



## The Justice of Easter

### Matthew 28:1-10

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April 9, 2023

The Easter story is one most of us know well. Of all the Biblical passages that we hear talked about, preached on, studied, and used as social media memes – the Easter scripture is the one we come back to the most often. It is a text and a proclamation that defines who we are as a people of Christ.

Each of the gospel accounts remembers the story of Easter just a bit differently. The narrative recollection of that morning has some slight variances, depending on which passage you read. But, for the differences that exist, the proclamation is still the same: the Lord is not in the tomb, for he is risen.

As Matthew recalls, on that first Easter morning, while the sun was still dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. As they were approaching the location where Jesus had been laid to rest, the ground shook, and an angel of the Lord descended from the heavens. The angel rolled back the stone and sat on it.

Could there have been an action that had any more *brag* to it? I mean, I'm certain the angel pulled this off with such a cool and calm demeanor, it was dripping with swagger. Like, yeah, I just did that ... go ahead, look inside, ain't nobody there. I said, there ain't no *body* there.

The angel spoke to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you came looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised."

I don't know about you, but when someone says to me, "Do not be afraid ...", that's usually when I'm the most afraid. Especially when that someone has just descended from the heavens, rolled away a large tomb stone, and told me to look inside. Like, who are you ... and where did you come from ... and what do you mean, the dead man is not here, but is raised?

The Marys weren't sticking around to ask these questions. "They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and they ran to tell the disciples," just as the angel had instructed.

While they were on their way to see the disciples, perhaps a bit lost in their thoughts on what they had just encountered, out of nowhere, Jesus shows up and says, "Greetings!" The word used for Jesus' exclamation in the original New Testament Greek is *Chairete*, which more fully means, "Peace be unto you!" or perhaps, more appropriately, "Rejoice!"

Jesus isn't just saying, "hello, is it me your looking for?," he's offering an invitation to receive his presence with joy and excitement. And that's exactly what the women do: "They came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him."

Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The story of Easter, the story of Jesus’ resurrection, it is worthy of our pomp and circumstance. It is worthy of the flowers, the easter eggs, the extravagant dinners, and the family gatherings. But, Easter is about so much more than a magical and perhaps unexplainable empty tomb. Yes, we should celebrate the empty tomb. Yes, we should celebrate the resurrection. Yes, we should celebrate the joy of life triumphing over death. But the Easter message is about more than the simple celebration.

The Easter story is about God’s proclamation *through* the empty tomb. It’s about the cosmic shift that God enacts *through* the resurrection.

It is not enough to proclaim that Easter is a celebration of how life won out over death. It is not enough to celebrate that some 2000 years ago, Christ *was* resurrected. The power and proclamation of Easter is not just about what God *has* done ... it’s about what God is *still doing*.

If our Easter remembrance is limited to a single day, if we only really care about Easter on this one Sunday of the year, if the resurrection is only proclaimed on the First Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox (and yes, that is how the date of Easter is determined), well, then Easter seems like a lot of work for a fairly short-lived celebration.

But this is the good news – this is the gospel message: the resurrection of Christ proclaims God’s eternal justice upon all of humanity. Let me say that again, *the resurrection of Christ proclaims God’s eternal justice upon all of humanity*.

Now, given our modern proclivities to the word *justice*, we need to define what this word means from an Easter perspective.

Theologian Scot McKnight writes, “Justice for the *Christian* is not about freedom or liberty, rights, individualism, or the pursuit of happiness. ... Christians can’t let the U.S. Constitution define what “justice” means.”<sup>i</sup> This is especially true given that justice as defined in our societal witness today is often applied inequitably. Your personal presentation or appearance can often sway how justice is handed down in the courtroom or in the court of public appeal. As my good friend Whitney Parnell likes to say, she cannot call it the “Criminal *Justice* System,” but instead the “Criminal *Legal* System,” because that system is not built on justice.

To understand justice as it is enacted in the resurrection of Christ, we must define justice in a way that is consistent with the Biblical witness.

Justice, as defined in the Holy Scriptures, makes clear that, while God offers love to everyone as God’s-own created humanity, “that [God] has a track record of paying *particular* attention to those whom society ostracizes or overlooks.”<sup>ii</sup> As Pastor Rich Villodas states, “God’s love is not neutral. God takes sides.”

If you were to scroll through the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, you would find numerous examples of God's instruction being offered to provide justice for those who were considered least by society. For example, in Exodus 23, it reads, "do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits." Deuteronomy 27 writes, "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Psalm 103 offers, "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed." Isaiah 1 declares on the Lord's behalf, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed."

If you were to synthesize the array of Biblical texts that speak of *justice*, and there are over 150 passages that mention the word, you would find that justice is not simply something God demands to be offered by the covenanted people of Israel, but that justice is the very nature of God. "Justice isn't just what God *does*, it's who [God] *is*. God *is* just."<sup>iii</sup>

But unlike justice as it is supposedly applied in our own societal context, the aim of Biblical justice – the work of God who is just – is not to ensure that those who deserve punishment receive said punishment. Justice, as demonstrated by God, is not in the least about retribution. The justice that defines the nature of God is not about ensuring every individual wrongdoing is balanced out through some form of equal and opposite condemnation.

The purpose of justice, as God-initiated and expressed, is about the restoration of humanity. It is about recreating that which God had first created in the garden. Justice, in the way of the Lord, is about setting right that which has gone awry – not from a criminal-legal perspective, but from the will of the one who created the earth and who desires creation to exist in perfect *shalom*.

This is why God demands justice for the poor and the oppressed, the widow and the fatherless. In a society that subjugates people and deems them of less value simply because of their economic or familial status, God demands a change to ensure the greater well-being of the community on the whole. In a society that allows the powerful and wealthy to take advantage of the lower-class or impoverished, God insists on a change that offers restoration to the whole. In a society that intentionally belittles those who are believed to have less worth or value, Jesus teaches us to pray that the Kingdom of God might be known on earth as it is in heaven. This is the witness of our Holy Scriptures.

The justice of God, as defined throughout the Biblical witness, is about the reunification of humanity as God first created humanity. It is about restoration and reconciliation.

And this, again, as defined in the Biblical text, is the reason God sent Jesus, as demonstrated in the resurrection. In Acts 17, the Apostle Luke writes, "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with *justice* by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

In the resurrection of Christ, we see God's ultimate enactment of justice. In this act, God aligns humanity as one, removing all social and cultural stigmas that seek to differentiate and demonize us from one another. In the resurrection, in the overcoming of death, God has made abundantly clear, there is no length to which God will not go, and there is no obstacle that can stop God's will from being

known on earth. God has and is doing a new thing. God has and is recreating creation. God has and is making a new way when it seemed there was no path forward.

And this, this is good news. This is the news Christ greets the Marys with, as he speaks to them, “*Chairete!*” Rejoice! Peace be with you!

In the resurrection of Christ, there is a divine and ultimate peace. Christ tells them not to fear, for God is redoing the structures of human brokenness that elicit fear. God is offering a new path, a way forward marked by forgiveness and love, defined by a holy justice.

It is this divine justice, witnessed in the resurrection, that gives us reason to celebrate. For God is righting that which was wrong – God is healing that which was broken – God is giving new life where death seemed the only possibility.

It’s not just an empty tomb. It’s not just the absence of the Lord behind the stone. It’s not just another day. And it’s not just *a* day. Easter, marked by the resurrection, is a way of living that rejoices in the divine will of God for all of creation.

Easter is about rejoicing any and every time God brings about wholeness in a place that was marked by brokenness. Easter is about praising God any and every time peace is witnessed in a world plagued with turmoil. Easter is about acknowledging the will of God to reunite a divided community, a broken family, a separated people – any who are estranged. This is the joy of divine justice – to heal all that is broken, to right all that is wrong, to restore the love of God that defines God’s created humanity.

Easter, the celebration of Christ’s resurrection, the proclamation of the empty tomb, it is God’s enactment of divine justice that gives us what we cannot give ourselves. And so we celebrate – we celebrate the good news, that Christ is Risen! For this news, and this news alone, sounds the trumpet call that God is in control. That we have reason to rejoice. For Christ lives – the grave could not hold him in – and we have no more reason to fear.

So may we live, and rejoice, and proclaim the glory of God that everyone may know God’s love, and that everyone may share in the glory of God’s created humanity with hope and promise for new life and abundant joy. For this is Easter. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Scot McKnight, as quoted by Rich Villodas. *Good and Beautiful and Kind*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> Rich Villodas. *Good and Beautiful and Kind*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> Villodas.