

**Easter Vigil – April 8, 2023**  
Matthew 28:1-10

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)  
Grace to you and peace from God our creator, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If last night was the time for sitting with the terrible reality of our sinfulness, and our complicity in Jesus' crucifixion, today has been the day for sitting with the terrible reality of death. It's not something we like to do in this culture. We prefer to pretend that we are immortal. Of course we would never actually *say* that. We know *intellectually* that everyone dies. We don't deny that. But our actions often betray another belief – another hope, that we can behave our way out of death. Let me give you an example. Over the past year, I discovered intermittent fasting. This is where you limit your food to a certain window of hours. A popular one is 18/6, where you fast for 18 hours and then do all of your eating in a window of 6 hours. Fasting means no food, but you can drink black coffee or tea, and water, of course. An easy way to do 18/6 is to finish eating by 6:30 p.m. and then not eat again until lunch at 12:30 the next day. It's not a diet because it's not about how much you eat, or what you eat, just when. The idea behind this is that we're not really made to be eating all the time, and we need to give our bodies a break from the work of processing the food we intake. And when we do that, research has shown, our bodies are able to attend to other tasks, like repairing damaged cells. I'm intrigued by the possibility that this change in my eating pattern is going to give me not just a better quality of life, but a longer life as well. See? I can push back against death! Now if I could only get back to running three times a week as I was before I got COVID, I could push back a little harder. So that's how I've been trying to behave my way out of death. Maybe you have your own strategies. Cutting out sugary drinks is another good one that I'm trying to get my children on board with. But sooner or later, in spite of all our efforts to ignore it or fight it, there comes a time for all of us when death catches up with us, and we can't ignore it any longer. The COVID pandemic, especially in its early days, was a jarring reminder of the reality of mortality. The war in Ukraine is another more recent one. The death of our brother Harry Clem last weekend brings it all even closer to home.

So today we have sat with death. We have done that liturgically with Jesus' death since leaving here in silence last night after the passion reading and the musical offering of Jesus' seven words from the cross. But into this liturgical drama we have each brought with us our personal connections to death: the death of loved ones, friends, and acquaintances, spouses, parents, even children. Some of these deaths are recent and some we are still mourning after many years. And we sit also with the inescapable reality our own death that is coming sooner or later, and maybe sooner than we anticipate. We sit with death and we are grieved and we are frightened.

Tonight, though, we have sat together and in the light of the new fire we have told the stories of our faith to each other, the stories of how God repeatedly snatches life from the jaws of death, beginning with the creation of the world right up to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

There are three things I want you to hear from this collection of stories. The first is that we are not alone in sitting with and facing death. We are not alone because of course all of us experience this in one way or another. But much more importantly, we are not alone because God in Jesus Christ has joined us in death. During the early days of the pandemic you heard a lot

of people say that “we are all in this together.” And that was true is a limited sort of way. All of us were vulnerable, though some more than others. But in Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, God is fully with us in death. God suffers what we all suffer.

The second thing I want you to hear is that by going through death with us God defeats the power of death, together with its allies, sin and evil. Tonight for us is Passover 2.0, in which Jesus passes over from death to life. This is a victory feast because in Jesus Christ life wins. Death does not go away. We still face it. But now we face it knowing that it is not the last word on our lives. Christ has passed over from death to life and in Holy Baptism he takes us along for the ride. Joined to him in death, we are joined to him in resurrection as well. That is the good news of this night.

Third, this victory is not like other victories. That might not sound as good to you. In normal victories, someone wins and someone loses. In normal battles, some live and some die, and when we fight we want our enemies to suffer. The story of the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt was a victory with a lot of collateral damage – the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt, Pharaoh’s army, and all those horses that we sang about a little while ago. The flood that rescued Noah and his family destroyed the rest of life on the face of the earth. Even God’s rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego involved the death of those who threw them into the furnace, and came with the threat at the end of the story of graphic, lethal violence for anyone who spoke against their God. But Jesus’ victory over death is not like those other victories. It does not require the death of the enemy. Not very satisfying, maybe. Until you remember who the enemy is. And then it turns out to be really good news, because as Paul says in Romans 5, Christ died for us while we were still God’s enemies. So aren’t you glad that Christ died so that his enemies might live.

But that too is not the end of the story, because Jesus’ death and resurrection not only forgive our sin and save us from death, they also turn us from God’s enemies into God’s friends, and partners in God’s ongoing work of reconciliation and new creation. More about that tomorrow and throughout the Easter season. For now, having sat with death, we now get to sit with life because of the great good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)