St. Matthew's Lutheran Church – Oconomowoc, WI
Easter Festival Service – Year A
Matthew 28:1-10
April 5, 2026

Sermon: Matthew 28:1-10
What Difference Does Easter Make?

On March 5, 2022, the images came into view from the remote-controlled submarine. They discovered it in pristine condition, beautifully preserved from the deep, cold waters of the Antarctic. Sir Earnest Shackleton's ship, the Endurance, was sitting upright on the ocean floor looking as if it was ready to set sail for another expedition. How did the Endurance end up on the ocean floor in 9,869 feet of water in the Antarctic? Sir Earnest Shakleton always had a desire for adventure. He wanted to be the first person to reach the South Pole, he lost that race. So, he set his sights on another adventure: to be the first expedition to cross the continent of Antarctica and he set out to that end in 1914. Legend has it that he placed an ad in a London newspaper that read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in the case of success." Sign me up! Apparently over 5,000 responded that way for the expedition and 28 made the cut to endure all of that with the small chance of recognition. The first part of the journey was smooth sailing from England to just off the ice of Antarctica. Then their worst fears were realized. Before they could make it to the solid ice of the continent the floating ice pack surrounded them and squeezed the wooden hull ship like a vise. The crew spent months trying to free it from the ice only to have to squeezed tighter until the hull split open and it slipped beneath the ice. Their supplies were slowly consumed and if you could make a crystal ball out of the ice it would tell you that death was in their future. They couldn't withstand the -20 temperatures for long without supplies. The unthinkable was thought. Shackleton and two others would set out on a lifeboat to make an 800-mile trip over the open seas to an island that was a whaling outpost to get help and rescue the crew. No GPS. No recalculating along the route. If they were just 30 miles off their route they would miss it. It was either try or die. Any rational analysis of the situation concluded this was a suicide mission. There was no real hope of rescue. As the dot of that lifeboat disappeared over the horizon rational thinking told the crew that was the last they were going to see of their captain, and they were on their own from here. It had to be a terrible, empty feeling.

The crew of the Endurance weren't the only ones that knew that feeling. The events that unfolded in the last 72 hours were nearly beyond what they could process. It happened so quickly. In a way some of it wasn't new. The Jewish elders, chief priest, and Pharisees were always trying to trap Jesus. What was new and set it all in motion was one of his own disciples. Then came the arrest, the trial in the middle of the night, the crowd chanting, "Crucify!" before Pilate. Ultimately, that's what Pilate did. Jesus was whipped and beaten, mocked, and nailed to a cross. The last image the women had of Jesus was his lifeless body on the cross, then being taken down and put in the tomb. The women make their way to the tomb expecting what every rational thinking person would expect to find in a tomb early that morning, a dead body, a dead Jesus. Emotionally they were in the grip of the vise of death, abandoned by the one listened to and followed. So, they came with spices to finish the burial and bring closure to these horrible events. That was the reality they faced and the reality they expected.

What they find at the tomb was not what they expected. First the guards are nowhere to be found, second, the stone is already rolled away and then this happens. *"The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then 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.'" (Matthew 28:5-7).* I imagine the load of the burial spices was dropped and forgotten about quickly. There was no use for those. They came looking for a dead Jesus, what they found was a vacant tomb because he has risen just as he said. What difference does Easter make? What difference did it make for those women early Easter morning? Their hearts were filled with grief far heavier than the burial spices they carried. Their hopes were shattered. What they found was a risen Savior! They left the tomb overflowing with Easter joy! They left with hearts full of victory! What they found is this,

"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him' (Matthew 28:8, 9).

If Jesus was just a great man that set a wonderful example for us, then today doesn't make much difference. If Jesus was just a great teacher to focus us on some great lessons of morality, then we have failed because there is no keeping God's Word perfectly. If we only see Jesus that way then the only difference today makes is we get decked out in pastels, color some eggs, hunt for some as well, and overload on chocolate and tomorrow we recover from our sugar coma and wonder what are we going to do with all these hardboiled colored eggs? But let's get serious, if that's all Jesus is then we are still in our sins, still bound by the ultimate equalizer of death, and no suit and tie or pastel dress will ever cover up the stench and filth of our sin!

Listen again. *"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said" (Matthew 28:5, 6).* There has never been more joyful news that someone didn't find what they were looking for. Jesus is who he says he is. Jesus has accomplished what God's Word tells us he accomplished. He bore our sin. He declared on the cross on Good Friday, "It is finished." He didn't say it's almost finished or nearly finished. He didn't say that he went 95% or even 99% of the way for you and you just need to cross the finish line. He didn't say, I've paid for your sins but not that one or that it applies to everyone else in the world but not you. Don't call Jesus a liar. It is finished. The payment for sin is complete. It is paid in full.

What difference does Easter make? The victory is declared. Sin and death have been defeated. There are only two outcomes to Holy Week. Either sin, death, and the devil won or Jesus won. That's it. There is no other possibility. *"He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."* Jesus has won. Brothers and sisters, Easter makes all the difference for our lives and eternity. What does today mean for us? Will we wallow in our guilt? Do we remain controlled by sin and defined by our sins, weaknesses, faults, failings, and shame? Absolutely not! Because of today! Because he lives we too live. Because we have been buried with him in his death and rise to a new life in his resurrection.

But what about the real world and real life and real problems? What difference does Easter make? When the women saw Jesus risen and living, it changed everything for them. Don't be overcome by the challenges and troubles of today and tomorrow. Don't be overcome by sins of the past. Don't be overcome by fear and worry about sickness, death, or whatever the future may bring. Don't be overcome by that because we know our future. Scripture tells us our troubles toady are not worth comparing to the glory that is ours in heaven. Our Savior rules and reigns. Sin, death, and hell can never claim him and because our Savior is risen it can't claim us either.

About 4 months after the lifeboat disappeared over the horizon another dot appeared in the distance. Their captain made it. He did the impossible. Shackleton came back to rescue his men. 28 men left on the expedition and 28 men returned safe and alive. What did that mean for the crew? It meant life. It meant they were saved. It meant they had a future. They were rescued because their captain came back for them.

Did you catch what the angel said to the women? *"He has risen, just as he said."* Jesus told us he would come back from the dead. The empty tomb and risen Savior shouldn't have been shocking, yet it was. Thanks be to God he keeps his promises even when we find it so hard to take him at his word. Jesus went to the tomb and came back conquering it and conquering its hold on us. That is the promise that he makes to each one of us. Maybe you came here this morning loaded with pain and guilt. Maybe the scars of past wrongs and the wrongs of others. Maybe the doubts if it's ever going to get better. Maybe the anger of why life has to be the way that is right now for you. Maybe the fear of the unknown and the out of control.

What difference does Easter make? Jesus lives and that makes all the difference. He tells us, *"I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* Today means that nothing can rob us of the joy we have in Christ, not even death. Today means that life is ours now and forever. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.