!") Amen.