

**PLASTIC LILIES**  
**Matthew 28:1-10**

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**Fred Craddock once worshiped in a church that had a fifteen year tradition of displaying 500 lilies at the altar on Easter Sunday. He didn't know why 500 – but it was 500 – beautifully arranged, sometimes just a bank of lilies, sometimes in the shape of a cross, sometimes almost carelessly strewn, like an artist across his canvas. Beautiful. Memorial lilies. People paid \$5 each, and, therefore, the insert in the worship bulletin on Easter had 500 names remembered by the giving of a lily. Five hundred lilies – \$5 each. A beautiful sight.**

**In the sixteenth year of that tradition, it came apart. One of the elderly members of the church – a woman – went up after the morning service and said, “I’m going to the hospital to visit a friend. Can I take one of the lilies to the room? I know I can’t tell which one it is I gave, but just any one of them. They’re all alike.” Without really getting an answer to her question, she went up to the cross of lilies – 500 lilies – and picked one at random. And she paused, turned around and, in a shocked voice, said to those who still remained in the sanctuary, “They’re plastic!”**

**Well, there was a lot of concern over their being plastic. “Well, we gave \$5 for the lilies. If they’re plastic, they may be the same ones that were used last year.” And they gave \$5 for those lilies last year. For fifteen years, they’d paid \$5 each for the same plastic lilies.**

**Committees met and huddles formed, official and unofficial, and the whole tradition collapsed. Someone came up with a figure – over fifteen years, that’s \$37,500 for the same plastic lilies.**

**The minister tried to gather everyone together and defend the practice of having plastic lilies that were stored in a cool place, covered and dark. And they had, indeed, lasted for years. They were beautiful. He defended the use of the money for the contingency fund, helping transients and meeting emergencies that had not been covered by the budget. “Let me assure you,” said the pastor, “the money has gone to good use.” Some accepted the pastor’s explanation. Others did not.**

**But his other line of defense was theological. He said, “After all” – and he said it with enthusiasm – “After all, the plastic lilies are more appropriate to Easter because they always bloom. They never die.” And then he said, “We don’t want to waste Easter.”**

**I don’t like plastic plants of any sort – lilies or poinsettias or geraniums or daisies. Plastic is plastic. Some of you like them, and that’s okay. It’s a matter of taste. But I don’t like them.**

Dust catchers, that's all. But, he is right about that one thing. Easter is an awful thing to waste.

Unlike the plastic lilies, Jesus was dead. He was not sleeping – He was dead. Acts 5 – what's the proclamation of the early church? “This Jesus whom you hanged on a tree, God raised from the dead.” And in John 20, Jesus in resurrected, bodily form, says, “See the scars. See the nail prints.” And Revelation 1:5 says, “Jesus Christ, the firstborn of the dead....” Literally, the first born among the corpses. He's dead.

Ask the soldiers, they'll tell you. “You talking about the one in the middle? Yeah, He's dead.”

You ask His disciples. “Well, we weren't really that close. We'd gotten off to a safe distance. But we could tell. Dead is dead.”

Or you ask those who prepared the body. What would they say? “Yeah. Yeah. He was dead.”

You ask Mary. “Mary?” And she says, “I know what you're going to ask. Yes, He's dead.”

The point is, it's not Christmas anymore. Somebody go tell the shepherds it was a mistake – go on back. And on your way, if any of you are going north, would you stop in Ramah and tell Rachel that all that crying she was doing that we thought was out of place, she was right. In reflection, all of our carols seem kind of silly, really. Not Christmas anymore. You tell the wise men, “They are nice gifts, but thanks anyway. And tell Herod he wins again. In fact, it was rather naive of us to think we could actually change anything.” It's not even Palm Sunday anymore. “Tell Pilate Rome is safe again. As always, tell Caiaphas he was right. It's expedient that one die for the people. He's right – political expediency wins out again over the dreams of the disenfranchised and poor.”

It's over and you feel the dull ache of a lost campaign.

Have you ever been involved in a lost campaign? The people went to the polls and it was Barabbas by a landslide. “All in favor of Barabbas? Well, we don't even have to count. It's Barabbas. Somebody needs to go down to the lobby and speak to our supporters and workers. I know they're downhearted. But somebody needs to go to the mike. Yes, I made a call to our opponents. Apparently you are the people's choice, Barabbas. The campaign is over. I want to thank all of you who've worked. It's been expensive. It's been hard. We haven't lost everything – I don't want you to be despondent. We've come to love and care for each other. I hope sometime in the future we can get together and remember... well, we don't want to remember tonight, but we can remember the good times we had along the way.”

Losing is just like – it's like dying.

Did you ever lose, just lose?

**They lost.**

**The disciples had the same dull ache that you have when there is a death in the family. It's the most confusing, most meaningless time there is. Everything is in slow motion, even though you want it to be over. And there are people around talking to you that you don't even know. And bringing in all that food. Hungry all your life, and now that you can't eat – all this food.**

**“Make a list, Rachel, of who brought the food. We'll have to return the dishes and we'll have to send thank-yous.”**

**“Let them come and get the dishes. We didn't ask for the food.”**

**“Now, Rachel, that's no attitude. You make the list, and I'll send thank-yous.”**

**“Don't send thank-you notes. Buy those that already say 'thank you' and just send them on. There is no need....”**

**“Now, that's no way...these are our friends.”**

**“Are you going to clean out Jesus' room, Mama?”**

**“Oh, not now.”**

**“Well, when you clean out the room, James wants his carpenter's apron and his hammer.”**

**“Okay, maybe next week.”**

**The landscape, the proper landscape, the only landscape in which you set the empty tomb of Easter is defeat and death. Over half of the people of the world live all their lives – from whimpering infant to whistling old people – all their lives, every day is Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. That's it.**

**Easter is a terrible thing to waste, and it is wasted if Jesus is not raised. (Fred Craddock, “The Waste of Easter,” Chapel Sermons Series)**

I don't want us to waste Easter today.

In our text that was read from the gospel of Matthew, the women make their way – Mary of Magdala and the other Mary – to the grave. The earthquake had occurred, and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. He looked like lightning. His garment was as white as snow.

The guards shook for fear – they were like dead men. The angel, clad in white, declared to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He

is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead” (28:5-7)

Matthew 28:8-10

And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid.”

If we were to take a poll out on the street, or even in the hallways of the church, what is the most frequently repeated commandment in the Bible? Oh, you might get some silly answers and some serious answers. Some might say, “Don’t tell lies; that’s the most frequent commandment in the Bible.” Others would say, “Always say your prayers.” Or, maybe, “Love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself. Those are surely the main commandments of the Bible.”

But every one of those answers would be wrong – as yours would probably be. Far and away, the most frequent commandment in the Bible is what the angel says to the women and what Jesus then repeats: “Do not be afraid.”

That’s the message of Christmas and Easter. Do not be afraid.

Look at verse 5.

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid.”

Why not be afraid? Verse 6: “For He has risen.”

And again, Jesus meets the women on the way, while they are going in fear it says in verse 8. And He says in verse 10, His first words, “Do not be afraid.” The first words of the resurrected Jesus in the gospel of Matthew: “Do not be afraid.”

It’s all going to be all right. Easter proves it.

They did have every reason to be afraid, didn’t they? An earthquake. An angel. Guards struck down as though they were dead. This was a cosmic disturbance – the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has gone to His death with the weight of all evil, while the earth itself quaked at the commotion. But while they’d gone looking for a corpse, God had a message: “Don’t be afraid. God’s new world has begun. The age of the resurrection is here. And you’re a part of it.”

That’s what Easter is about.

Do not be afraid.

I think back to the first message of the angel regarding Jesus. Back in another evangelist’s book, the gospel of Luke, the shepherds are out in the field. There was a bright light – the glory of the Lord before the shepherds. Luke tell us they were terribly frightened. And the angel’s first word, before the angelic choir sings, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy

which will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). The angelic choir sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

Don’t be afraid. We’ve got some good news. The Messiah has come.

We’ve all experienced the fear after death, haven’t we? I’ve been there. You’ve been there. You know how the disciples felt. Jesus was gone. The echoes of the pilgrims, “Hosanna to the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest” – the shouts of messianic acclamation were still ringing in the disciples’ ears. Just a week earlier, Jesus was on top of a colt. He was on top of Rome. The pilgrims were praising, the stones were singing. But now, all they heard was the deafening roar of silence – the silence of death.

They had left everything to follow Jesus – their jobs, their families, their futures. They had created their own image of Jesus as Messiah, with Jesus sitting on the throne and they themselves sitting on the right and the left hand of the new king.

But you cannot have a kingdom without a king. You cannot have a kingdom without a Christ. Real messiahs don’t hang on trees – that’s for the cursed.

After a funeral, it’s hard to know what to do, isn’t it? How to move on? You’ve buried the body, but how do you bury the despair? How do you bury that hollow in the pit of your stomach? There is no pain like the pain of standing at the graveside and knowing it’s over. There is no fear like the fear after a funeral. Your wife, your husband, your father, your mother, your son or your daughter. It’s at those moments we realize how dreadful an enemy death really is. How final the word seems when you attach it to someone you love. The fear of death keeps you up at night.

Someone with whom your life was intertwined – suddenly and unexpectedly, or after a lingering illness, they are taken from you. You know the enormity, the power, and the dread of the enemy of death. And you know how Mary of Magdala felt and the other Mary felt when they were going to the grave of their Lord that morning. It was the morning after the funeral.

And while the fear of death aches in their bones, the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

The message of Easter is clear. Evil does its worst in death, but evil has failed.

Had Jesus not said to His disciples in John 14, before His death, “Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you...Peace I leave with you...Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

Easter is not about the empty tomb of one man. It’s about the beginning of the age of the resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tries to explain. It’s not about one guy’s tomb being empty or one person becoming alive again. It’s about the beginning of the age of the resurrection from the dead. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the

first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power . For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death" (1 Corinthians 15:22-26).

I mentioned a passage earlier from Revelation 1. Is there any greater truth in the Apocalypse of John than this one? "And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead...behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who crucified Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Amen" (Revelation 1: 5, 7).

How does John describe Jesus? "The first born among the corpses." He's not the only one to come to life again. He is the first one to come to life again. Even our baptism says we are buried with Him, and we are raised with Him. "If you die with Him, you rise with Him," Paul tells us in Romans.

You can be sad over the death of your father, your mother, your husband, your wife, your brother, your sister, your child, your best friend. But you cannot be afraid.

So many in our church have been touched by death. You know the pain, the disillusionment, the discouragement, the desperation of the disciples on that first Easter. Jesus was gone.

But I do not want you to know their fear, for we live on the other side of Easter – not on the side where they lived. They were fearful before they knew of the resurrection. After Easter, no more fear.

Years ago, Jordan Cox, who was at that time our Minister of Recreation and Communication, was up at the church with his daughter Jordan Lee. They were at orchestra practice, where Jordan was controlling the microphones. The choir was singing, practicing in the sanctuary for Easter. Jordan Lee was just about three years old. They were singing the song, "On the Third Day."

"What does that mean, Jordan Lee, 'on the third day'?" her daddy asked her.

Jordan Lee replied, at three years of age, "That means He arose from the dead."

"Well, what does that really mean, that He arose from the dead?"

The three-year-old's response was absolutely perfect. "It means we don't have to be scared anymore."

Oh death, where is your sting?  
Oh death, where is your victory?

Through the empty tomb of Jesus, on this very morning you will not rob us from those we love.

Let us pray.