

April 12, 2020
The Difference Is Joy
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Matthew 28:1-15

The Sabbath was over, and it was almost daybreak on Sunday when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Suddenly a strong earthquake struck, and the Lord's angel came down from heaven. He rolled away the stone and sat on it. The angel looked as bright as lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards shook from fear and fell down, as though they were dead. The angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus, who was nailed to a cross. He isn't here! God has raised him to life, just as Jesus said he would. Come, see the place where his body was lying. Now hurry! Tell his disciples that he has been raised to life and is on his way to Galilee. Go there, and you will see him. That is what I came to tell you." The women were frightened and yet very happy, as they hurried from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and greeted them. They went near him, held on to his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said, "Don't be afraid! Tell my followers to go to Galilee. They will see me there."

[The Report of the Guard]

While the women were on their way, some soldiers who had been guarding the tomb went into the city. They told the chief priests everything that had happened. So the chief priests met with the leaders and decided to bribe the soldiers with a lot of money. They said to the soldiers, "Tell everyone that Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole his body while you were asleep. If the governor hears about this, we will talk to him. You won't have anything to worry about." The soldiers took the money and did what they were told. The Jewish people still tell each other this story.
(Contemporary English Version)

During our prayers this week at Thursday Bible Chat, someone used the phrase, "your blessings we now reach for, O God." And my own heart said, "Yes. That is exactly right." We have taken too much for granted. Some blessings must be reached for. And the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that maybe the reaching is *itself* the blessing. The expectation, the confidence, the faith that Easter is right here, right now – for everyone who reaches for it. For example, from where I sit this minute, here on my own back porch, Easter is practically shouting at me.

See those trees out there – mostly sticks and branches. But out on the ridge near the junkyard, the leaves are greening up and the redbuds are coming on. In another month those woods will fold completely into shade, the best green screen ever. This dead vine next to my head will be a veil of purple flowers. Here on the deck the thyme, oregano

and mint have come back already. Out in the yard, the tulips are open, and the weeping cherry tree has bloomed. And thanks to Nick Delong, God love him, my garden bed is all snuggled down under four inches of last year's chicken poop. In eight weeks, bean and cucumber vines will be climbing all over this wire. All of this was dead as winter just a month ago. And now the whole earth is exploding with life – preaching Easter all by itself, to anyone with eyes to see. Preaching Easter's easy on days as beautiful as this. But not every day is. Some are dark. Some are scary. And sometimes we need help knowing what to believe about whom to listen to, to understand what we see and hear in a world so full of voices.

Would you pray with me? *I pray you, good Jesus, that as You have given me the grace to drink in with joy the Word that gives knowledge of You, so in Your goodness You will grant me to come at length to Yourself, the source of all wisdom, to stand before Your face for ever.* (The Prayer of St. Bede the Venerable)

In Matthew 28, the whole world witnesses the resurrection of Jesus via this audience of guards and women disciples. All of them are afraid. In their own ways, each of them is obedient. Some believe one thing. Others another. The difference is joy. They have assembled outside Jesus' tomb like a crowd waiting to get into a theater. Suddenly an earthquake strikes. An angel descends and proceeds to move a stone the size of an SUV. All were frightened. Half were scared to death *before* the angel started talking. *“Don't be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus, who was nailed to a cross. He isn't here! God has raised him to life, just as Jesus said he would. Come, see the place where his body was lying.”*

Matthew's gospel now divides into parallel stories as the women run for Galilee, and the guards walk back into Jerusalem. Both end up standing before their respective authorities to be told what happens next. The guards tell them everything – earthquakes and angels, don't you know? I like imagining the chief priests responding, “Seriously? You had one job!” The Risen Christ says to the women, “Greetings!”

All are still terrified. This time, half fall to the ground in joy. The others are not merely paralyzed but now compromised as well. “What you saw and heard is what we pay you to see and hear. Do you understand? The story we tell you is the story you will tell, if you want to get along in this world.” While the Risen Christ said, “Greetings!”

The one whom they saw die is now alive and speaking the same sentence they'd heard him say a hundred times before: “Do not be afraid.” Look how he doesn't qualify their senses, how he never suggests they saw or heard more or less than what they knew was true. “Greetings,” said the Risen Christ. “Go and fetch my brothers. I want to see them too.”

A month ago our world shifted, and we shifted with it. Now we are shifting again. What was novel just two weeks ago is becoming strangely normal now. It's like Toni Morrison wrote in *The Color Purple*: "Folks can get used to anything."

Know what I wonder? I wonder, when Jesus met up with his brothers and sisters in Galilee, what they all expected from him? If they thought they'd go back to life the same way it had been before, before that terrible week in Jerusalem? I wonder what the conversations were like as he explained how everything was different, now that Easter was in place.

I expect that it was hard, figuring out what was the same and what was different. "Do not be afraid." That was the same, of course. But it made everything different. Then. And now. Just like those first brothers and sisters, we have to decide again and again, in whatever normal each new day brings, who shall be our authority on the matters of our faith, on what we shall believe, on how we will live these lives of ours, in quarantine and in spirit.

Will it be the powers whose only use for us is keeping the power they already have, who have shown no willingness to spare that power for the weakest brothers and sisters among us? Or will it be the God who walked ahead of us into that realm that terrifies us most, who fought on our behalf the fight we could not win, not with a thousand lifetimes of courage on our side? Will it be the powers who fear nothing so much as they fear the loss of their own power, who would keep the rest of us paralyzed and compromised by stories we know are lies meant to preserve the Empire no matter how much suffering and death it costs? Will it be the God who has been trustworthy time and time again:

- when we were afraid;
- when our duty was not clear;
- when we had less information than we wanted;
- when our situation was one we did not choose;
- when the plans we'd made fell through –

the God who didn't disappoint us when all we could see and hear seemed hopeless and dead as winter?

And Easter showed up again. Not someplace ancient and far away, but in your very own life, the same way it shows up every April in your own front yard. The whole world showed up at Jesus' empty tomb – all of them afraid at first, some more afraid than others. All of them let others tell them what they'd seen and heard. In the end, the difference was joy! Would you pray with me?