

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his cloths as white as snow. The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn’t here, because He’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid Him. Now hurry, go and tell His disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Him there.’ I’ve given the message to you.”

With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell His disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed His feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there.”

1. Breath of God

This year, Easter Sunday falls in a time of COVID-19. It’s a time when we are secluded in our homes and told to wrap our faces in cloth if we go outside. Walk into the grocery store, and you’ll see people wandering quietly through the aisles with gloved hands

and masked faces. People are not getting too close to each other. We are hiding from an invisible beast.

“The Beast” is what some people are naming the virus that attacks ferociously in the night with spiked fevers, aches, and lung binding. The COVID-19 virus is a “breath-taking” virus. It steals the breath from people’s bodies in a particularly terrifying way. It strikes suddenly, leaving people frightened and breathless. With no cure in sight, the only thing we can do is hide away, covering our noses and faces with cloth, hoping to keep the aggressive beast from our lungs.

COVID-19 is a death threat that has already made good on many lives.

In a sense, this particularly brutal coronavirus makes us feel that we are locked up in a dark tomb for an impossibly long duration, as though the darkness of “Good Friday” might go on forever with little hope in sight. Yet all around us, we see signs of spring, signs of awakening, signs of hope, signs of resurrection. We know life as we know it may be dampened down for now, covered in what feels like “funeral clothing.” Yet, spring blooms around us. Birds sing, the sun bursts out from the winter clouds, trees bud, flowers unfurl, the ground thaws, and God unwraps an entirely new landscape of color and life. For now, we wait.

What must it have felt like for Jesus those days in the tomb, knowing resurrection was imminent, yet waiting for dawn to

come on that magnificent morning when the stone was rolled away, and the sun streamed through, when the “angel of the Lord” removed the funerary cloth from Jesus’ face, and the Holy Spirit breathed again the holy breath of life into His stricken body and made it rise like Ezekiel’s bones from the valley of the shadow of death. Three days of darkness. Then, new and restored life. Not the same life—a restored, resurrected life.

2. First Easter

On that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” were on their way to the tomb. We do not know who the other Mary was. It could have been Jesus’ mother Mary—it could have been Martha’s sister Mary—it could have been another Mary altogether. We just aren’t sure.

When they get to the tomb, there is an earthquake. An angel comes down from heaven. The angel rolls the stone away and sits on it. The angel’s face was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The guards shoo with fear. Scripture says that they became “like dead men.”

The angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as He said.” The women were told to go and tell the disciples that Jesus would be in Galilee. He would meet them there.

On their way to tell the disciples, Jesus met them. They grabbed His feet and worshipped Him. Jesus told them the same thing the angel did—not to be afraid and that He would meet the disciples in Galilee.

3. **Confusion**

Violent earthquakes, fearful friends, tearful disciples, running men, appearing angels, disappearing bodies, empty tombs, more running, more tears and fears, running to and fro. Confusion and chaos—Easter sounds more like a disaster story in desperate need of FEMA rather than the triumphant Jesus comeback we retell year after year.

We really don't want to go there on Easter Sunday. We much prefer the shiny golden cross, the trumpets, the happy hymns in major keys, the heavily perfumed Easter lilies. We deserve this after all we've been through. Holy Week can't get more depressing than Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We need an upper—a shot in the arm—a win for the team!

If resurrection is really about new life, then it is messy, stressful, and emotional. It is most likely not without physical pain.

Think about death-defying—that's what resurrection is. What activities use the term death-defying? Bungee-jumping off a mile-high cliff—swimming with great white sharks? Death-defying is

terrifying. I'm not saying that we should turn Easter into an Evel Knievel/Halloween holy day, but there is something way too pretty about our packaging of Easter into egg hunts and chocolate crosses when the idea of life-death-resurrection should be unsettling and awe-inspiring in the truest sense of the word.

Of course, there is another side of new life. There are tears of deep joy and surprise, gratitude and wonder. How did this happen? How can this happen? The miracle of life continues to astound and confound us. Peace be with us.

4. **Empty Tomb**

Consider the empty tomb. Pilate had instructed the soldiers to make the tomb secure, and so the stone was placed and sealed. Here was an act of imperial authority, but resurrection overruled it—the angel rolled away the stone and sat on it. To sit was a sign of authority, and so here God's messenger represents a power that trumps the empire. Think of the little angel sitting on top of the stone swinging his legs, blowing raspberries at the guards. The gospel calls us not to fear, but to bold mission.

5. **Keep Going**

Scott Carlson, one of our District Superintendents, shared this week a story I liked.

A young Lakota asked his grandfather why life had to be so difficult sometimes. This was the old man's reply.

Grandfather says this: In life there is sadness as well as joy, losing as well as winning, falling as well as standing, hunger as well as plenty, bad as well as good. Grandfather does not say this to make you despair, but to teach you reality. To teach you that life is a journey sometimes walked in light, sometimes in shadow.

Grandfather says this: Life can give you strength. It can come from facing the storms of life, from knowing loss, feeling sadness and heartache, from facing the depths of grief. You must stand up in the storm. You must face the wind and the cold and the darkness. When the storm blows hard you must stand firm, for it is not trying to knock you down, it is really trying to teach you to be strong.

Grandfather says this: Being strong means taking one more step toward the top of the hill, no matter how weary you may be. It means letting the tears flow through the grief; it means to keep looking for the answer though the darkness of despair is all around you. It means to cling to hope for one more heartbeat, for one more sunrise. Each step, no matter how difficult, is one more step closer to the top of the hill—to keep hope alive one more heartbeat at a time leads to the light of the next sunrise, and the promise of a new day.

Grandfather says this: The weakest step toward the top of the hill, toward the sunrise, toward hope, is stronger than the fiercest storm.

Grandfather says this: Keep going.

On this Easter morning, God is telling us to keep going. You are all beloved children of God. You all benefit from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the days ahead, God will never abandon us. If it seems that you are alone, then turn around—because you are not alone. God is always with you. God will always care for you. God loves all the beloved children of God. Christ is risen indeed.