

CHRIST IS RISEN!

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EASTER

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Good morning and Happy Easter! What's not to love about this day? The music is wonderful, the flowers are in bloom; there are egg hunts and new Easter outfits—sometimes a hat or two. Preachers love Easter because the room is packed, and it's hard to resist thinking just for a moment it must be the quality of the preaching...so God created the Sunday after Easter to bring us back down to earth! Actually, we're blessed that it is comfortably full here at Knox each week; thankfully, most Sunday's it's just a little easier than this to get a seat. So if you haven't been in a while, come back and see us another Sunday. And thanks for crowding in closely today.

Easter does have a lot of benefits. The challenge preachers face every Easter is that there's no way to come up with words that will do this day justice. The miracle of the resurrection—restored hope in the power of goodness—defies the limits of human language. Easter cannot be explained; we just hope to do a good job of telling the story.

There are four different versions of this story told in the Bible. Each of the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, had their own way of telling it. Each one includes different details, characters, and points of view. This year we read Matthew's account, and he includes a turn of phrase that I think helps us understand something of the meaning of Easter: when Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary arrive at the tomb and discover the resurrection, Matthew says they were overcome with "fear and great joy." This is a feeling we all know—the fear that comes with something that is joyful, but also unknown and risky. As Richard Dietrich writes, these women at the tomb "...are afraid for joy. It is the kind of feeling we have when we fall in love, when we witness the birth of a child, when we lean over the rim of the Grand Canyon, joyous and fearful at the same time" (Dietrich, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*). At times like these we're overcome with joy...and we experience the terror that comes with wondering why this has happened, what will come next, whether you will rise to the challenge.

We all know the story of Easter; we know that its meant to be a joyful one. But in the midst of our familiarity, we sometimes forget the great fear that must have been felt by those first women at the tomb. The story begins on a dark road in the wee hours of the

morning. As they walked toward the grave, friends sharing their grief, they had no idea what they were about to discover. They arrive at the tomb fully expecting to anoint a dead body, pay their respects, and say their prayers, but then dawn breaks and they are confronted by something completely unexpected—something that brings them both fear and great joy.

Matthew is the author who is the most dramatic in his telling of the Easter story. The stone is rolled away, not quietly or mysteriously, but by an earthquake; and when the angel comes to announce the news, Matthew adds the detail that the angel is frightening enough to leave the guards paralyzed. Somehow, these women, Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” have the courage to engage the angel in conversation, perhaps because the angel reminds them that Jesus has been raised, just “as he said” he would be. The angel then adds something that is later repeated by the risen Jesus himself—it is said that Jesus will meet his followers in Galilee. Galilee is the place where all of the ministry took place—the feeding, the healing, the sharing of the grace and love of God with all who would hear it. The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, “let he who is without sin cast the first stone”—all of it happened in Galilee. And they’re going back. Apparently those hope-filled and challenging days are not over but about to continue. It’s time to get back to Galilee, back to the way Jesus taught them to live. So the women are met with great joy that Jesus is risen, and perhaps with fear, realizing that the work they thought was over is just getting started. By the time the darkness has cleared away and morning has broken at the tomb, all of this unexpected news of the future has been revealed. Much will be required of those who follow Jesus. It is a moment of fear and great joy. And that’s not just ancient talk; it’s something you can see all around you...if you’re looking.

Here’s a story about that kind of looking:

A friend of mine runs a medical mission in Guatemala called *Faith in Practice*—five hospitals and teams of physicians and nurses sent into small villages throughout the country. Their base is in the old city of Antigua, a beautiful step back in time to the age of cobblestone streets and classic Spanish villas, a tropical oasis surrounded by mountains and rainforests. Antigua would be like the set of a Disney movie, were it not for the high crime rates after dark, and the fact that Guatemala is a place where Linda’s five volunteer hospitals make up the second largest health care system in the country. Each time I’ve visited, I’m struck by the incredible kindness and generosity of all of the people I meet, open, gracious, and friendly people, who open themselves fearlessly to others. And this in the midst of poverty and lawless violence that would cause most of us to lose hope. It’s a place where people show great joy and hope in their living, in spite of daily unknowns about what the future may hold. Somehow it’s a place of fear and great joy.

My friend Linda has a habit of going to Antigua's old Spanish church in the town square to pray during Lent. She sent me a message about it this year, and I'd like to share a bit of it:

"In La Merced Church in Antigua, Guatemala, there are three statues of Jesus displayed only during Lent. Carved and painted in the 16th century, they transcend time. In the statues, Jesus has been scourged, his knees and back bloodied. In one statue, he crawls. Each year I make a point to spend some time with these statues. They call to me.

"This year, as I sat in the pew, a man approached the statues. He knelt on one knee, bowing his head. He raised his right hand and rested it lightly, carefully, on the base of the statue in which Jesus leans on a pillar, his hands bound, his eyes looking down. From my angle, it appeared as if Jesus' eyes were looking down upon the bowed head of this man. The man did not move for a long time. He was as still as the statue before which he knelt. When he finally rose and quietly left, I drew near to the statue and looked up into Jesus' eyes. And, I saw it anew in the eyes of this 16th century statue. Love for me. I saw Jesus' love for me. Drawing me in, asking me yet once again, will you let me love you? Do you see how much love I have for you? And if you know that I love you, then, follow me. Together we shall enter into the joy and fear of others. For that is where I, Jesus, reside. That is where I will rise to new life on Easter morning. For them. For you. Now and forever." (Rev. Linda McCarty, Executive Director, Faith in Practice, adapted with permission)

Who knows what emotions that man might have been carrying, but as I read Linda's message this past week, I wondered if he might have been experiencing fear and great joy. Joy isn't always wrapped up in happiness, joy can involve good yet deeper feelings, feelings of hope or trust. The church is right next to the hospital. Was he a frightened patient or the spouse of one? Was he a new father, wondering, as all parents do, will I be a good enough parent? Perhaps he had lost a job and was wondering how he would feed his family, or had a new job, far away, and wondered if moving would be worth the risk? Perhaps he was hoping to start his life over after a horrible mistake, and wondered in fear if he could be forgiven. That man might have been any woman or man, in any place, facing any kind of an unknown future with much to fear; and yet in Jesus' eyes he found love and mercy. Whatever our burdens, those eyes of Jesus hold the hope that nothing, not even death, can ever separate us from the love of God. And that is the message of Easter.

It certainly is nice to have a large crowd in the room on Easter morning, but there's a risk when the room is so full. The risk is that you will get lost in the crowd, that you will mistakenly think that all of this is for everyone else, and you will forget that even if you were the only one in the room, the love of God would still be here just for you. Take

away the music, the flowers, the preaching and the whole crowd...what is meant to happen here in this place is that you get a chance to look into the eyes of Jesus and to see how much you are loved. And you receive the challenge of taking that love into the world—the world for which Jesus died—and finding a way to share it with someone else. Jesus meets us today bringing fear and great joy.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.