

# He isn't here

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Matthew 28:1-10**

After the Sabbath, at the dawning of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. And there was a big earthquake, because an angel of the Lord had come down from heaven, gone and rolled away the stone, and sat on it. The angel's appearance was like lightning, and the angel's clothing was white as snow. The people on guard were shaken by fear of the angel. They were as good as dead.

The angel responded to this by saying to the women, "Don't you be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus, the one who was crucified. He isn't here. He was raised, just as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Now, go quickly and tell his disciples, *He was raised from the dead, he's going ahead of you to Galilee, you will see him there.* I have told you."

They left the grave quickly, both afraid and joyful, and they ran to tell his disciples. And Jesus met them and said, "Hello." They came to him and grabbed his feet. And they worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go, tell my brothers to go to Galilee. They will see me there."

## **Children's Story**

Did you ever see a squirrel riding a bicycle? It's not easy with those short back legs. But Sammy can do it. As a matter of fact, Sammy the Squirrel likes riding his bike better than doing just about anything else.

That's why Sammy was so upset a few weeks ago when a tree fell over onto his bike. What a mess the bike was after that! The frame was bent, the handlebars were twisted, and the wheels were anything but round.

Sammy cried.

His father told him, "Don't worry, Sammy. Your bike will get fixed." Sammy didn't see how anyone could fix such a messed up bike. But he trusted his father. And when the bike disappeared one day, he hoped it would be back soon, straightened out and ready to ride.

A few days later, early in the morning, Sammy had a big surprise. His bike was back! At least, he thought it was his bike.

It looked like his bike. Except now the frame was straight and the handlebars flowed up and over just the way they were supposed to, and the wheels were perfect circles again.

It was Sammy's bike all right. But somehow it looked brand new. Somehow it was brand new.

Sammy couldn't figure out what had happened or how. He only knew that he was happy to see his bike again.

## **Sermon**

Jesus was dead. Good and dead. As dead as he was ever going to be. There were witnesses who saw him die, plenty of witnesses. There was the spear thrust into his side, a final insult, but also a double-check to confirm the execution squad's diagnosis of death. There was the tomb, a hole in a hillside, a resting place for a body on its way to becoming bones and dust. There was the stone, to seal in the smell of decomposition, a smell that perfumes couldn't mask for long. And there were the guards, there to keep vandals out, to short circuit the potential claims of religious nut-jobs. Jesus was dead. Good and dead. As dead as he was ever going to be. That was Friday. That was Saturday. But today is Sunday!

**Christ is risen! Christ is risen!** Each gospel tells the story in its own way – the frustrating inconsistency of eyewitness testimony crowds the pages of those gospels – but the basic storyline is the same in all of them. It’s early Sunday morning, not far to one side or the other of dawn. Some women are on their way to the tomb. (Matthew says they were coming just to have a look.) At the tomb, they find a rolled-away stone and an angel or two. (Matthew says the angel was sitting on the stone!) But at the tomb, they don’t find Jesus. Instead, for a moment, Jesus finds them. Then they’re on their way with the news. (Except in Mark’s gospel; Mark says they were struck dumb with fear – almost like the guards in Matthew’s telling of the story, the guards whose fear left them as good as dead.) Regardless of who was or wasn’t afraid, the news got out: Christ is risen!

**I want to cover some basic, but important, theological ground here for a moment.** Something extraordinary happened that Sunday morning. And it wasn’t that a dead person came back to life. That had been done before. Besides, Jesus wasn’t as dead as or as far gone as Lazarus had been. Lazarus had been four days dead. He was starting to smell. Jesus wasn’t even two days dead. That was long enough to be all the way dead, not just mostly dead, but for sheer, “Look! A dead person brought back to life” power, Jesus was not as good a case as Lazarus was.

But “a dead person back to life” isn’t what happened that Sunday morning, not at all. Instead it was an old creation being transformed into a new creation. It was the dawn of a brand new sun over a brand new world. It was light breaking into darkness. It was prison doors being torn off their hinges. It was the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the blind seeing. It was the poor hearing good news. It was the meek inheriting the earth. It was the overture to an everlasting symphony of life in a world that would be born all over again.

We’ve never seen a dead person come back to life (good luck to those frozen corpses waiting for cancer cures!), but we can grasp the concept: life and breath returning like spring. With Jesus, though, it’s not the return of spring after a hard winter. With Jesus, it’s a season the world has never known. A season of life, of health, of joy, of beauty forever.

That season dawned one Sunday morning. It warms our bones – and our hearts. It delights our eyes – and our Spirits. It sets us free – and it sets us in motion. All our life and hope flow from that Sunday, the Day of Resurrection!

**And now, I want to wonder a while about one thing.** It’s a question. Why the trip? Jesus died just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus was buried just outside the walls of Jerusalem. His disciples were gathered in or near Jerusalem. So why the trip to Galilee? The angel said, “He’s going ahead of you to Galilee, you will see him there.” Jesus said to the women, “Tell my brothers to go to Galilee. They will see me there.”

Why the trip? It was eighty miles from Jerusalem to Galilee. By foot it would take several days. Several days to be amazed. *How could it be? What could it mean?* Several days to have doubts. *It couldn’t be. It must have been a mistake. The earth shook for a moment, but nothing else changed.* Several days to feel guilty. *For scattering like scared sheep. For leaving others to look after the burial. For having more doubts than faith.* Several days to argue. *To point fingers at each other. To question Peter, James, and John, the inner circle: What good had they been? To settle on a story: Eleven fingers all pointing at Judas.*

But why the trip? What was the point? To be honest, I have no idea. I can only speculate. Here are my speculations.

Perhaps there is something to be gained by going back to the beginning. Jesus called his first disciples in Galilee. There they followed him. There they learned from him. There they came to love him. Perhaps there was an advantage to be gained by going back to an old beginning before embarking on a new beginning, a new beginning that would take them to Jerusalem again and then in every compass direction. Perhaps.

Perhaps preparation is necessary before meeting the resurrected Jesus, before spending time with him. Maybe a long walk and all the talk along the way would keep them from fainting away as good as dead when they met up with Jesus. Maybe they did need to come to terms with themselves, with their own failures, before discovering the love of Jesus that would still embrace them. Perhaps.

And perhaps Galilee was safer. The world hadn't changed. The chief priest was still in office. The Romans were still in the city. Pontius Pilate was still washing his hands. No doubt those powers would be on the lookout for the disciples, especially now that they were thought to be grave robbers.

Why the trip? I'm not sure. Perhaps it just hints at what the world is still like. Christ is risen. The dawn has come. The new creations is born. But we're still waiting. We're still on the road. We still have a lot to work through and a lot to work on. We still have to be wise and careful. We still have to live by faith, not by sight.

And we will live by faith, because it's not Friday.

We will live by faith, because it's not Saturday.

We will live by faith, because it is Sunday. And Christ is risen.