

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at the Great Easter Vigil
April 15, 2017

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It is always interesting and instructive to compare the Easter morning accounts of the four evangelists. You have heard me encourage you to do this periodically, by opening up four Bibles, one each to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Or if you want a short cut, a volume called *Gospel Parallels* does all the work for you. In the comparison you get a fuller understanding of just what happened. For instance, we so easily accept that there were angels at the tomb, announcing the Resurrection of Christ. In point of fact it is only Saint Matthew's Gospel that says a *single* angel was present. We have just heard that account proclaimed at this Easter Vigil Mass.

In Saint Luke's Easter account the two figures at the grave are described as *men*. Perhaps that is because angels are messengers and do not ask questions. *These* men asked a question. They said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Mary Magdalene and the others were focused on the bad news. Something had devastated their capacity to believe there was any goodness in the world. They came to the tomb at dawn on Easter morning focused on the dead. They were coming to carry out one last task and act of devotion to their Master Whose death seemed to obliterate everything good from the face of the earth. So the question the men at the tomb asked was right on the money. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Is there any room in you for good news?

This is an appropriate question for Christians in any age as well. Christ's followers are not immune to being dragged down by the secular and cynical worldview. Like Mary Magdalene and the others, our own hearts can be burdened with fear about what is to come, and what is to become of us. And when fear is the engine that drives us we cannot be the bearers of the Gospel good news.

Our world focuses on the bad. The world cynically trains us not to take news and information seriously unless it is bad news. We are being taught to treat good news with suspicion. On football Saturdays in the autumn when a team scores a touchdown the camera is not put on the happy players on their side of the field but on the *other* side. It is as if we are supposed to be entertained by people's unhappiness. Some of you have heard me tell of my first experience dealing with a Boston *Globe* reporter. I had just been called to be rector of my last Episcopal

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Church parish, which was in Boston. So one fine day the religion reporter rang me up in my parish office in Goshen, Indiana, to interview me. I was glad to talk about my ministry and what the new parish had seen in it and how we hoped to work together. But the reporter wanted to talk about recent contention in the Episcopal Church and in the parish to which I was headed. I questioned him about his focus to the point where he said unless we talked about the bad news he wasn't interested in the interview. So I told him to have a nice day! In so many ways the world invites us to fall into its trap. And when we do, life is just one damn thing after another.

We all learn to cope with bad news and react to it. But what about the good news? Mary Magdalene and her companions could have so easily been believed had they reported a defiled grave and a missing body. That is what they in fact did report initially, according to St John's account of early Easter morning. (You can put that all together thanks to the *Gospel Parallels!* And Peter and John had gone off to see what could be done.) But these women *returned* to the tomb and later carried back to Peter and the rest *another* message, which was the most significant piece of information the world has ever been given. And this time there is no Scriptural record of the apostles rushing off to see the Risen Christ. Rather, the reaction must have been "Christ is risen???" And it is easy to imagine the apostles initially using words like "*wishful thinking*" or maybe a little less kind, "*delusion.*" Or perhaps even "*crazy.*" No one can ever accuse the Lord's followers of being gullible.

The world is a very different place because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The witness of Christians is to focus on the good news about that difference. Life is imperishable. It changes, but it does not die. Jesus showed us many things. And the most decisive and life-changing thing He showed us is the real relationship of death to life, and what that life is like when it is His life in us. *Which is where He wants it!* Christ's death and Resurrection declares the preciousness of life, and of *your* life.

It was night when Christ arose from the dead. The Easter Vigil Mass is held at night, because nobody saw the Resurrection. But in the morning light the first messengers had to say to the Lord's followers "Are you ready for good news?"

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Before or after the Resurrection, the Blessed Lord never made fun of people's suffering. He never said, "Snap out of it." That wasn't what was being asked at the empty tomb either. What the good Lord did do was consistently point to life, and He showed us the way we should go. He said, "*Follow Me.*"

The bad news will always be around us. Christians of all people should not be surprised or taken in by it. But neither should we be overcome by the bad news. For the Risen Christ has overcome the world. Easter morning told Mary Magdalene and all the rest of us that bad news is not the real story after all.
Alleluia!