



Faithfulness Personified

Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

April 12, 2020

Alleluia Church!

Christ is Risen – ***Christ is Risen indeed!***

Over the past couple weeks, I've been a part of a number of conversations about what it looks like to celebrate this glorious day in the life of the church – what it looks like to celebrate Easter Sunday – when we are not gathered in person at the church. I've heard more than one person ask, "Can we celebrate Easter if we are not gathered together?" Perhaps you could add on, can we celebrate Easter if we are not decked out in our new Easter dresses or our fancy Easter suits? Is it even really Easter if you haven't visited the Tops of Old Town hat store in Del Ray? Can we call this Easter if there is no ham on the table, or deviled eggs at the brunch, or plastic eggs left hiding in the pews for weeks to come – the balcony folks know what I'm talking about.

My wife, Jen, was commenting just the other day about how our financial resources have been re-aligned – reallocated – in this change of pace for life. She was asking of others online, what are the budget breakers in this season of life? For us, this year, there are few Easter-specific purchases – no new church clothing, or hosting a dinner for family and friends; this year, the biggest expense is the cost of new puzzles. Is it really Easter if haven't purchased some extra Cadbury eggs?

Can we, inquiring minds have asked, celebrate Easter without the pomp and circumstance of the community gathering in this sacred space to exclaim, "He is risen!"?

As we have journeyed this past Holy week, and really throughout this season of Lent, I can't help but think of just how *Easterly* this Easter really is. I said a couple weeks ago that I was appreciative of the comment that this was the *lentiest lent that has ever lented*. ... Reflecting on that comment today, I would echo those sentiments and say, *this is the Easteriest Easter that has ever Eastered* ... well, perhaps, as *Easterly* as any but the first. (And no, I don't care that *Easteriest* and *Easterly* and *Eastered* are not proper English – this is still the *Easteriest Easter that I have ever Eastered*.)

I would suggest that this is the closest to the first Easter as any of us have ever experienced. And for any who questions, yes, just as sure as that first Easter *did* happen, so too does Easter happen today.

Let us remember the Easter story:

It was the first day of the week – the day after the Sabbath. Early in the morning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. We're told in other Gospel accounts that they were taking spices to perfume the body.

It is not uncommon to go to the grave of a beloved in the first few days following a burial. Even today, many have a hope for moms, dads, friends, or other loved ones, that it will all have been a nightmare. We have this desire to find there will be no grave – that there will be no memory of loss. We go to the tombstone – that which reminds us of the sealed grave – as it is the closest we can get to being in the presence of the one who we have lost.

The women went early, before the sun had even crested the horizon. They went for privacy; they went for solemnity. As they arrived at the site where Jesus had been buried, Matthew's gospel says that there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lighting – a blinding light – and his clothing was white as snow. In fear of the angel, the guards, who had been there to ensure no one robbed the grave of Jesus' body, shook and became like dead men. (They fell to the ground – they fainted – stunned and awestruck.)

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised. Come, see the place where he lay."

This is not a slight-of-hand trick. Jesus did not get up and walk out of the grave before the women arrived. Jesus was not resuscitated, brought back to life through a pulse charge or a shot of epinephrine. (I know that's probably not medically accurate, but the point stands, this was not a humanly contrived event.) As the women walked up to the grave, it was still sealed with the stone. Jesus did not sneak out in front of them while they were stunned by the earthquake at the angel's arrival. And yet – the angel says, look inside, and you will see, he is not here, for he has been raised from the dead.

The story doesn't give us the pause – Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us if the women took the time to look into the empty tomb, it moves right along with the dialogue as the angel continues his proclamation, "Go quickly and tell [Jesus]' disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed is going ahead of you to Galilee; there, you will see him.'"

Now, though the women don't hesitate to leave, I want to pause at the empty tomb for just a moment. I know, just like a man, trying to over-explain an event that was sufficiently defined for the women who were present ... but this is one of my favorite scenes in the gospel. The angel, dazzling in white, like a flash of lightning sent from heaven, is sitting atop the boulder that had blocked the grave. And though the text doesn't define it, I have all kinds of visions of the posture the angel took. Was it a lounging posture – was the angel laid back on the stone? Was it a *Thinker* posture – did the angel lean in to look at the women? Or was it a yoga pose, like Bound Angel, or the Lotus pose – a posture of esteemed humility and grace?

In any position, I love the mockery of the grave this scene presents. It invites this laughable ridicule of the sin of the world that thought it could contain God's grace in a grave. It invites this ludicrous assumption that by using human means – by using Roman, or governmental punishments – the love of God could be concealed. It invites this comical promise that the evil of sin and death will not have the final say over eternal and divine love. It promises that no cause of fear or death can stop Easter from coming.

We'll have to sprint to catch up with the women who are quickly making their way back to the disciples. They had left the tomb with fear and great joy – a heavenly mixture we might best define as 'awe.' The women haven't even seen the risen Lord, and yet they are filled with wonder – this faithful posture of being unsure, and yet, at the same time, convinced.

As the women are making their way back to the disciples, out of nowhere, and quite suddenly, Jesus appears before them. "*Chairate*" he exclaims. *Chairate* – a greeting that means more than simply 'hello,' but a promise that carries the full weight of a combination of words like *peace*, and *greetings*, and *rejoice I am with you*. Jesus is not just saying, "hi there," Jesus is speaking the promise of new life to the women. *Chairate*.

The women fell before him in the position of worship – the prostrated themselves before him on the ground – grabbing on to his feet. Though Jesus did not walk out of the grave, he did have a physical resurrection of body enough that the women could hold on to his feet.ⁱ

Jesus speaks to them, saying, "Do not be afraid: go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Perhaps because Easter is such a holy occasion, I can't help but think of a fitting Christmas adage from the Grinch who stole Christmas – an appropriate cross-contamination (no pun intended) of holy ideals. At the end of the Grinch, the narrator proclaims, "Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing without any presents at all! [The Grinch] hasn't stopped Christmas from coming. It Came! Somehow or other, it came just the same!" ... As some have asked, can we celebrate Easter in this season? Yes. *Every Christian around the globe, the tall and the small, is singing without gathering at all! No pandemic can stop Easter from coming. It came! Somehow or other, it came just the same!*

The Temple elders thought crucifixion could calm the Jesus revolution. The Romans thought the grave could hold Jesus in. The disciples and the women, they feared in isolation what would become of them in the wake of Jesus' death. And yet, Jesus did not wait for any of them to come to him – he did not wait for them to be gathered in worship, proclaiming his name – he did not wait for their belief to be secured before following the will of the Father – Jesus was resurrected from the grave to proclaim God's glory over even the most permanent of human imaginations – even the most devastating of worldly sufferings – over half of our guarantees in life – death and taxes.

Jesus shows up before the women, and he will show up before the disciples, just as sure as he shows up in our socially distanced midst today. In his resurrected and risen form, God's glory will not wait for us to have faith or assurance, or for us to be gathered in this, or in any space. The faithfulness God seeks is personified in Jesus, whose faithfulness to God through death and resurrection proclaims the truth of God's promise, that life *shall* win out over death, that divine love *will* have the final say.

Whether we are gathered here in this place as a physical congregation, or whether we are spread out as the church in diaspora, gathering online from multiple states and countries around the globe, the words "Christ is risen" invite us to "lay hold to the resurrection power of Jesus to see more possibilities in the people and situations around us than others might see."ⁱⁱ The resurrection does not wash away the realities of our human frailty – it does not wash away the difficulties of life. It does not cease all suffering and grief. But the proclamation and assurance of Christ's resurrection does make it possible to experience joy in the midst of such challenges as God continues to create something new.ⁱⁱⁱ

The resurrection of Christ calls for us to see the good work of God that continues in the world today – for nurses and doctors who are continuing to bring healing to those who are sick; to social workers and therapists who are continuing to speak words of grace to those who are hurting; to teachers and educators who are finding new ways to connect with their students; to Open Table and other ministries that are finding new ways to feed the hungry; to churches who are finding new ways to proclaim the Gospel message; to Zoom calls and Facetimes that are bringing together families and friends that have long been separated.

The promise of God in Jesus Christ, the promise of life over death, the promise of love over selfish ambition, the promise of the cross and the empty grave is that God can do all things, and that God is not done working yet. God will sustain us in difficult seasons, sure as the angel moved the stone from the grave. God will bring us together in the Spirit when we cannot be together in person, sure as Christ showed himself to the women and the disciples. God will provide the resources to ensure the well-being of all persons even when resources are wearing thin, sure as Christ rose from the dead. God will provide a way when there seems to be no way, sure as Christ's resurrection laughs at the failed attempt of death.

Can Easter happen in this, or any season of life? Friends, God waits for no person to have faith before acting. God does not need our gathering to do holy work. God does not wait for *us* to fulfill the covenant promise. God preempts all of this through the faithfulness of Jesus. In holy joy we proclaim, on this and every day, Christ *is* risen. God's *love* wins. Life *overcomes* death. Hear and receive this good news – it is Easter – it has come, just the same – so sing with joy, and proclaim God's glory. Christ is risen – Christ is risen, indeed!

ⁱ Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved April, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.