

Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

Sorrow gives way to “fear and great joy” when two women are sent by an angel to proclaim the good news: Jesus is risen!

¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then 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.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we hear the wonderful, familiar story of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary walking to the tomb after the sabbath on the first day of the week. An angel appears in a blaze of glory as the earth quakes. The guards are so frightened by this they shake and become like dead men. Just as the heavenly host told the shepherds at Jesus’ birth, this angel tells the women, “Do not be afraid!” The angel goes on to tell them Jesus, who was crucified, isn’t there, he has been raised, just as he said he would be. Come, see the place where he used to 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.”

So, we hear the women left the tomb quickly with “FEAR and GREAT JOY.” Those are key words upon which to focus on this particular, peculiar Easter. On this particular, peculiar Easter we live in a time of fear. We live amidst a time of physical isolation from one another because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Let us all pray that this Easter Sunday will be one of a kind. May we never have to have another one like it. May we also resolve that, once we all are able to gather together physically again, we will pull out all the stops on the organ and make a JOYFUL noise – for JESUS is RISEN! He is risen, indeed! ALLELUIA

I hope some of your neighbors are puzzled to hear you yelling at your desktops, laptops, iPhones or Androids that Jesus Is Risen. Who knows, maybe you’re watching this video while shopping? Go ahead, yell it out loud in the frozen foods aisle, JESUS is RISEN! He is RISEN, indeed. ALLELUIA. Who knows, you may never get quite the same kind of opportunity to share the Good News in quite the same way. Why not?! Especially with a mask on, you can dare to be a fool for Christ. You can dare to let your Jesus-freak flag fly. Who knows, maybe after you yell, “Jesus is risen” in the frozen food aisle, someone may even reply, “He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!” What do you have to lose? Hopefully, the everyday heroes stocking the shelves will get just the jolt of joy they’ve been missing in their lives. We all could use a double dose of hope and joy these days!

As many of you know, much is shared on Facebook every day. Much of it is silly (especially much of what I share). Too much of it can be political. Some people like to sling mud at their political opponents. I try to let my Facebook page rise above the muck and mire of such trenchant political wars. I have too many people I love and respect along the entire political spectrum, so I take pains not to

engage in many political posts. There are some causes I care deeply about. If people want to know what they are, they're on my about page.

And some Facebook posts are just inspirational and profound. I also try to share many in that category as well. This world can be a cold, dark, often empty place. There is too much in life to make us sad and desperate. Fortunately, in this time we've been physically isolated from each other, Facebook has been a place where we can be a little less socially isolated while we remain physically isolated. Our congregations Facebook pages and those of other congregations have been places where churches and their members can tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love in ways previous generations may never have dreamed of.

My wife's Aunt Rita Scheidt shared the following post with me. It's one of those brilliant posts by Anonymous, who happens to be one of the wisest sages I've ever read.

The very first Easter was not in a crowded worship space with singing and praising. On the very first Easter the disciples were locked in their house. It was dangerous for them to come out. They were afraid. They wanted to believe the good news they heard from the women, that Jesus had risen. But it seemed too good to be true. They were living in a time of such despair and such fear. If they left their homes their lives and the lives of their loved ones might be at risk. Could a miracle really have happened? Could life really have won out over death? Could this time of terror and fear really be coming to an end?

Alone in their homes they dared to believe that hope was possible, that the long night was over and morning had broken, that God's love was the most powerful of all, even though it didn't seem quite real yet. Eventually, they were able to leave their homes, when the fear and danger had subsided, they went around celebrating and spreading the good news that Jesus was risen and love was the most powerful force on the earth

This year, we might get to experience a taste of what that first Easter was like, still in our homes daring to believe that hope is on the horizon. Then, after a while, when it is safe for all people, when it is the most loving choice, we will come out, gathering together, singing and shouting the good news that God brings life even out of death, that love always has the final say!

This year we might get the closest taste we have had yet to what that first Easter was like

Max Lucado, in his book entitled, “He Still Moves Stones” shares towards the end of his book the idea of a gallery. He encourages people to draw pictures that symbolize their before and after stories. Before they knew of Christ and his love, grace and the abundant, everlasting life he came to bring us all. Towards the end of this book, Lucado writes,

“and when we all get home [heaven] we’ll make a gallery.

That’s my idea. I know it’s crazy, but what if, when we all get home, we make a gallery? I don’t know if they allow that kind of stuff in heaven. But something tells me the Father won’t mind. After all, there’s plenty of space and lots of time.

And what an icebreaker! What a way to make friends. Can you envision it? There’s Jonah with a life-size whale. Moses in front of a blazing bush. David is giving slingshot lessons...Abraham describing a painting entitled, “The night with a Thousand stars.”

You can sit with Zacchaeus in his tree. A young boy shows you a basket of five loaves and two fishes. Martha welcomes you in her kitchen. The Centurion invites you to touch the cross.

Martin Luther is there with the book of Romans. Susannah Wesley tells how she prayed for her sons – Charles and John. Dwight Moody tells of the day he left the shoe store to preach. And John Newton volunteers to sing “Amazing Grace” with an angelic backup.

Some are famous, most are not...but all are heroes. A soldier lets you sit in a foxhole modeled after the one he was in when he met Christ. A housewife shows you her tear-stained New Testament. Beside a Nigerian is the missionary who taught him. And behind the Brazilian is a drawing of the river in which he was baptized.

And somewhere in the midst of this arena of hope is your story. Person after person comes. They listen as if they have all the time in the world. (And they do!) They treat you as if you are royalty (for you are!) Solomon asks you questions. Job compliments your stamina. Joshua lauds your courage. And when they all applaud, you applaud too. For in heaven, everyone knows that all praise goes to one source.

And speaking of the source he represented in the heavenly gallery as well. Turn and look. High above the others. In the most prominent place. Exactly in the middle. There is on display elevated high on a platform above the others. Visible from any point in the gallery is a boulder. It’s round. It’s heavy. It used to seal the opening of a tomb.

But not anymore. Ask Mary and Mary. Ask Peter. Ask Lazarus. Ask anyone in the gallery. They’ll tell you. Stones were never a match for God.

Will there be such a gallery in heaven? Who knows? But I do know there used to be a stone in front of a tomb. And I do know it was moved. And I also know that there are stones in your path. Stones that trip and stones that trap. Stones too big for you.

Please remember, the goal of these stories is not to help us look back with amazement, but forward with faith. The God who spoke still speaks. The God who forgives still forgives. The God who came still comes. He comes into our world. **HE COMES INTO OUR WORLD.** He comes to do what you

can't. He comes to move the stones you can't budge. Stones are no match for God. Not then and not now. He still moves stones."

...and what has COVID-19 and it's accompanying quarantine been for each of us but one, huge collective stone?! Just as stones are no match for God, neither is COVID-19

Yes, Jesus still moves stones, and He came to bring us everlasting life. Pastor Harry Pritchett shares a moving story about a friend of his.

"Once upon a time I had a young friend named Philip. Philip was born with Downs Syndrome. He was a pleasant child – happy, it seemed – but increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. Philip went to Sunday school at the Methodist church. His teacher, also a friend of mine, taught the third-grade class with Philip and nine other eight-year-old boys and girls.

You know eight-year-olds. And Philip, because of his differences, was not readily accepted. But my teacher friend was creative, and he helped the group of eight-year-olds. They learned, they laughed, they played together. And they really cared about one another even though eight-year-olds don't say they care about each other out loud. My teacher friend could see it. He knew it. He also knew that Philip was not really a part of that group. Philip did not choose, nor did he want to be different. He just was. And that was just the way things were.

My teacher friend had a marvelous idea for his class the Sunday after Easter last year. You know those things that pantyhose come in – the containers that look like great big eggs – my friend had collected ten of them. The children loved it when he brought them into the room. Each child was to get one. It was a beautiful spring day, and the assignment was for each child to go outside, find a symbol for new life, put it into the egg, and bring it back to the classroom. They would then open and share their new life symbols and surprises one by one

It was glorious. It was confusing. It was wild. They ran all around the church grounds, gathering their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all the eggs on a table, and then the teacher began to open them. All the children stood around the table.

[The teacher] opened one, and there was a flower, and they oohed and aahed. He opened another, and there was a little butterfly. "Beautiful," the girls all said, since it is hard for eight-year-old boys to say, "beautiful." He opened another, and there was a rock. And as third graders will some laughed and some said that's crazy! How's a rock supposed to be like new life? but the smart little boy who'd found it spoke up: "That's mine. And I knew all of you would get Flowers and buds Ann leaves and butterflies and stuff like that. So i got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me that's new life." They all laughed.

My teacher friend said something to himself about the profundity of eight year olds and opened the next one. There was nothing there. The other children as eight year olds will said "That's not fair – That's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right ."

then my teacher friend felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down. Phillip was standing beside him "It's mine" Phillip said. "It's mine."

And the children said you don't ever do things right Phillip. There's nothing there!

“I did so do it,” Philip said. “I did do it. It’s empty. *The tomb is empty!*”

There was silence, a very full silence. And for you people who don't believe in miracles, I want to tell you that one happened that day last spring. From that time on, it was different. Phillips suddenly became a part of that group of eight year old children. They took him in. He was set free from the tomb of his differentness.

Philip died last summer. His family had known since the time he was born that he wouldn't live out a full lifespan. Many other things had been wrong with his tiny body. And so, late last July, with an infection that most normal children could have quickly shrugged off, Phillip died. The mystery simply enveloped him.

At the funeral, 9 eight year old children marched up to the altar, not with Flowers to cover the stark reality of death. 9 eight year olds with their Sunday school teacher, marched right up to that altar, and laid on it an empty egg – an empty, old , discarded pantyhose egg.”

Out of death, desolation and darkness and fear Jesus comes to bring joy, hope and eternal life. Yes, in the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic, and even in the midst of the tragic death and destruction it is leaving in it’s wake, there is hope for the dead, for Jesus is risen. **HE IS RISEN, INDEED! Alleluia!!**