



Grace, Unmatched

Matthew 28:1-10

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Again, good morning! What a beautiful day to come together to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, our Lord and King! I am thankful for the many who helped prepare over the past week for our breakfast and egg hunt this morning, and for those who helped prepare our Sanctuary space for worship. So much preparation rightly goes into our Easter celebration. For this morning we celebrate the great joy of God conquering death, we witness the resurrection of Christ, and we stand as onlooker to an empty tomb.

Matthew's Gospel narrative of the first Easter morning is a bit more detailed than the Easter story as told in Mark, Luke or John. Matthew writes as a master poet, portraying the scene with great detail and overemphasizing the movement of the scene. Perhaps the weight and choice of his words is nothing more than the style in which Matthew usually writes. But imaginably in this text exaggerated verbiage is necessary, for this is hardly just another story in the Biblical text. This event, this morning, this day is unlike any other.

On the first day of the week – the morning after the Sabbath – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to see the tomb. They could not go on Saturday, during the Sabbath; such a trip would have gone against cultural and religious law. But they don't hesitate to go once the Sabbath is over – they leave the house before the sun has even begun to appear.

Visiting the gravesite of a loved one is no *abnormal* occasion. I lost my paternal grandparents over 15 years ago. They are buried in a cemetery that is within walking distance of the house they lived in for over 60 years on the outskirts of Tallahassee, Florida. That property still belongs to the family, and we gather there a couple times a year for Christmas and for a summer reunion. It would be *abnormal* for the family *not* to take a walk over to pay our respects to Grandma and Gramps when we are gathered at the family property.

The visitation of the two women to Jesus' tomb is perhaps the most *normal* event in the story of Easter morning. As they reach the tomb, everything else that takes place will be something of a shock.

As they come within sight of the tomb, they can see a couple Roman guards standing watch. There had been a rumor circling prior to Jesus' death that even if he were he to be killed, he would rise from the dead – that he would somehow escape the grave. The Roman leaders knew that if Jesus could indeed escape the tomb after having been killed, the devotion of his disciples and the size of the crowd following him would grow. Such an uprising of support for the man who claimed to be the Son of God and the King of the Jews would be very bad news for the Roman governors who ruled over the region. They had no belief that Jesus could actually rise

from the dead, but they did fear that some of Jesus' disciples would try to steal his body from the tomb to make it look like he had risen. A missing body would mean a resurrected Jesus. So the tomb was sealed with a giant stone and the guards were put there to ensure no one could steal the body.

As the women approach the tomb and the guards, there was a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord descended from heaven. The angel came and moved the stone back and sat on it.

Have you ever had to move a large, oversized, extremely heavy object? Perhaps you've moved a couch into the house; maybe you've put together a platform bed; or maybe you, like the angel, have done some work outdoors and had to move large landscaping boulders in the yard. Once you had finished moving the oversized objects, how did you respond?

Quite often, once we are finished with such a project, we *sit on the object*. You strike a pose to show that you have conquered the task. When the couch gets into place, you lie down on it. When the bed is finally in place, even before the mattress goes on top, you sit down on it. When the stones are in place, you climb to the top and have a seat. You sit in a posture of dominance over the object you've just conquered.

That is the posture of the angel. The angel has moved the tomb and sits on the top of it, perhaps bragging over the completed deed.

In all the action that's taken place, in the descending of the angel who appears as lighting with clothes white as snow, and in the moving of the stone, the guards, who were standing watch, have passed out. Matthew's text tells us the guards were scared and became like dead men; they fell to the ground stiff with fear.

But the angel – now sitting all cool in a posture of dominance atop the stone – says to the women, "Do not be afraid."

HAHA – "Do not be afraid." When's the last time someone said that to you and you weren't *more* afraid? Perhaps when you were toddler curled up in your mother's lap during a lightning storm?

When someone says "Do not be afraid," we are anything but put at ease. Just imagine when these words come up ... You've gone into the doctor's because you have a growing sun spot on your arm, and the doctor, looking over the charts, says, "Now, don't be afraid ..." ...Our thoughts start the fear: I didn't know I was supposed to be afraid ... should I be afraid of something?!

Or, perhaps you're flying across the Atlantic, travelling on a business trip to Europe, and over the loud speaker, the flight attendant says, "Now folks, don't be afraid ..." ... Dear Lord, is something wrong? What's wrong with the plane? How close are we to land?

Maybe you've been called in to a company meeting with the head of HR and the CFO, and the lead HR rep says, "Folks, thanks for coming today. No need to be afraid ..." How long before you start calling other companies to see who may be hiring?

The angel says to the women, "Do not be afraid." Such an invitation is the angel's calling card – like when the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary to inform her of her pregnancy, or when the host of angels appeared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. The invitation to fear not is the promise that God is in control here, and that God's love is triumphant.

"Do not be afraid," the angel says, "for I know you have come to see Jesus, who was crucified. But, he is not here for he has been raised."

The angel knew the women would be curious. The grave now stood open. Couldn't they walk in and kneel beside the body of Jesus. The angel says no, that Jesus has been raised and he is not here! What has happened is not something the women will be able to have explained. Up until their arrival, the tomb had not been opened. The guards had let no one in and no one out. Jesus wasn't simply resuscitated and brought back to life. He is not there to appear in the tomb's doorway. There were no angels in the tomb performing CPR. Jesus isn't sitting on the burial table in the tomb waiting for visitors. Jesus has been raised from the dead and he is already gone.

The angel can see the perplexing look in the face of the women, and so the angel invites them, "Come, see the place where he lay." Look for yourself and you will see – Jesus is not here, for he has been raised.

Dwelling in the empty tomb serves no greater purpose, so the angel doesn't let them stay long. "Quickly go and tell the disciples, 'Jesus has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee.'"

The women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.

The combination of fear and joy is the best combination of emotions. Just think of all the times in life when those two emotions come crashing together at one time.

It's like being five years old and running down a grassy hill full speed; there's the fear that you could fall and go crashing down at any time, but there's the joy of knowing that even if you do fall, you'll roll over, hop up, and see how quickly you can get back up to full speed.

Fear and joy collide when you're sitting in a real estate office putting pen to paper as you sign on the bottom line to seal the purchase of your first home.

Fear and joy overcome you as you hear your partner exclaim from the other room those words, "I think my water just broke." Or perhaps when you hear that April, the giraffe, is finally going to give birth!

Fear and joy may be the grip on your soul as you peer over the rim into the depths of the Grand Canyon – amazed at the beauty, but fearful of the magnitude.

The women are running filled with fear, but overcome with joy. As they are running, they are brought to a dead stop. There, standing in their path, is Jesus. The women, hearts racing, blood pumping, are now like deer in headlights. They're trying to catch their breath ... is it ... is it really Jesus?

Jesus says to them, "*Chairete!*" (kai-ray-tay) The word is translated in our text as "Greetings!" But perhaps a more fitting translation would be, "Rejoice!"

The women fall down before him, grabbing onto his feet. This is no ghost – this man is real. They took hold of him, and worshipped him.

Jesus says to them, again those words of the angels, "Do not be afraid ... but get up," he continues, "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The text leaves us here as it takes a shift in verse 11, but it indicates the women do as Jesus told them, they continue in their fear and joy-filled run to the disciples.

Everything that happens on that Easter morning happens so fast. They show up at the tomb, the angel appears and calls them to quickly go to the disciples. They stumble upon Jesus, and he too tells them to make haste and quickly go. The story hardly takes a pause as the women, still consumed with the fear of the morning and the unspeakable joy, have yet to offer a word. They are speechless in all that is taking place, yet their feet barely stop moving.

I wonder if we share in their experience. When we hear and feel the earthquake, do our feet resonate with the earth? When we see the brilliant angel descending, are we too caught up in wonder. When we hear the call of the angel, are we also filled with fear and joy. When we see the resurrected Jesus, do we too stop, fall before him, and worship the risen One?

I hope for you that you may experience Easter as did these women. I hope for you today that you can step away from all that is going on in your life beyond the walls of this church, the work that is waiting for you back in the office, the house chores that are waiting just across the threshold when you get home ... step away, even if for just this moment. We gather on Easter morning to take a pause as we see Christ, resurrected, standing in our path, and we, like the women, come to a full stop in fear and wonder and we rejoice together in worship.

Could we stay here and celebrate all day, we would. I would be happy to join with you in a day-long celebration. As it is, our time in worship will carry over the sacred hour allotted for worship on Sunday mornings because of your long-winded preacher. But more importantly, even if we wanted, we can not stay here. Easter is not simply the end of a season that calls for a lengthy celebration. Easter is the beginning of new life that is worth going out and living!

The good news of the resurrected Christ, offered by the angel and offered by Christ, is that we must go forth and share the good news of the risen Lord. The world is in too much pain for us to sit here in a closed door celebration, while others in our community and in our world struggle to find life.

The resurrection does not wash away the realities of our broken world – we will still go through difficulties at work, we will still struggle in our relationships with one another, we will still deal with the grief, and pain, and loss ... there will still be hunger, and war, and lives lost. But the promise we are given at Easter is that no matter where we are, no matter the season of life we may be living through, no matter the fear we face, we do not face it alone. The call of the angel and the call of Christ to not be afraid is not some guarantee of prosperity that says life will be easy from here on out; the promise of God in the resurrection of Christ is that in the end, God's love *will be* triumphant. It's the promise that in whatever difficulties we face, we do not face them alone. For not even death can overcome the great love of God.

I want you to leave here today filled with the awesome fear and the great joy of the women. I want you to be filled with the courage of the women who left with purpose and resolve, overcome with the glorious news that Christ is not here, for He is risen! The great news of the resurrection of Christ isn't that today is here, we'll rejoice, and then it's over.

The promise and good news of Easter isn't about what God *has* done, it's about what God is still doing. The good news of Easter is that God is still leading us forward into new life, offering us the strength to take on new possibilities, encouraging us to seek reconciliation and forgiveness for all of God's created, and to ensure that everyone is welcomed to know the great love of God. So be not afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified; He is not here, for He is risen! Yes my friends, He is risen indeed!