

Much grace, mercy, and peace be to you, from God our Father, and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

[TROUBLE IN THE TEXT]

There sure seems to be a lot of FEAR in the first eyewitness accounts of Easter. I mean, I guess I get it—these first followers of Jesus didn't know *the rest of the story*. They didn't know how all of this was supposed to go. The first disciples didn't have our vantage point: we know the grave is empty, and we know why:

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

But the very real people in our text for today didn't know that's how *the story* ends; at least, not yet. So I understand *the fear* that surrounds the telling of that first Easter. These followers of Jesus saw *death all around them, and they were afraid*; afraid because they didn't know *the rest of the story or understand the empty grave*.

Just look at the WOMEN who went to the tomb that first Easter morning, fully expecting to find a dead body. And why shouldn't they? These faithful women watched as Jesus was mocked and beaten. They wept as they follow Jesus on the path to the cross. They stared death in the face as Jesus slowly and painfully fought the battle for life, and lost.

Along with Jesus, all their hopes and plans for the future slowly died. They saw Him taken down off the cross. They saw His corpse laid in the grave. They came that first Easter to say their good-byes.

These women saw *death all around them*. No wonder then, that *these women were afraid*. They reach the garden and they *see the empty grave*. Messengers from God appear, but the women are focused on their fear. They are left with a strange and unbelievable story:

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Only that's not the reception their story received. It's more like: Christ is risen? You must be kidding me, indeed!

And who could blame the disciples, really? The story the women told seemed like nonsense to those who were surrounded by death and fear.

Peter, like the others, thought the story of *an empty grave* was nonsense. But he ran to the tomb anyway. Maybe Peter was quick to act because he, too, had been overcome by fear.

You remember how Peter had promised Jesus, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never leave your side!” But things didn’t turn out the way Peter planned. I think Peter had a glorious revolution in mind, but when the alternative was being crucified as a criminal with Jesus, Peter balked.

His master and teacher was on trial and about to be sentenced to death. If he were captured, Peter would surely face the same penalty. *Death was all around him!* No wonder *he was afraid*. No wonder he denied he had ever met Jesus or ever followed him! Peter didn’t know *the end of the story*. How could he understand even *the empty grave*?

[GRACE IN THE TEXT]

We see a very different Peter in our Acts reading today. Instead of a confused, frightened fisherman, we find a man on fire, bravely preaching both our sin and God’s victory over death in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So what changed? What made Peter a different man?

Peter is still *surrounded by death*. In fact, tradition tells us that Peter did end up going to a cross because he would not deny Jesus again. So why is Peter *no longer afraid*?

I think it’s because he finally gets it. Peter finally *knows the end of the story*. Peter finally understands the *empty grave*.

Peter boldly preaches: “You put this Jesus to death by nailing Him to the cross, but God raised Him from death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him!”

That’s what Peter didn’t understand that first Easter morning: the empty grave means death is not strong enough to hold Jesus down.

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Written is the story! Empty is the grave!

Peter finally understood what that empty grave means: because Jesus died and then defeated death, Peter knew that *the end of the story is an empty grave*. And that empty grave belongs to Peter just as well as to Jesus.

When Peter preached the resurrection of Jesus to the crowds in Jerusalem, he was putting himself in danger of arrest and execution.

Death was all around him, but Peter was no longer afraid.
He knew the end of the story; he had seen his own empty grave.

The empty grave of Jesus made all the difference!

[TROUBLE IN THE WORLD]

On that first Easter, the disciples were afraid because they were surrounded by death and they didn't know what to expect next.

You don't have to look far to come to the conclusion that on this Easter Sunday, *death is all around us*, too.

Just watching the evening news sometimes makes me shudder. And I am afraid for my children growing up in a world of violence. *Death is all around us*.

Many of you know, I began my ministry here with a death in the family. I preached my first sermon on December 23 and before my second sermon on Dec 24, I got the call that my Grandma Rossow had died. It was a different Christmas vacation than I expected. *Death is all around us*.

And then came the news that my new partner in ministry, this man that had helped lead and guide and shepherd St. Luke through the vacancy—then came the news that Byron Porish had been diagnosed with an aggressive and terminal form of brain cancer. And I had to sit with the youth of our congregation and ask the tough questions. Is Byron going to die?

And the tough answer is YES, Byron is going to die. And I am going to die. And you are going to die.

Is Byron going to die from brain cancer? That I can't say. At this point, medically speaking, it looks likely, but none of us knows how long we have.

We are such frail and fragile human beings. It only takes one car accident, one infection, one small blood vessel bursting in the wrong part of our body, and any of us could be gone tomorrow. *Death is all around us*.

And I have to admit, sometimes *that makes me afraid*.

- I watch the evening news and *I am afraid* for my children.
- I think of my 94 year-old Grandfather, and am *afraid* he won't do well without Grandma.
- I look at Byron and think of radiation and chemo, and *I am afraid* because I don't know what's going to happen next.

I have to tell you, that *fear* is real. Fear is a natural response to not knowing what comes next. It's OK to be *afraid* because you don't know the next chapter.

[GRACE IN THE WORLD]

But I also have to tell you, although you might not know the next chapter, you DO know how the story ends.

You know the end of the story! Jesus took on your flesh, and lived, and died, and rose again so that you can have confidence in the End of *the story*!

Peter boldly preaches: "Your sins put Jesus to death, but God raised Jesus from the grave, because it is impossible for death to keep its hold on Him!"

It is impossible for death to keep its hold on Jesus!

It is impossible for death to keep its hold on those who belong to Jesus!

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Written is the story! Empty is the grave!

That's what Peter wants us to understand this Easter: because Jesus died and then defeated death, the end of the story is an empty grave.

And that empty grave doesn't belong just to Jesus!

That empty grave doesn't belong just to Peter!

That's my Grandma's empty grave! That's my Grandpa's empty grave!

That empty grave belongs to my children, and my grandchildren, and my great-grandchildren!

Thank you, Jesus, that's Byron's empty grave! That's my empty grave! That's your empty grave!

Jesus took the full power of death head on at the cross, and destroyed the power of death for you in His empty tomb.

You may not know the next chapter, but you know the end of your story:

*Death is all around us, we are not afraid;
Written is the story, empty is the grave!*

The empty grave of Jesus makes all the difference! Amen!

Rise to sing.