

Hurray, it's Easter! He's risen! Fresh starts for everyone! New life all around!

But before you can say Al-le-lu-ia, already this morning we've hit a snag. I mean, did you hear today's Gospel? In case you missed it, let me read it for you again.

"And entering the tomb, [the women] saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.'"

And here's where it gets weird—"And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." And there it just stops. It ends with these women fleeing from the tomb, trembling and afraid. How's that for Easter joy! If you ask me, that's just no way to run a resurrection! So, what's going on here?

Well, one possibility is that God's got a twisted sense of humor. It's as if today when that young man in white says, "He's risen!" the women look around and, not seeing any risen body . . . they're all afraid it's just one big joke. Like, "*Psyche! Made you look! Can't believe you fell for it!*" After all, today is April first, April Fools' Day. And catching on to His bad joke, maybe these women think God's just pulling their leg. It's just His version of sending them on a snipe hunt. Or like when I was a kid and put a rubber band around the kitchen sink sprayer, so my Mom got soaked when she turned on the faucet. That's enough to take the joy out of Easter—might explain why these women leave the tomb quaking in their boots. *Ha, ha, very funny, God.*

If that were the case, I don't think we'd find it very funny. After all, if God didn't raise Jesus out of the grave then all of us might as well pack our bags and go home. It's like Paul said this morning, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." Again, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." *Ha, ha. Nobody's laughing.*

But that just can't be what's going on here—there's no way God can be making April fools out of us. While these women have kept quiet so far this morning, if we were to read on just a couple verses more—Mark 16:9-10—we'd find Mary Magdalene's fear wearing off, and able to contain it no longer, she'll go running to tell the disciples. And while those disciples might not believe her at first, eventually they'll become so convinced that they'll make it their life's work to broadcast the Good News of Easter to the entire world. They'll become so convinced, in fact, they'll even stake their lives on it—almost all of them will die for their conviction. Now, who would do that, unless they were completely and utterly convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ had indeed been raised? And then, there's the fact that the body of Christ still has yet to surface two thousand years later, even though every Jew and Roman back then and every Atheist today would have everything to gain by it. Of course, there's many more reasons why Easter can't just be some practical joke. So then, what else would explain the ending to today's Gospel? Again, why the fear and trembling?

One other possibility is this—how else *should* they react? If you've ever seen the romantic comedy *50 First Dates* then you know what I mean. Drew Barrymore's character gets into this car accident that's left her with what's called anterograde amnesia, the inability to make new memories. Every day, she wakes up and thinks it's the same day—the day of the accident. And to spare her the heartache, her family tries to keep this all a secret from her. They have stacks of newspapers from the date of the accident, every afternoon they play a recording of the same Minnesota Vikings game, and before bed they always re-watch the same movie.

Eventually, she meets a guy, Adam Sandler, and they start to flirt. And then, day after day, Sandler, who's really falling for her, has to keep re-introducing himself as if they were meeting for the first time. Well, he knows their relationship

will never get anywhere this way, so he makes a tape. And from then on, with this video, he reveals the startling truth to her every morning. Hitting play, she sees newspaper clippings about the accident, photos of her in the hospital, and then pictures of them out on dates together to show that they've been involved for a while. Of course, at first, she wonders if this is some kinda joke. But realizing it's not, she gets emotional. There's fear because this absolutely rocks her world. And there's trembling—lots of tears and she goes off to take time to be by herself.

Could it be that's what these women are experiencing at the tomb? Imagine being in their shoes, hearing for the first time that in real life someone is truly risen from the dead! Before, these ladies might've believed it could happen—theoretically—but to actually have the dead walking among you! For this to really come true, well, that flies in the face of everything they'd ever known. Never before, had they experienced anything like that. The dead don't rise—that doesn't happen. Everyone they've ever known hit the dirt . . . and stayed there.

But if this is true, then what else have they missed? How can they trust anything, how can they know what to think anymore? When their world's caving in like that, tell me, how else *should* they react? Fear and trembling? It makes total sense.

This Easter morning, you and I join these women at the empty tomb, the same news they're getting is news for us too. And after hearing that Jesus is risen, if you and I aren't just a little fearful, trembling even just a little, then I wonder if we actually get it—y'know, if we really take it to heart? I mean, this kinda news is enough to rock anybody's world, shake our foundations, turn life upside down. We're so used to the idea that this is it, enjoy it while you still can. We say our final goodbyes, before it's too late. We're all just living out our days, waiting for the doctor to give us the inevitable bad news. That's the world we live in, that's what our experience tells us, that's just what we've come to expect. Good Friday we know—but Easter, well Easter just pulls the rug out from under us! No one could blame us if we, ourselves, had fear and trembling—I mean how else *should* we react? And maybe, learning this unsettling truth, we can still feel like the joke's on us.

But if anyone's the April fool today, it's not you and it's not me. No, if God's pulling a prank on anyone . . . it's death! Death—the one we've grown accustomed to, what has become normal for us, what we can all count on—is actually the butt of the joke this morning. Like my five-year-old playing dress-up, death's been parading around as if it were big and important. All this time, death's somehow managed to convince us that *it's* the one running the show.

But then comes Easter, and death's whole charade comes unraveled. Jesus gets up! Jesus, the crucified one—with holes in His hands and feet, a gash in His side—comes back to life. Surely, if anyone's a goner, it's Him! But death loses its grip on Him. And Jesus returns, good as new. *Thought you had me?* He says. *Ha! Gotcha!*

And like Drew Barrymore, like the women at the empty tomb, maybe our fear and trembling is giving way to Easter joy. I mean, finding out that the world as we knew it *isn't* the world as we knew isn't such a bad thing! With Jesus Christ risen from the dead, life is now infinite; it's death's days that are numbered! It means no more deadlines, no expiration dates, nothing's ever final! It means for us death's not some brick wall, but seamless, uninterrupted, commercial-free programming—we go from life . . . to life! Because a man is back from the grave, there's no end to us, we are unstoppable, indestructible, you and I will live *for-ever!*

"He has risen," the young man said, "He is not here . . . He is going before you . . . There you will see Him, just as He told you!" Jesus has gone on ahead, that where He is you may be also! He's waiting on the other side to pull you through, from this world to the next! And there you will see Him, just as He tells you. I don't hear death laughing anymore—but you and I can laugh even in the face of death!

Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, seems to have gotten the punchline. He had his funeral all planned out, and when the time came, two buglers were positioned high up in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, per his instructions. Before the funeral service had come to a close, the first bugler started playing taps. Now taps signals that the day is now over, as if Churchill's life had come to a close. But then, imagine everyone's surprise when, immediately following—the final notes of taps still ringing in the air—they heard a second bugler. This time playing reveille, the rousing song of a new day dawning, the start of a brand new life. Because of Easter, Churchill got the last laugh—and so do we.