

The Resurrection Substitute
Mark 16:1-8, Romans 6:4-6

Friends, would you agree with me that many people in our society today are looking for a new life or a better life or just the chance to perhaps improve their life?

And it's a fair to say that many people believe winning the lottery would help them do that.

With all that money you could wipe out your debts, pay off your mortgage, send your children off to college, and buy that cottage you've always wanted, travel, leave a dead-end job behind, and do whatever you want.

It's why one Lottery corporation has the slogan "Imagine the Freedom!"

And so we all dream of what we'd do if we won the lottery. And whenever there is a big jackpot, the radio DJ's invite people to call in and describe what they would do with all that money.

And it's all those dreams, along with the fact that someone will win, which keeps people playing, hoping that perhaps they will be the lucky ones whose dreams come true.

But friends – while we all may dream of winning the lottery and have some ideas about what we could do with the money... the truth is that if it actually happened to us – we wouldn't quite know what to do.

There are many stories of how lottery winners are hesitant and reluctant to come forward and claim their winnings right away.

A few years ago, in December of 2008, somebody won the fifth biggest Lotto 6/49 jackpot in the history of Canada. I remember reading about it at the time thinking "Wow, wasn't that going to make for a great Christmas"

But the article went on to say that "the person with the winning tickets had yet to come forward to claim their winnings. Apparently a few people knew who the winner is,

but until the winner makes themselves known it's being kept quiet."

And I think I might also be inclined to keep quiet if I won the lottery...

Because the fact is there are a whole bunch of issues which all of a sudden pop up when you win such a large sum of money.

The government is going to want to take their share, and so you'll need some financial advice about that, and you'll need some advice on how to bank and invest such a large sum of money.

But who do you trust? How do you find someone who won't take advantage of your inexperience in dealing with millions of dollars for their personal gain?

And you'll have to deal with everyone who wants you to share your new wealth – family, charities, old friends who you haven't heard from in years...

And the media will want to know all about you, because everyone wants to know who won.

And the more ordinary you are the better because it proves the premise that dreams do come true for ordinary people like you, this is the heartbeat of the lottery.

But you won't be an ordinary person for long. You'll be on TV in the newspapers, overnight you'll become a public figure.

Are you ready to deal with that? The media can be vicious if you say the wrong thing, present the wrong image.

Then you have to face the really hard question – do you really have the maturity and self discipline to actually handle such a large sum of money?

There have been some reality TV shows which look at how life actually turned out for those people who won large sums of money in the lottery.

In many cases people simply squander the wealth and in a few years they are right back where they started, and some even worse off than before.

So the dreams of a new life and what you could do if you won a lottery are nice, but to actually go through it in reality is quite different than what most people expect.

Now I've spent a bit of time talking about this because I want us to identify as close as we possibly can this morning with the three women who went to the tomb, what they found there and how they reacted to it.

For them, as for most Jews of that time, the promise of the Messiah coming was like the possibility of winning the lottery.

They would dream of what life could be like when the messiah came, no more Roman oppression, the glory and splendor of their nation would return, a magnificent capital city, or maybe just being able to have a nice little house in the village and farm and raise your family in peace and security.

Of course it all hinged on when this messiah would show up.

So given all these expectations and dreams - Jesus had certainly looked like a promising candidate. He was a prophet and teacher and miracle worker.

So many people followed Jesus in the same way we play the lottery, pushed on by the dream and hope for a better life, a new life, caught up in the dreams of possibility.

And just like everyone is all abuzz the week before a big jackpot, so too the crowds cheered and welcomed Jesus when he showed up in Jerusalem for the Passover - expectant, waiting to see what would happen.

Then, it all went bust – instead of solidifying power and overthrowing the Romans, Jesus had a falling out with the Jewish Religious leaders and they betrayed him to the Romans and had him executed as a common criminal.

And so it appeared the Jesus was not the winning ticket that the disciples and the Jewish people were hoping for.

They wrote him off and settled back into normal life waiting for the next big ticket that promised a chance of reaching their dreams.

And so, after Jesus had died - in accordance with the Law of Moses, He was given the burial fitting for a criminal.

In the Law of Moses God command that someone who was executed as a criminal could not hang on a cross overnight, this would defile the land.

So, Joseph of Aramathea makes a request for the body of Jesus and is given permission to bury it.

He's like a diligent janitor cleaning up the office after work and inadvertently gathering up the discarded tickets from the office lottery pool and throwing them in the garbage so things are nice and clean for the next day's board meeting.

But, whatever Jesus was or wasn't, a miracle worker and prophet and messiah hopeful, the three women in our passage of scripture knew that at the very least he was not a criminal!

So the morning after the Sabbath finds them traveling to the burial site with spices in order to give Jesus a proper burial, they did not want him to go to rest as a common criminal.

As Mark tells the story, we find them preoccupied with wondering how they are going to get into the tomb in order to anoint Jesus body. The three of them are not going to be strong enough to roll away the stone which had sealed the tomb.

Now Mark makes a point of mentioning their concern over this because it illustrates how Jesus's followers totally missed it when He had forewarned them that He would suffer and die.... but that he would be raised back to life!

And it shows that the women are going to the Tomb not because they remember what Jesus had said about resurrection, but because they don't want his remains to stay buried like a criminal.

They have no expectation of finding a resurrected messiah who has come to life as he promised he would.

However they are in for a surprise! When they get to the tomb they find the stone rolled away and an angel inside who rebukes them for their lack of faith and their ignorance and says to them “ you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, he is risen he is not here!”

Now you would think that this would produce joy, excitement, happiness among the women, right – like they'd just won the lottery... but it doesn't.

Instead this is like an office worker coming back in to retrieve a discarded lottery ticket from the garbage because he jotted down a phone number on which he needs.

But when he retrieves the ticket and looks at it again he realizes that he had misread it and it is in fact, the winning ticket.

But instead of doing a dance of joy - his hands begin to shake; he goes weak in the knees as the reality of what it means to win the lottery sinks in, not sure what he should do next or who he should tell, certain only that life will not be the same from now on.

So too the women run from the tomb in terror and amazement. Amazed because of what they had just seen and heard – good news, Jesus had risen to life -- he was going to meet them! Their heads must have been spinning as they tried to make sense of it -- as he promised?

When did he promise this? Who was this man really – what kind of messiah was this?

And terrified because of the responsibility that had been given to them – how do we break this news to the disciples?

They'll think we're emotionally distraught and making it up, they'll say we went to the wrong grave, they'll be angry with us for starting a rumor that will implicate his followers as having schemed to steal the body...

So the women were seized with amazement and terror, not understanding much but knowing for certain that life was not going fall back into the normal routine of dreaming about how things would be different when the messiah came.

So Mark ends his gospel here – reporting that the women were scared and said nothing to anyone, like a lottery winner stunned, and afraid to come forward to claim their prize because of all the media attention, taxes, and legal issues.

So the gospel of Mark ends with this note as if to leave us with the question, what would you do if you won the lottery?

What would you do if you discovered that Jesus had been resurrected to life – as he promised? Because this morning that's what we are proclaiming has happened, friends!

Maybe you're the kind of person who can't keep this news quiet and you've got to tell everybody about it, the publicity and all that doesn't bother you.

Or perhaps maybe you're more like the women who found the tomb empty and the realization of what is going on shakes you to the core and leaves you stunned.

But either way - stunned or ecstatic the fact is that we may dream about achieving a higher quality of life, or a longer life... but we didn't expect to receive an everlasting life – a life which in terms of quality and quantity will not be destroyed by death.

A life whose quality comes from the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, a life that is characterized by peace, joy, love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control... the fruit of the Spirit.

A life which is marked by actions that express belief and obedience in Jesus Christ as Lord, a life where giving and thinking about others is second nature.

A life that is based upon the truth, a life that is lived by God's wisdom – a life that receives God's blessings: protection, provision, wealth, honor, grace, mercy, forgiveness, hope!

Because friends, while the everlasting life we receive from the resurrection begins now... working its way from the inside out as it were - in order for that life to fully transform our physical bodies – like Jesus we too will *pass through death* into resurrection!

So friends, the joy of Easter Sunday isn't simply because Jesus is alive - it's because his resurrection from death we are guaranteed that our passage through death will result in our resurrection as well - into the fullness of everlasting life in our physical bodies!

Listen to how Paul describes what happens to the bodies of those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ when they pass through death.

“The body that is sown (dies) is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:42-44)

Because it happened to Jesus Christ friends - it can happen for us too!

And there's more good news! It's not like playing the lottery where you buy a ticket and hope against the odds that you win...

No friends, we are assured that we have the gift of eternal life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because the sacrament of baptism connects us to Jesus.

As Paul says in Romans 6:4-5 “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his..”

Friends, in order to strengthen our faith, in order to help us trust and believe that we most certainly will experience resurrection from death because of Jesus Christ – we are given baptism.

The word baptism means immersion – and when we are immersed into the water, when we are baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the water doesn’t symbolize the washing away of sins – the water symbolizes death!

Friends in baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit we actually participate in the death and the subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This experience, that fact of our baptism stands as an assurance for us that this will happen for us when we go through death – but not because being dunked under water is magical – but because though it the Holy Spirit assures us that we are connected to Jesus Christ!

So our faith is in him!

And when we learn about this, when we understand this, when we celebrate this... the result is that the Holy Spirit works increasingly more and more in us, and we manifest more and more of the characteristics of that everlasting life which one day we will experience in its physical fullness!

Can I get an Amen? !!!

So friends – its Easter Sunday... what did you come here expecting this morning? A typical Easter service with some familiar hymns that we get to sing once a year, Easter lilies, hot cross buns – which all leave you feeling good about “life” and not depressed about “death”???

Well – friends I hope that this morning you have encountered the empty tomb and have been challenged about what you expected to find...

That it leaves you stunned and shaken with the realization that what happened actually means that nothing can be the same in your life anymore.

Because you realize that you've stumbled upon something that goes far beyond simply improving your quality of life – far beyond what you could dream about doing with a million dollars - something – someone that actually gives you everlasting life!

Death is not the end friends – it is the path to resurrection!
Let's pray!