

**Matthew 28:1-10** *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 2There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. 5The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." 8So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

I can't believe all the things that are being cancelled because of the pandemic we are facing in the world. They've cancelled the remainder of the NBA and NHL season, along with the rest of spring training in MLB and delaying the start of the season indefinitely. The NCAA cancelled their famed March Madness BB tournament. High Schools and colleges cancelled the whole season of spring sports. Our church body already cancelled the 12 district conventions that were scheduled for early June. Today, traditional Easter breakfasts have been cancelled along with community Easter egg hunts. Traditional family dinners have been cancelled because it's not safe to travel. Can you believe that some have even talked about cancelling Easter? Well, not cancelling it, I guess, but postponing it. I've seen some pastors talk about not celebrating Easter today because we can't physically get together and celebrate it. They want to wait to celebrate Easter until the first Sunday when we are able to get together to worship physically together. Don't get me wrong. I understand the reasoning behind it. But my heart still screams: WE CAN'T CANCEL EASTER!

Easter is just too important to cancel. Even though we can't physically be together, spiritually, we need Easter right now perhaps more than ever. We need Easter right now, not just as a diversion, not just to take our mind off the weird and crazy world that we live in. We need Easter to be strengthened in God's love. We need Easter to silence all of our fears and to wipe away our tears. We need Easter to calm our troubled hearts. We need Easter to assure us of the victory that is ours over death and the devil. We need Easter perhaps more now than at any other time in our lives. And so today we celebrate! We might not be able to join our voices together physically, but we are joined together spiritually with one another and Christians around the world today as we rejoice in the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus. You might be able to cancel a lot of things...but **You Can't Cancel Easter!**

If you think the world that we are living in today is weird, imagine what it must have felt like for those ladies traveling to the tomb that first Easter morning. Their heads had to be spinning! Their world had been turned upside down. Just one week ago, they had watched the crowds celebrate as Jesus has triumphantly entered into Jerusalem as they celebrated him to be the Messiah. Now, just a week later, he was dead. And it wasn't that he had a freak accident or they found him dead when he wouldn't wake up in the morning. No, it was much worse than that. They had seen him arrested by their own religious leaders. Some of the disciples had been there to witness the kangaroo court which had multiple false witnesses testify against them who couldn't even agree on their false testimony. When two witnesses finally agreed, they handed him over to Pontius Pilate to be executed. They watched as Pilate tried to release Jesus but was too weak to do so. They saw the Roman soldiers mistreat him, savagely beat him, whip him and eventually crucify him. It must have been surreal to those who followed Jesus and believed him to be the Messiah sent from God. They must have been asking themselves, "How could this have happened?" or "Is this really happening? Is what I'm seeing with my eyes real?" And then Jesus died. The one in whom they had put their hope was gone. The one they had followed for 3 years, who had done miracle after miracle to help other people, did nothing to help himself and was dead.

They had so many questions and not any answers! So many fears and anxieties filled their hearts as they approached that tomb! If those leaders were so bent on getting rid of Jesus, would they go after his followers also to make sure there were no repercussions for their actions? They lived in fear that they might be the next to be arrested and executed. They lived in fear that they might be ostracized and persecuted because they were followers of Jesus. In just a short period of time, their whole world changed. They lived in fear of the unknown and were uncertain about what was coming next.

Boy, that sounds exactly like the world that we are living in. Fear reigns all around us right now. Some of it is the fear of the unknown...some of it is fear of the known. We've seen what this virus can do to those who are older and are already experiencing physical problems. Many of the people who have died so far are people whose health was already compromised in one way or another. We know what might happen to those who have this virus overtake them. There is a good chance they will die. Others of us live in the fear of the unknown. Where is the virus? Where has someone who is carrying the virus been where they might have left it for me to come into contact with it? Am I a carrier who is already carrying it and have no symptoms? What if I am and I unknowingly give it to my family? What about the future financially? How long is this quarantine going to last? When will my professional life get back to normal? Will my business survive? There is so much fear and uncertainty in the world. As we travel to the tomb this Easter morning, we do so with the same fears and uncertainty from a weird and crazy world as the women experienced.

What those ladies found when they arrived at the tomb was not what they expected. The stone had already been moved away. The soldiers who had been guarding the tomb were nowhere to be found. On the slab where they had laid Jesus' body lay only the cloth that had been wrapped around him. Then, they saw the angel—brilliantly white, as white as lightning—sitting in the tomb. Were all this not confusing enough, the message of the angel was almost unbelievable, "*Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.*" Talk about a weird and crazy world! We're told they left the tomb, "*afraid but filled with joy.*" We might wonder just exactly what that fear was. No doubt they were bewildered and perplexed as they tried to sort out and process what they had just seen and heard. Perhaps their fear and excitement came from the same question: "Could it be true?" On the one hand if Jesus were truly alive, all their hopes would return. Everything they hoped for would be back on the table. If Jesus were alive, then everything he said about himself was true. He was indeed the Messiah who had come to rescue them from their sins. He really was the Son of God who had power now

only over the Romans and Jewish leaders, but over death itself! He had promised them that whoever believes in him will live, and whoever believes in him will one day conquer death too. Oh, how the joy swelled up inside of them! Their world might be weird and crazy, but their Messiah lived. But on the other hand, if he were alive, that would mean he really was the Messiah and if he were, how would he view their actions of the past few days? They had forgotten his promise to rise after 3 days. They had doubted his words and despaired at his death. They had given up hope in him and given in to their fears. Would he be angry with them? Would he cast them to the side because of these actions? Suddenly they were confronted with their sins by a holy God. You might say, they came face to face with God's divine accounting system and immediately saw that there was a debt that they owed. Though they were excited that he was alive, they were afraid because of their sins.

Note what erased the fears of those ladies completely: seeing Jesus alive. Jesus spoke to them perhaps the most comforting words of all time, "*Don't be afraid.*" There it is—the heart of the gospel message. That's the summation of what Easter is all about! With these few words Jesus was saying, "You have no reason to fear. You have nothing to be afraid of. My perfect life and gruesome death was done for you. The punishment has been paid. All has been completed." You see Jesus didn't merely cheat death. He met it head on. He had truly died. His lifeless body laid in the tomb until the third day. But then his eyes fluttered open and his lungs filled with air and he came back to life. Death did not beat him. It was defeated by him! And when he defeated death, he did not do it merely for himself. He defeated death on behalf of the entire human race. He swallowed up death for everyone throughout the world. He was not dead but alive. The devil hadn't won. The Jewish leaders hadn't won. Death hadn't won! Jesus won!

This is why we can't cancel Easter! You and I need this same assurance. Our fears and anxieties over all these problems that we face come from the fact that we know we deserve this treatment from our God. God's divine accounting system leaves us with the same report as these ladies: there is a debt that we owe. When hardships and difficulties come our way, how many times haven't we despaired of God's help and forgotten his promises? We fear God's wrath when we think about the times we have blamed God for our troubles or accused him of being far away from us and uninterested in our problems. We have not always been the loving, selfless people God wants us to be. We haven't been the parent or child or spouse God expects of us. We put our trust in the things of this world, like the latest medical advances, rather than trusting in God's care for us. We know all too well the sins that we have committed and the shame and fear those sins bring.

But if we have to think about the fears and anxiety that come to us because of God's divine accounting system, then we have to admit that our biggest fears are concerning death. The reality is, all of us are going to face death one day. When it is your time—and this time will come for all of us—it is your time. When it's your time, it won't matter if it is the coronavirus, a coronary, a stroke or an accident, your time is up. Death can be frightening. We fear for what will happen to our children after we die, the pain we may experience before death and the medical costs to our families. We fear that moment of crossing into death itself. But death becomes most frightening when we look back and size up our lives. Death is dreadful because the divine judge can so easily uncover piles and piles of guilty sin left in our wake. Death is the ultimate reminder of the debt that we owe to our God. Death is the sentence proclaimed to those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory that God demands from us. Whether we are standing at the grave of a loved one or facing the prospect of our own death, we have before us a stark reminder that no matter how good of people we think that we are, before God we have sinned. We fear death because we know that it means we have to stand before God and give an accounting for our sins. We know all too well that God's divine accounting system will tell us that we deserve to face his full wrath in hell because of our sins. At death, the outcome is black and white and severe. For those who meet God's standard of holiness there is the everlasting joy of heaven. For those who have sinned there is the terror of an eternity in hell. With stakes that high, it is no wonder that fear and anxiety surround death.

Yet, Jesus comes to you today and says, "*Don't be afraid!*" You have seen the living Jesus through the eyes of faith. No matter what you have done or have left undone, whatever you have done to bring shame and guilt into your heart, whatever you have done to cause you fear before God, all of that has been covered in Jesus. He came to take the punishment for all of our guilt away by his perfect sacrifice on the cross. His resurrection is proof that he succeeded. It is God's proclamation to the world that he accepted the sacrifice Jesus made. This is why we embrace with joy the open and empty tomb. It is to this tomb that God beckons all people—those who are uncertain about the future and full of fear; those weary from fighting battles against sin, the lost, the frustrated, the discouraged, those who are wandering through life not sure what they are looking for, those who are looking for shelter from life's storms and troubles, and those who are full of fear about death and their sins. God calls us today to receive what we need without cost—forgiveness for our sins. The open tomb proclaims to us that heaven is now open. Death for us as God's people is nothing but a doorway into heaven. With sins removed through Jesus' sacrifice, he has clothed us with his perfection. When God looks at us clothed with the perfection of Jesus, his divine accounting system sees only the holiness that he demands. We don't have to be afraid to stand before God. Heaven is open for us and waiting.

No, we couldn't cancel Easter because this is a message that we need to hear today! We need the comfort as our God comes to us and says, "*Don't be afraid!*" We don't worship a God who is dead. We worship a living Savior. We worship a Savior who loved us enough to conquer the biggest problem that confronted us: death. We worship a Savior who promised that because he lives, we too will live. We worship a Savior who promised that the grave cannot conquer us and cannot win. The pandemic we are facing may be big enough and powerful enough to cancel many big and momentous events. But it can't cancel Easter! Jesus' resurrection means we have no reason to fear. Cling to your Savior in faith as these ladies did at the tomb. Stand assured of what awaits through your Savior. And treasure those beautiful words that not only summarize the entire Easter and Gospel message, but bring joy and strength to our hearts: *Don't be Afraid!* Today is a day of triumph! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! That's why you can't cancel Easter. Amen.