

EASTER SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 28:1-10
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 April 20, 2014

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, please help me to **fill in the empty words/blanks** as I am reading this Easter Sunday Gospel text about Jesus rising from the dead.

“After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary **Magdalene** and the other Mary went to see the **tomb**. And suddenly there was a great **earthquake**; for an **angel** of the Lord, descending from **heaven**, came and rolled back the **stone** and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as **snow**. For fear of him, the guards shook and became like **dead men**. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be **afraid**; I know that you are looking for **Jesus** who was **crucified**. He is not here; for he has been **raised**, as he said. Come, **see** the place where he lay. Then go quickly and **tell** his **disciples**, ‘He has been **raised** from the **dead**, and indeed he is going ahead of you to **Galilee**; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with **fear** and great **joy**, and ran to **tell** his **disciples**. Suddenly **Jesus** met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be **afraid**; go and **tell** my **brothers** to go to **Galilee**; there they will **see me**.” (Matthew 28:1-10)

Kids,

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| 1. Who died on the cross on Good Friday? | <u>Jesus</u> |
| 2. Where did they bury Jesus' body? | <u>Tomb</u> |
| 3. When did Jesus come back alive? | <u>Easter</u> |
| 4. Is Jesus still alive today? | <u>Yes</u> |
| 5. Where does Jesus live? | <u>In heaven, in our world, in our hearts!</u> |
| 6. Because Jesus rose from the dead and lives in your heart, where will you go when you die? | <u>Heaven with God.</u> |

Thanks be to God! Happy Easter! Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

The campfires cinched it for me. It was Friday, a week ago. I arrived home about 7:00 p.m., having eaten a sandwich while driving. My wife, Jennifer, was gone off on a retreat. The first two days of the week I had been home, sick with stomach flu. The next three days had been spent entirely sitting down inside the church, in people's homes or other buildings. I needed to get outside and to exercise. I went into the house, changed clothes and went for a walk.

Jennifer and I have been out walking occasionally this winter. Again and again, we've passed empty yards with no sign of human life except through closed windows or in passing cars. Too cold... The winter has been so long and hard. Last Friday night, it felt so good to be out with only a light jacket on. As I walked along, I glimpsed a flicker of flame behind the next house. I stopped. "**Yes, it's a campfire.**" Then I saw two people sitting beside the fire. I walked on. A few more houses, "**there's another fire**" and more people. Around that one block, I spotted three campfires. Finally I saw two kids, a brother and a sister I guessed, maybe 10 and 12 years old. They were pulling wood off of a woodpile and placing it in a rock fire ring. That was enough for me. I picked up my pace and headed for my own campfire ring back home. These campfire people were all kindred souls with me – longing for the end of winter, a taste of spring and the freedom of summer to follow.

This might sound crazy, but for me; that Friday evening walk was like a **little glimpse of the first Easter morning**. Soon after I spotted that first campfire, I had my pen in hand and had begun jotting notes on a piece of paper pulled from my pocket. Campfires, hopeful signs of spring, what might this summer hold in store for me? Easter morning, what might God have in store for my life in the days and weeks to come? My body and soul have been longing for summer. Do you know what I mean? Have my body and soul also been longing for resurrection, healing and new direction? Can Jesus rise up once again in my life today? In my family? At my workplace? I raced home and built a campfire in my own yard.

Jesus was dead. God lost. Our cold, hateful world had won. God's plan to love and save our world had apparently gone awry. Or so it seemed... The two Marys, Peter and John – winter had fallen upon them in the heat and dryness of Israel. As surely as our own coldest sub-zero plunge, deepest snow and most brutal north wind – they were trapped in place, dead in their tracks, overwhelmed by a virtual blizzard of loss and grief. The one who loved them, forgave them, and made them laugh – Jesus was dead. The one who fed hungry people, welcomed outcasts and embraced little children – Jesus was gone. Has Jesus ever been dead in your life? Has it seemed like Jesus is gone? Jesus was gone for them...

I proceeded to sit by my campfire for the next two hours, well into the dark night. Around the lake where we live, I searched for some sign of other campfires. There were none. In the summer you can always see other campfires around the lake. Not this night. I listened. I watched. I reflected. I wrote. There by the fire, as darkness fell, I talked with God. Do you know what I mean? Have you had such conversations?

Just a little before 10:00 p.m., I decided to head for bed. With snow still standing deeply around my fire ring, I decided to let the flames continue to dance there in the darkness. That way, if someone else came along who needed a fire, it would be there. That way, others around the lake could be lifted by the twinkling of my fire. That way, I could squint out of my own darkened house and see that fire flickering in the midst of late winter's fading mantel of cold, darkness and death.

“God is not dead.” That's the name of a movie that's in the theaters right now. I saw it. It's the story of a college student who ends up in an introductory philosophy class which is being taught by an atheist. The professor requires that his students sign a statement saying that God is dead in order for them to do well in his class. One student refuses and the rest of the story is about the student trying to philosophically prove the existence of God. I majored in philosophy at the University of Minnesota – Duluth. My advisor, also the department head, was a crusading atheist. He told us that he was a former Roman Catholic and that the church lied about the existence of God. He proceeded to spend my next four

years of college arguing against the existence of God. Our exams were always essay style. I would write arguments in support of God's existence, 10 pages, pica type, double spaced. Then he would give me a written response, 10 pages, elite type, single spaced. He didn't fail me for my faith. He even invited me into his home to discuss the tests. During my last quarter I went in to ask him to sign my admission papers to Luther Theological Seminary where I would study to become a Christian pastor. He sat at his desk, without a word, reading through the paper. He signed on the bottom, looked up over the top of his glasses and said, "**One slips through every once in a while.**" That was a bad year for him because two of his advisees went on to seminary.

Without giving away the ending to the movie, "**God is not dead,**" that atheistic professor was a hurting man. My own college professor may well have been too. I don't think they saw any campfires. I don't think they allowed for any conversations with the living God, Jesus. I think that they tasted winter and never saw the hope of summer. I think that they witnessed all of the evil, pain and suffering in the world and determined that either:

1. God doesn't exist, or
2. God is angry, wicked and hurtful.

The two Marys went to the tomb thinking that Jesus was dead, but guess what, Jesus came back. And when at that cold, dark tomb, the **powers of the world** were **overcome with fear,** an angel of the Lord told the **women,** "**Do not be afraid.**" "**Come and see... go and tell...**" **Jesus is risen.** Then the women went quickly along their way "**with fear and great joy.**" And Jesus himself met them and gave the same message as the angel. "**Greetings! Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.**"

I know from those four years of college philosophy and from forty years of life since, you can't prove the existence of God and you can't disprove the existence of God. Either you believe or you don't. Either you see the light or you don't. It's a **head thing and a heart thing.** I'm not saying "**check your brain.**" But I am

saying, “**open your heart.**” And with both heart and brain, both body and soul, **focus on Jesus.**

“**Don’t be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell.**” Jesus was dead and gone. Then he was alive and back. Then he said, “**I will meet you at Galilee, out in your world.**” Jesus is still coming. Jesus is still meeting God’s people in their everyday world. Jesus still appears along the road that you travel. Jesus comes to where you **live, pray, doubt, wonder, hope...** Unfortunately, my philosophy professor saw only the shortcomings/hypocrisies of the church and never did really see God’s love for him coming in the person of Jesus and in the Body of Christ, you and me, the Church.

The ancient and the contemporary **marching orders** of the Church and of each and every one of us each and every day are: **Don’t be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell.** The campfires are burning. Fearless people who have seen Jesus at work in their lives and world are out shining the light of Christ into the darkest, coldest corners of existence.

If you come by my house this spring, you may see a **campfire burning.** If you come by my life, this spring, or any time, I hope you’ll see the **light of Christ burning.** Will you maybe keep a fire going too? Will you maybe let the light of Christ shine in and through you too? They thought he was dead. I’ve sometimes been there too. But Jesus is back. **Don’t be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell.**

As I walked along a week ago Friday, I scribbled my reflections/conversation with God on the back of **Verna’s Benefit sheet.** My good friend, in her fifties, has fallen victim to a disease which will slowly, but surely rob her of her voice, her mind, her very breath. Her church friends are holding a benefit to help her and her husband to make the transition from loss of her wages until social security kicks in. When hellish things happen in life, God’s people do their best at shining the light of Christ. Can you prove that Jesus exists? No. But for those who are looking, **you’ll see Jesus at Verna’s Benefit,** and when **your family is in trouble,** and when you get **hung up on drugs or alcohol,** or when **death approaches...**

Jesus will be there moving to give hope and life. The world is still tough, broken and limping, but Jesus walks with us and will not let us go. **Don't be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell. Jesus.**

As I walked around my block, those three campfires encouraged me to join in reclaiming the life and freedom of spring and summer as winter's icy grip slowly relaxed. Is your fire burning? Do you know what it means, because of Jesus, to have no fear? Have you seen the risen Lord? Can you go and tell? Will you go and tell? Go and tell. There are many empty or hurting people waiting to see the Jesus who walks with you.

You can't prove the existence of God... Jesus just hung onto me throughout those four years of college and ever since. **"Don't be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell."** How about you? Has Jesus been hanging onto you too? **"Don't be afraid. Come and see. Go and tell."**

I don't get it. I don't know why God didn't just call it quits when we killed him. That should have been the end of it for the whole world, but then, I guess there wouldn't have been a you or a me. I don't quite understand it, but I have seen the light and it's not just all in my head either. The light is in my heart and in my hands and feet and eyes and mouth. And I've seen the light shining in the lives of countless other folks including right here in this place. What an amazing thing, somehow **God's plan includes you and me helping to keep the fire going until Jesus comes again** and **winter** and **darkness** and **disease** and **hatred** and **death are no more.**

Come Lord Jesus and be our guest, the guest of every person here - **in having no fear, in seeing** and **in telling** that you are the **risen Lord Jesus** who is moving to give **faith, hope, love and even joy** in our lives and world. **Keep hanging onto us Lord, and we will do our best to hang onto you too...** Thanks be to God. Amen.