



"Easter in an Age of Terror"

Mk. 16:1-8; Rm. 8:28-39

By: Dr. Peter B. Barnes

April 24, 2011 – Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8; Romans 8:28-39 (New International Version 1984, ©1984)

Mark 16:1-8 The Resurrection

¹ When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

⁴ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

⁶ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

[The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9–20.]

Romans 8:28-39 More Than Conquerors

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,^[a] who^[b] have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."^[c]

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[d] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Footnotes:

- a. [Romans 8:28](#) Some manuscripts *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God*
- b. [Romans 8:28](#) *Or works together with those who love him to bring about what is good—with those who*



- c. [Romans 8:36](#) Psalm 44:22
 - d. [Romans 8:38](#) Or *nor heavenly rulers*
-

Introduction.

On September 11, 2001 at 8:45 a.m. EDT, our world changed forever. When American flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, it sent a reverberation of catastrophe around the world, and our lives have never been the same since. If Pearl Harbor marked my parent's generation, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. marked my generation, then surely the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. will mark my children's generation for a lifetime.

Two days after the events of September 11, I asked my mother, who lived in Atlanta, to compare and contrast the tragic events of that week with Pearl Harbor. She said, "Oh, this is far worse. Pearl Harbor was so far away. The world was at war. It was an attack on a military base, and we heard it on the radio. But this...this is so close, it's all over the TV, and now I don't feel safe. I never felt unsafe after Pearl Harbor."

How do we cope with these uncertainties in life? How can we maintain hope in our day and time? I believe the message of Easter holds the key, for in the events of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we see the power of God conquering the evil of the world. We see life literally come out of death.

I. We Live in an Age of Terror.

You and I live in an age of terror. When I say the words "9/11," "Columbine", "Oklahoma City bombing", and "genocide in Rwanda" what images come to your mind? When I say the names Osama bin Laden and Timothy McVeigh what do you think of? Does the name Charles Whitman ring a bell. He was the student at the University of Texas in 1966 who went on a shooting rampage from the Clock Tower on the campus of UT. It left 16 people dead and 32 others wounded. Not even Austin has been immune from this sort of thing. There are reasons to be afraid in this world, aren't there?

I read an excerpt from a book by Gregg Easterbrook in *Time* magazine¹ a while back which tried to examine the question if life is so good, then why do the old days look better? The title of his book is *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. One of the theories discussed in the book is what is called "collapse anxiety." Collapse anxiety is the deep-seated fear in the minds of many that we cannot sustain the standard of living and the liberty we currently enjoy. We fear the economy will collapse, or natural resources will run out. We fear that our military superiority will be neutralized by some bio-horror, or that terrorism or an environmental catastrophe will overwhelm us. Some of these concerns are rational and real, and they keep us on our guard. But at some point it crosses the line, and we become paralyzed by our fear.

A few years ago, I was in Washington, DC, just after the sniper who had been terrorizing that metropolitan area was caught. I attended a dinner party with some friends who lived there, and I asked, "How did it affect your daily routines, and how did you cope with your fear



of the sniper?” Various people related how they changed the way they dropped their kids off at school, or their shopping habits to avoid areas where shootings had taken place. One man shared that whenever he filled up his car with gas, he never stood still but kept bobbing and weaving, checking things around the car so as to not give a steady target to a sniper. They all expressed relief that the man had been caught, but few said life would get back to normal anytime soon.

Terror in the world is nothing new. It has been around since the dawn of time, and it was very evident when Jesus walked the earth 2000 years ago. The little country in which He lived in the 1st century AD was a conquered nation, and the Roman Empire was in total control. In order to maintain its oppressive rule, Rome meted out execution by crucifixion to punish law-breakers and serve as a warning against anyone who was contemplating a crime against the state. Few rituals were as cruel or as brutal as Roman crucifixion, and it struck fear into the hearts of millions.

And yet, something else caused fear to grip the followers of Jesus that first Easter. A different kind of terror seized their hearts. It wasn't just the terror of the Roman Empire that got their attention that day. We read in Mark 16 that when the women went to the tomb to finish the process of burial, they were *alarmed* when confronted by the angel of the Lord with the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. Our text tells us that they were *trembling* and *bewildered* at the report, and they fled from the tomb because they were *afraid*.

A *holy terror* came over the women that day because they realized Jesus had gone to hell and back, and the empty tomb offered them hope. The terror of the resurrection overcame the terror of the cross. In the face of great evil, God sent His Son to go to hell and back for you and me.

II. We Have a Savior Who Has Been to Hell and Back.

In the Apostles' Creed we recite at our church from time to time, we say the words, "I believe in Jesus Christ [God's] only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Those last few words slip off our tongues so quickly and easily most Sundays. But I should slow down and remember just what it took for Jesus to provide a ransom for my soul. The pain of His suffering is what it took to secure God's forgiveness for our sins. "He...suffered under Pontius Pilate...was crucified... dead...and buried." For me!

However, the Creed goes on to affirm "He descended into hell." Theologians disagree over what this sentence in the Apostles' Creed really means. John Calvin believed Jesus went into hell as a helpless victim in order to experience on our behalf the ultimate suffering, degradation, and humiliation that the world experiences. However, Martin Luther had another take on it. He believed that Jesus went into hell endowed with the power to rescue, and He went there to invade enemy territory. Here in Texas we might say, "He went there to kick some butt and take some names!"ⁱⁱ

There is a medieval painting called "The Harrowing of Hell" which depicts the moment in Ephesians where it says, "*Jesus descended to the lower parts to lead out a train of captives.*" The painting shows Jesus just as He has broken out of the gates of hell. With His hand He frees Adam, and with the other He frees Eve. Beneath His feet is Satan, bound, gagged and



immobilized. The actions of Satan and his terrorist cronies are the desperate acts of a defeated foe. Why? Because Jesus is a Savior who has been to hell and back for us!ⁱⁱⁱ

This can give us hope as we seek to cope with terror in the world. It is a promise to us that He that is in us is stronger than he that is in the world. We need not fear Satan or any of his cronies of terror. He is a dog on a leash who has been defeated by Christ the conqueror.

There is nothing that you and I have to fear as long as we trust in God. This morning we have read in Romans 8 that God works all things together for the good of those that love Him and are called according to His purpose. There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from His love, and in Jesus Christ we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. As Martin Luther wrote in his great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*:

And though this world, with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.

That little word is the name of Jesus!

I have a friend whose father was a fireman, a captain in the fire department of his hometown in Riverside, California. When my friend Vic was a boy, his father often smelled of smoke when he came home from work. One time he fell through a roof and his uniform caught on fire in an attempt to rescue someone. Vic says isn't it interesting, when terror comes our way, when the bottom falls out in life, we don't call on celebrities or athletes or the powerful people in our society. When the bottom falls out, we call on faithful, quiet, hard-working firemen, just like we did on September 11. They are the quiet heroes who come to the rescue; they are the ones who stand in the gap.

Jesus Christ was a firefighter of heavenly proportions who went through the flames of hell itself for you and me, and He lost His life in the rescue. Jesus told His disciples, "*Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends.*" Our Lord demonstrated that sacrificial love when He hung between heaven and earth and died in our place to secure our salvation. And it is because of His victorious resurrection that we now have a message of hope to share and a ministry of release to provide people who feel captive to fear.

III. We Have a Calling to Enter the Hellish Places of the World in the Name of Christ.

Have you ever noticed how tough times and great tragedy lay your heart open to God in new ways? They are means by which we come face to face with the great questions of life and the most important matters of our existence. Your parents divorce, a loved one dies, the doctor breaks the news to you that you have cancer, you lose your job, and all of a sudden you are stopped dead in your tracks, and you try to make sense of it all. When terror hits our world, life shouldn't go back to normal. It should take us deeper into the heart of God.



Terror serves as a wake-up call for our world, but it should also be a wake-up call for the Church. That first Easter morning, the angel of the Lord told the frightened women to go and tell Jesus' disciples that Christ had risen from the dead and He would meet up with them in Galilee, just as He said He would. Later on when Jesus appeared to them, He explained to His disciples the purpose of His death, and He gave them a mandate to go into all the world with the transforming power of His message of love (Mt. 28:16-20). They were to be heralds of His good news and agents of change to turn the world upside down. The good news of Easter would overcome the terror of the world.

It is only when we really believe in the resurrection that we are able to enter the hellish places of this world. Every terror, every crisis, every occasion of suffering is an opportunity for God to break into our crazy lives and for the Church to give itself away in the service of others. Go to the places where the Church is most authentically giving itself away, and there you will find people who believe in the power of the resurrection to transform lives.

Conclusion.

A few years ago, I went to Princeton, New Jersey, on business, and while I was there I made a trip to New York City and Ground Zero, the place where the World Trade Center once stood. It was a moving experience to read the displays about the buildings, the attack on 9/11, and the lives that were lost. Little shrines and memorials were still set out to honor the fallen – both for the victims and those who died in the rescue efforts. It is a massive area, and work was continuing to repair neighboring buildings that were damaged by the attack.

I also visited St. Paul's Chapel just a block away. It served as a place of rest and refuge for recovery workers at the site, and for eight months, hundreds of volunteers worked 12 hour shifts around the clock, serving meals, making beds, counseling and praying with the rescue workers. Massage therapists, chiropractors and musicians also tended to their needs. It was an amazing display of sacrifice and service.

The church, which was built in 1766, is the oldest public building in continuous use on the island of Manhattan. This was George Washington's church, and it contains his pew. It is here he worshiped immediately following his Inauguration as the first President of the United States on April 30, 1789. There is a small graveyard directly behind the church that goes back to the Revolutionary War. It still had some of the debris in it that was blown out of the World Trade Center buildings. Miraculously, all the other buildings around the church were destroyed, but not one of the windows in St. Paul's was even broken.

During the months of rescue efforts after September 11, police officers lined the wooden pews of the more than 200-year-old chapel, and firefighters in full rescue gear walked up and down the aisles. I noticed that the pews were all scuffed up, and the paint was chipped everywhere. Deep gouges had been cut into the wood from all the rescue gear the workers were wearing then.

At first, I wondered why no one had taken the time to repaint them. Then it struck me. They were left that way on purpose. It was a testimony that the Church is called to be out on the front lines of rescue whenever terror hits the world. She may get scuffed up a bit in the process, but what is that in terms of the value of saving souls and rescuing people?

Later on I read that just before the attack of 9/11, a new pastor had come to the chapel. Prior to his arrival, some consideration had been given by the Episcopal diocese to closing down



the ministry of the church, but it was thought that with a new pastor and new vision perhaps they could find a new reason for being. The pastor had prayed that God would help them take the focus off their struggle to survive and give them a burden for mission to reach out to the world. Little did he know how God would answer his prayer.

My friends, Easter reminds us that we overcome terror with the hope of the resurrection, and every time we read of a terrorist attack, or a school yard shooting, or the rape of a young coed, or a hate crime against gay people, or even reactionary prejudice against Muslims and people of Arabic descent, then our hearts should grieve at the presence of evil in this world, and we should seek to overcome terror with the hope of the Gospel. Easter reminds us evil never has the last word, and God always has another move He can make. The Lord can take the worst things humanity can do in this world and work a miracle of hope.

Friends, let's take this message of Easter into our broken world. He is risen! He is risen indeed

ⁱ Book excerpt from *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, by Gregg Easterbrook in *Time*, December 15, 2003, pp. 66,67.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a sermon by Vic Pentz, "Jesus, the Fireman" preached in Atlanta, September 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Vic Pentz's sermon.

