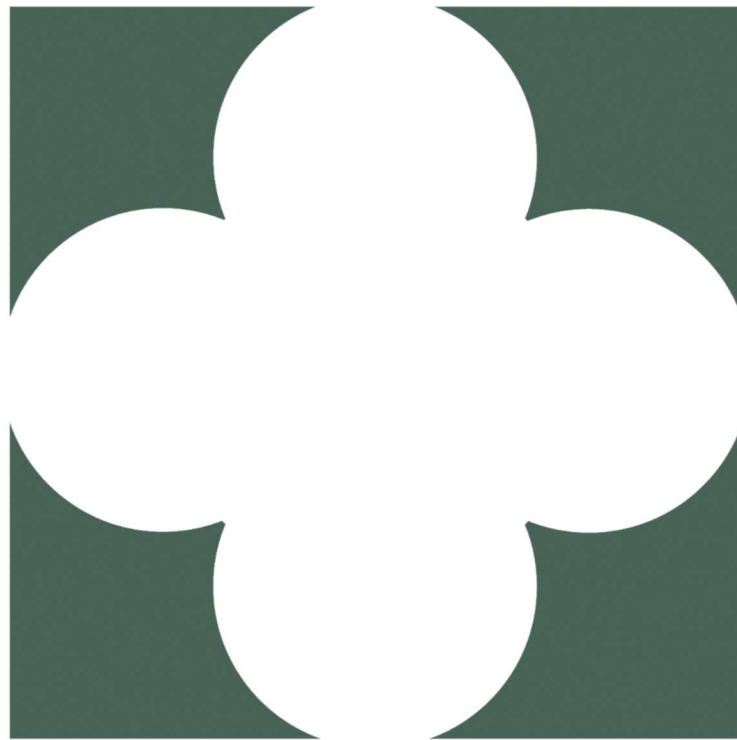


# The Paradoxes of Easter

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Easter Day

Matthew 28:1-10

Dear ones, it is a gift to be with each of you on this Easter day! To share the holy days of our church year together is not something I take lightly, especially over the last two years, and so I am grateful that we are sharing space, physical and virtual, on this beautiful day in the life of our community.

There is so much movement on Easter morning! Wow! The choir singing, our guest musicians blessing us with their talent! The glorious flowers, including a rose celebrating a new baby in the congregation! The Easter breakfast, tasty and filling and providing fellowship time. The comments and love flowing in our livestreamed virtual space, greeting, and rejoicing over the interwebs! Wow, wow, wow!

And of course, in our Easter scripture, there's a lot of movement, and surprise, as well. Let us hear how the gospel of Matthew tells the story of this morning:

*After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

The excitement is palpable in this story! To track the energy in scripture texts, sometimes I read looking for the verbs: here we have "dawning," "went," "see," "descending," "came," "rolled," "sat," "shook," "said," "come," "see," "go," "tell." Such movement makes it so that we can almost tell the story without any other details, just through the action words that bring the energy in this story.

But even though the text is chock full of motion and energy, that's not always how Easter starts, and it is not how many of our Easter mornings go.

When we were planning for this Easter service, mindful that it would be a tender affair because it has been 3 whole years since we've had an Easter celebration in this building, I could not get that spiritual that Ibidunni sang out of my head, "My Lord, what a morning...my Lord what a morning." No, this song doesn't have the glorious brightness of brass and cymbal and the flourish of celebratory bouquets. No, it doesn't have the playfulness of balloons and streamers and the stately beauty of Easter lilies. But as we are here together this morning, in the room and online, present together, we say, "My Lord, what a morning..." as we together come close once more to the mystery of Easter that can only be proclaimed when we start from the beginning.

Easter starts in the darkness of the tomb, in the garden with the long shadows moving slowly as the sun begins to rise. Easter starts with the women showing up, only knowing that they were bringing their grief and their trauma with them, trying to be close to their loved one who had died. Though they had heard Jesus talking in illustrative metaphor about what would happen after his death, they may not have comprehended what that actually meant ... and so they came to the tomb, 3 days later...

Debie Thomas says Easter "begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. The creeds and clarifications we cherish nowadays came later. What came first....[was the theme of] hope in the midst of struggle. As in: here's what happens when ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God. Here's what it looks like when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn."

In the other gospels, the stone is rolled away from the tomb when onlookers arrive. But in Matthew, they are present for the earthquake. They witness the angel descending and rolling the stone away, sitting on it triumphantly. They see the imperial guards at the tomb quake with fear, with shock, and tremble into stunned silence. The women are present for it all.

And they are present when the angel says, "do not be afraid." These words resonate way back to Jesus' birth, as the angelic messenger told Mary to "not be afraid" when telling her she has been chosen for a momentous task, to bear God's child. And when Joseph is approached by the angel telling him to keep his commitment to wed Mary, though she is already pregnant, the angel says, "do not be afraid." And when the heavenly host appear in the sky to the shepherds

quaking with fear in the fields, they say “do not be afraid, we bring tidings of great joy.”

Friends, it wasn't the smartest or the richest or the most powerful people having these exhilarating moments with the angelic; these were ordinary people, going about their everyday lives. A young woman in her home, a man planning his wedding, shepherds tending to their flocks by night...even devoted friends visiting the grave of their loved one who had been killed by the empire. Into these everyday lives and everyday moments, the angels arrive bidding them— bidding us— “do not be afraid.”

Of course, this is a tall order, when confronted by angels. And letting go of our fear is a tall order when we are living in this world and in this time, surrounded by cancer diagnoses and death of loved ones and wars waging and mass shootings and income inequality and all the other ways people are being crucified each and every day. And yet the paradox comes: despite everything you know to be true about this world, have no fear.

Something I appreciate about Matthew's telling of Easter morning is that the women went to the tomb together. They were not alone. They had each other to lean on. And though we are not sure who “the other Mary” is, we know that the two Marys at least had each other to hold close when confronted by the sudden earthquake and angelic visit and declaration. They had each other, and I like to think that they shared a silent conversation by looking at each other, surreptitiously asking, “Are we really seeing this? Is this real?” They could be reassured that their experience was real, even through the dim light of the shadowed garden and the haze of the overwhelming grief of the past three days, because they were not alone.

From this moment onward in the scripture, Easter morning picks up speed rapidly. Richard S. Dietrich compares it to a child running down a hill, going faster and faster, almost losing control but giggling all the way. The angel greets the women, and they are struck with wonder at all they had just experienced. The angel tells them:

*Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.*

In the middle of what must be a stunning experience, the angel gives the shocked women directions on what to do next: come see for yourself! Go quickly! Tell the others! The women leave the tomb, leave the garden, and run with “fear and great joy.”

Again, Richard S. Dietrich says, “the evangelist must call on contradiction to describe the women’s wonder. They are altogether too full: they are afraid for joy. It is the kind of feeling we have when we fall in love, when we witness the birth of a child, when we lean over the rim of the Grand Canyon, joyous and fearful at the same time.”

Contradictory feelings are par for the course on Easter morning. Realities that should not coexist but do are all around: seeking life in a place of tombs, oppressed and marginalized people triumphing over the earthly power of the empire. Feelings that we only experience together in the most extreme circumstances rule the day: fear and joy, heartache and comfort, uncertainty and yet, trust. All these paradoxes mingling together in the dawning garden.

For many of us today, we rarely experience these majestic moments on the scale of the experiences shared in the Bible. In a commentary on this passage, Debie Thomas writes, “we come to the empty tomb as ourselves, for good or for ill. We don’t shed our baggage ahead of time; it barges in with us and shapes our perceptions and conclusions. What matters, then, is encountering the risen Jesus in the particulars of our own messy lives. What matters is finding in the empty tomb the hope we need for our own struggles, losses, traumas, and disappointments. Whatever universal claims we make as Christians must begin in the rich, fertile ground of our own hearts, our own stories. Whatever acclamations we cry out on Easter Sunday must begin with a willingness to linger in the garden, desolate and alone, listening for the sounds of our own names, spoken in love. For our testimonies to ring true, they must originate in radical, intimate encounter. The question is not, “Why should people in general believe?” but rather, “Why do you believe? How has the risen Christ revealed himself to you?”

Those moments of resurrection, of grace, of joy, don’t always hit us with overwhelming wonder delivered through heavenly messengers. Sometimes those moments are small—in the simple gifts of grace that we’ve been reflecting on throughout the Lenten season.

These are some of the grace-filled moments people have shared over the past seven weeks of Lent: In the sunshine peeking through the clouds. In the arts and

crafts that sustain our creative spirit. In the experiences of ministering to people with less privilege than us that help us reframe our lives. In the steadfastness of friends promising they've got our backs, come what may. In the grace that we learn to give each other, loving each other and forgiving each other over and over again as we learn to build a better world. In the walks and bike rides in our neighborhood. In showing up for a grieving child's softball game. In the joy of colorful flowers that lift our spirits and brings beauty into our inner circle. In planning for the future when we thought we would never have one.

These gifts of grace may seem simple at first glance...but when you double back and look again, these are the moments that sustain us and motivate us as we keep working towards that other world that is possible, if we would just make it so. That other world characterized by the truth that resurrection stories tell us: that life triumphs over death, that love triumphs over death, that even in death and beyond death, God is with us, and we are united with God. The resurrection stories tell us the truth: that no matter how powerful empires are, no matter who they control and brainwash, no matter what tyrants say and what propaganda is spread, that a group dedicated to being present with people on the margins and pursuing justice so that all can live with dignity can survive...has survived...will survive.

The grace of this gospel is witnessed by everyday people with everyday lives on Easter morning. But of course, the risen Christ also has something to say about that glorious Easter morning, too, appearing for the first time to the women on their way to tell the other disciples what they witnessed at the tomb. He meets these first preachers (for that is what they were doing, preaching the gospel that Easter morning!) and tells them to share the message with all the disciples that he will meet them in Galilee. D. Cameron Murchison writes in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary, "The theological point of telling the disciples to meet him in Galilee is thus straightforward: the risen Jesus is to be expected in the places of his once and future ministry, in all those places of grace-full endeavor, where healing, feeding, teaching, and even suffering are undertaken in his company." In other words, the risen Christ will meet those who follow him in the place where he's been with them before: in the daily ins and outs, comings and goings of their lives. "Not just in buildings small and confining, not in some heaven lightyears away," as the hymn says, but "here in this place, the new light is dawning." Dear ones, now is God present, now is the day, right here and right now, with you and me and all of us.

“My Lord, what a morning.” We gather here today, with a myriad of emotions. With joy, as we praise the Living God who rolled the stone away and, as some prophetic preachers say, “made a way out of no way.” We gather with mourning, as we grieve the deaths of loved ones, saints we got to share space with for a while. We gather with relief, for the return of this worship service to the sanctuary. We gather with trepidation, as we wonder how to celebrate Easter in this time when we are constantly hearing of war and violence. We gather with questions, like our brother Thomas, who will say, “I need a sensory experience before I believe because it is hard to trust after trauma.” We gather ready to go and tell, ready to proclaim the gospel of peace through justice, the gospel of love overcoming death, the gospel that calls us to be our best selves, and to make a way for others to be their best selves, too.

Every Easter I think of what Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry says in one of my favorite poems: “practice resurrection.”

Beloved church, that is my invitation to you on this Easter day. Practice resurrection. Though the paradoxes of Easter surround us, with fear and joy meeting and holding hands, with doubt and wonder intermingling, let us practice being resurrection people. Let us know, deep in our bones, that love wins. Let us proclaim with our words and actions that the powers and principalities of this world cannot steal our joy. Let us be convinced that the deep abiding love we share with each other through Jesus called the Christ is not in vain when those we love are out of sight, for we will experience that again. Let us practice resurrection by coming to know each other as siblings made in the image of God. Let us witness together God’s glory revealed each day in those simple joys of grace. Dear friends, in this sacred season, know you are not alone, know that together we can hold all the paradoxes of Easter, know that in each of us, every day, love is made real.

Alleluia and Amen.