

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

What an unusual Easter for the church around the country — empty churches on her great festival, the very day when those members, who have lost contact with the church, come back to hear the Gospel preached. I'm glad to see them. What an unusual time we are going through. When America goes through a crisis, people find refuge in the church. After 9/11 happened, attendance at church swelled. They needed solace and hope. For this crisis, on the other hand, our people are being ordered to stay at home for fear of this deadly pestilence.

And yet, fear is not so unusual for the followers of Christ, beginning with Jesus' own disciples. They were afraid on that fateful Preparation Day when Jesus died, and on the Sabbath when Jesus lay in the tomb, and on the first day of the week when Jesus rose from the grave. They were afraid, for death was all around them. They were holed up in their homes for fear that death would visit them, too.

Still frightened, a few disciples ventured out — some women did. Matthew names two: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, but there were more according to Mark and Luke. Though still frightened, they shook off their fear to visit the tomb. Matthew doesn't tell us this, but they went there to finish the job of preparing the body for burial that had been done so hastily before the Sabbath. They were frightened, but courage is a little easier to come by in a group.

Fear is prominent in our Gospel text today; it's mentioned four times. Fear is an interesting thing. It can be incapacitating. That's what happened to the soldiers who had been sent there by the chief priests. Remember the chief priests were worried that Jesus' disciples might pull off a big scam, steal away the body, and claim that it had risen from the dead. So they sealed the tomb and posted guards.

But early on the third day, an angel came, and a great earthquake happened — like what happened at Jesus' death, and the angel rolled the stone away from the tomb, not to let Jesus out, but to let us peer in.

These guards saw the angel, and they themselves quaked for fear of him, and "*became like dead men.*" They were paralyzed with their fear, and so, they caused the women no trouble, for with the angel's otherworldly appearance, the soldiers remained too frightened to stop them.

Now, as I mentioned, the women were frightened, too, and surely it was not only because of the recent events, but also because of the appearance of this angel. But they shook off their fear, for as angels do, he comforted them, and urged them, "*stop being afraid,*" for he had good news for them.

He knew why they had come — to seek Jesus who had been crucified, but he had good news for them, the best news imaginable. “[*Jesus*] is not here, for he has risen,” just as He told you He would. Shake off your fear. Come in and see for yourselves. Look! The tomb where He was laid is now empty.”

That was good news, the kind that chases away incapacitating fears and replaces them with awe, perhaps, or reverent fear, and joy. And so it happened to these women.

“Go and tell Jesus’ disciples,” the angel instructed the women. “Tell them that Jesus is risen from the dead, that they might no longer be afraid, either. Remind them what Jesus had told them on that night when He was betrayed. ‘*After I am raised up,*’ He told them, ‘*I will go before you to Galilee*’ (Matt. 26:32). So tell them to go to Galilee, and they can see for themselves. They can see Him alive!”

And so, the women went with fear and great joy, Matthew says. But again, this was not the kind of fear that paralyzes. This is the kind of fear that heightens senses and clears the mind, that readies the body for whatever might come next, that causes the adrenaline to flow.

For what happened next was no apparition, and it was no illusion. Jesus came up to them. “*Greetings,*” He said. They knew right away. It was the Lord, and they worshipped Him. He also reassured them and calmed their fears. He told them again. “I’ll meet you and the rest in Galilee.”

The women carried that message to the disciples, and they listened. And the fear that had them cowering in the locked room would leave them, for in verse 16, Matthew records, “*the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them*” (Matt. 28:16). From there, Jesus sent them out into all the world: “*Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Moreover, Jesus would send His emboldening Spirit upon His disciples — the same Spirit as we heard on Good Friday that Jesus sent forth with a loud voice — and the once-fearful band would go forth fearlessly, and they would preach Jesus Christ the crucified, Jesus Christ raised from the dead.

To be sure, this was a message that landed them in jail. This was a message that got them beaten. This was a message that martyred them. But none of these very real threats paralyzed them with fear — not any longer. Rather, they “[*rejoiced*] that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts

5:41). They had shaken off their fear, for Christ's victory was sure; He was risen from the dead!

They had shaken off their fear, for by His death on a tree, death lost its sting, for *“everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”* (Acts 10:43). *“Through death,”* the writer to the Hebrews says, *“he [has] destroy[ed] the one who has the power of death ... and [has] deliver[ed] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery”* (Heb. 2:14-15).

They had shaken off their fear, for by His resurrection on the third day, God assured them and all believers of their own resurrection. Indeed, as St. Paul wrote to the Colossians: *“when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”* (Col. 3:4). And St. Paul encourages us in this way, too, in the midst of our fears: *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him”* (Rom. 8:16).

Dear saints, frightened in these perilous times by a very real danger of death, I encourage you to shake off your fear — not to be foolish or reckless, but also not to be paralyzed by fear. The same Spirit that Jesus sent out, and that was bestowed on the disciples, emboldening them, is the Spirit you have received by your baptism, and this is *“a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control”* (2 Tim. 1:7). The Spirit gives us hope with this message that Christ won the victory over death.

Surely Easter's message is a message for a time such as we are living in now. The time is frightening. I admit it. But dear friends, we need not fear death, for Christ has risen! Death had no dominion over Him, and through Him, it has no dominion over us either. That doesn't mean we won't die. Rather, we believe that since Christ *“Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep”* in Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14). So, shake off your fears. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.