

April 5, 2026

Matthew 28:1-10

“The Dawn that Ended Being Afraid!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus who rose from the dead and who caused the dawn of a new forever day where terror meets its end and hope takes its first breath.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Before dawn had touched the sky, while the city still lay wrapped in night, women walked toward a tomb. Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” had stood at the foot of the cross. They had watched Jesus breathe his last. They had heard the hammering of the nails, felt the earth shake at his death, and witnessed the Roman spear piercing his side and heart. Now, raw with grief, they came to see the tomb and to finish the painful task of tending to his body. Matthew says that they came “toward the dawn of the first day of the week.” Light was near, but it had not yet broken into **The Dawn that Ended Being Afraid**. Their spiritual state had to feel like a faint memory of promises and joy now swallowed up in the darkness of death. They brought spices, not expectation. They came to honor a corpse, not to meet the living Lord.

And we understand them. We too know what it’s like to walk through this life as if certain things are simply final. A doctor gives a diagnosis and terror rises like a tide. A family wound deepens and reconciliation feels impossible. A sin we thought was gone comes back to life so that we feel like dying. Death - its threat, its shadow, its finality - hangs over our lives. And God’s law does not soften the truth: “The wages of sin is death.” Not just physical death, but spiritual death - a frightening separation from God that no human effort can bridge. Beneath all our busyness and distractions lies this quiet dread: What if this is the end of my story? What if I have gone too far? What if God is done with me? At the grave, every illusion and delusion gives way to reality. We stand small before the grave stone.

The early Christians in Rome understood both the sting and the hope bound up with death. For centuries, when persecution drove believers underground they buried their dead in the catacombs beneath the city. Pagan inscriptions on the tombs above ground often spoke in despair - “Farewell forever,” “Never to return,” “into eternal night.” But in the Christian catacombs, carved in stone, you find a different vocabulary: “In peace,” “He lives in Christ,” “In Christ, he shall rise.” The Christians of the past did not pretend death was gentle. They carved their grief honestly. But they also carved their hope boldly. Their graves were not declarations of finality but quiet protests against it. This is exactly where Easter speaks: into places where being afraid reigns, where endings feel absolute, and where sin accuses and brings shame.

But Easter morning is not defined by human expectations. It is defined by divine interruption. Matthew announces it with a sudden jolt: “And behold.” Heaven is breaking in, the ground shakes, an angel of the Lord descends, blazing like lightning and clothed in dazzling holiness. He rolls back the stone with ease and sits on it like a throne turned into heaven’s pulpit. The guards tremble and collapse like dead men. And then the first Easter sermon is preached - not to soldiers, not to rulers, but to grieving women. “Do not be afraid.” This is heaven’s native language that says no judgment, no sin, no death, and no grave. The angel declares, “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.” The gospel is reduced to its core: Jesus died and Jesus rose from the dead. The stone was not rolled away to let him out. Death cannot hold him. The stone is rolled away to let the women in, to let them see - and us through their eyes - that the grave is empty.

They came expecting death and they leave carrying life. Matthew says they ran with “[proper] fear and great joy.” This fear is not terror but a trembling in the presence of a gracious God who shatters every expectation and forgives sin. And on the way, the risen Jesus meets them. “Greetings!” he says. The first word from the living Lord is to encourage Joy! The voice that had cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” now speaks peace in the forgiveness of sins and the conquering of death. They fall at his feet and worship him. And he says it again, “Do not be afraid.” Terror must flee before the good news. Terror over judgement bows before his forgiveness. The terror of dying must bow before his resurrected body. And fear of the future bows before the one who promises to meet them in Galilee. Jesus adds a stunning phrase: “Go and tell my brothers.” He does not call them deserters. He does not call them deniers. He calls them “brothers.” Easter is not only the reversal of death but the restoration of sinners. He claimed them and he claims you!

This is what the resurrection means for you today. Because Christ is risen, your sins are forgiven - fully, finally, and forever. Not one of them is left for you to carry. You don't negotiate your way back into God's favor or try to prove you deserve another chance. You are welcomed because Christ's work is complete. Scripture says he “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” That means the verdict over you in Christ is not “you're guilty - work on it,” but “righteous - case closed.”

Because Christ is risen, death is defeated. He promises, “Because I live, you also will live.” Death is no longer a brick wall. It's a doorway. Your grave is not your end. It is like a garden waiting for spring. What happened to Jesus' body will happen to yours - he is the first fruits, and you follow.

Because Christ is risen, terror doesn't get to run your life. “Do not be afraid” is not a Hallmark sentiment. It is a declaration from the One who walked out of his own grave. If the final enemy is conquered, then no lesser terror - of sin, of the future, of loss, of not being enough - gets the last word.

And because Christ is risen, your life is not aimless. The women were not allowed to endlessly linger at the empty tomb. They were sent with the news that changes everything. And that news is the same good news that you are sent to share with others. Jesus Christ is risen!

And this resurrection is not just something we remember. Paul tells us that it is something we receive in Holy Baptism. In Holy Baptism, the risen Christ unites himself to all who are baptized and born again. Scripture says, “We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised ... we too might walk in newness of life.” Indeed! Easter is not distant history. Easter is in the font for everyone who is baptized - men, women, children, and infants - all nations. And in the sacrament of holy communion is our participation in the very body and blood of Jesus in, with, and under the bread and wine - not a symbol - but the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins, the medicine of immortality.

In 1539, in the German city of Lübeck, several young Lutherans were condemned for refusing to renounce the gospel - justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. As they were led through the streets to their execution, they began to sing. One of the hymns they sang was “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word,” which says: “Support us in our final strife / And lead us out of death to life.” The crowds

grew silent. These young believers walked toward death not with terror but with Easter confidence. Their courage was not bravado. It was resurrection faith. They knew that the Christ who left his tomb empty would one day empty theirs. This is the ordinary confidence of baptized, forgiven, blood bought children of God - disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let this gospel walk into your griefs today. Let it sit beside your regrets. The risen Christ meets you on your way just as surely as he met the women on theirs. He comes not to scold but to save, not to interrogate but to embrace, not to burden but to bless. He comes to forgive what you cannot forgive in yourself. He comes to raise the hopes you buried long ago. He comes to steady you when the future feels uncertain. He comes to take your hand at the edge of the grave and lead you forward. And he places his own words on your lips to speak to those in terror, the guilty, the dying, and even to your own trembling heart: "Do not be afraid." Tell those who are in terror that Jesus lives. Tell the guilty Jesus forgives. Tell the dying that Jesus raises the dead. Tell your own soul that Jesus keeps his promises.

The women came in darkness but left in **The Dawn that Ended Being Afraid**. They arrived grieving but departed rejoicing. They expected death but encountered the Lord of life. So it shall be for all who belong to him. In their testimony we now live with them in **The Dawn that Ended Being Afraid**. There will still be tears, but none that remain forever. There will still be graves, but none that hold God's children. There will still be accusations, but Christ speaks the louder word of forgiveness. In Jesus everything has changed. The tomb is empty. Our Savior is alive. Because he lives, we also live. And wonder of wonders - we are not afraid anymore!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott