



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Fear and Great Joy”

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Matthew 28:1-10

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¹After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

This is it. Easter Sunday – the biggest day of the Christian year, the day we celebrate the Resurrection, the reason we worship on Sundays, the reason the church exists at all. Jesus, the Son of God, executed like a common criminal, dead and buried, rose again and destroyed the powers of sin and death. With Christian siblings around the world and across time, this is the day we proclaim, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!”

The story of the Resurrection is told in all four gospels, each one slightly different than the others. Today we read Matthew’s version – the most detailed account we have of that morning. Though it’s already been read to us, it’s worth hearing again.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the place where Jesus had been laid to rest. Now that the Sabbath was over, they were eager to visit the tomb, so they went very early in the morning. The sun was just beginning to crest the horizon.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake and a great rumbling sound echoed from the surrounding hillsides. Struggling to find their footing, they looked up just in time to see an angel descending from heaven. His clothes were dazzlingly white, brighter than any garment they’d ever seen. He himself radiated light. It was almost like looking at lightning. Swooping down, he effortlessly rolled away the large stone that covered the entrance to Jesus’s tomb, despite the added seal the Roman soldiers had put in place around it. Having rolled back the stone, the angel sat on it, in a defiant and almost playful gesture, looking around at the spectacle.

The guards at the tomb – you know, the tough guys with the weapons – shook at the sight of the angel as much as they did from the earthquake. They were so terrified, they fainted. But not the women. Oh, Mary and Mary were afraid; make no mistake about that. But after everything they’d been through the last week, they weren’t taking their eyes off the place where they had last seen Jesus. Something highly unusual, maybe even miraculous, was happening. They weren’t about to miss it.

That's when the angel spoke. "Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus, the one who was crucified three days ago and laid to rest in this tomb. He's not here. He has been raised from the dead, just the way he said he would. Take a look in the tomb. You can see where he was, but he's not here. "Go quickly and tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead and that he'll meet them in Galilee."

Questions filled their minds faster than the words could form. How... What... When...? Before they could even open their mouths, the angel said, "That's all I have to say. Now go."

They went quickly, with fear and great joy, literally running from the tomb toward the garden gate. Just then, Jesus appeared and spoke to them. (Most English translations record that Jesus said, "Greetings." But actually, what he said was, "Chairete" in Greek, which means something closer to "Rejoice!" There's a whole sermon just in that!) Overcome with emotion, they fell to their knees, wrapped their arms around his feet, and thanked God that he was alive.

Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my followers to go to Galilee, that I'll see them there." Hard as it was for them to tear themselves away from the risen Lord, they went and shared the news that Christ was risen.

That's the story we came to hear, the inspiration behind our songs and our prayers, the reason we celebrate this day. And maybe that's all that needs to be said. The story speaks for itself. Jesus isn't lying in a tomb somewhere outside Jerusalem. He is risen! Let's sing the Hallelujah Chorus and go to brunch!

Well, perhaps one or two words more are in order. The story explains the *reason* for our faith, but it's how we receive it and live it that matters most.

As I reflect on the story of that first Easter, several things strike me about the way Matthew tells it: The faith of the women, the only ones to visit the tomb, and their incredible courage and resilience. The description of the angel, almost cheeky in undoing the carefully laid plans of those desperate for the tomb to remain sealed. The urgency of the action to go and tell the disciples what had happened and to instruct them to rendezvous in Galilee. But what most captures my imagination is the description of the women as they ran from the tomb: *They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.*

I don't often think of fear and joy as belonging together. Being afraid and being happy are not two things we typically associate, unless you happen to love horror movies. But then I remembered the day our son Wes was born. Gazing down at our newborn child, I was filled with emotion. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. My heart was overwhelmed with the miracle of birth, overflowing with joy that this amazing gift of God had come from us and was given to us. Simultaneously, I was filled with trepidation, knowing that we were responsible for caring for him and raising him, with all the countless unknowns in his future. If you've ever experienced the birth of a child, you know this feeling, too.

As I reflect on that day now 18 years later, I realize that fear and joy have actually gone together quite often in my life. Falling in love. My wedding day. Ziplining down a mountain in Costa Rica. Watching a humpback whale lift its tail 50 yards from our boat. Riding in the front row of the Millennium Force at Cedar Point. (Well, riding pretty much *any* roller coaster, for that matter.) We can be at the pinnacle of elation yet at the same time scared out of our wits.

No wonder Matthew records that the first witnesses to the Resurrection were filled with fear and great joy. For months, they'd been following Jesus, amazed at his miraculous healing powers, hanging on his every word, waiting to see what he would do next. He'd given them hope beyond anything they'd dared to hope before. He was the Anointed One, the Son of God, and with him the world was full of promise. But then he'd

been arrested, rushed through a sham of a trial, beaten, and publicly executed. With eyes still puffy from three days of weeping, they'd returned to the place of death and sorrow, not even sure what they would feel. They'd braved an early morning walk to the cemetery, been intimidated by soldiers, stumbled and fallen as solid ground trembled beneath their feet, seen an angel descend from heaven, and gazed upon an empty tomb, the place where they had seen Jesus's lifeless body laid to rest. Who wouldn't be afraid? Rome's finest had fainted on the spot!

Oh, but there was also joy. An empty tomb – surely something miraculous had happened here. An angelic proclamation that Jesus had risen – could it really be? A heavenly message to gather the disciples so Jesus could meet them. Imagine the joy of that reunion!

Still, they had so many questions. The angel said he had been raised, but how? Where was he? What exactly were they going to say to the disciples? What did all this mean? As excited as the women were to receive the news that Jesus was alive again, they must also have been completely disoriented. People don't come back from the dead. If there's anything that's a given in life, it's death. But if God raised Jesus, the laws of the universe had been upended. What else might change? From now on, everything would be different. *They* would be different. And that is unsettling.

That little baby whose arrival completely changed my life 18 years ago just decided this week where he'll attend college next year. Jenn and I are still wrapping our minds around that. The day I first held him in my arms, I had no idea how the script would be written: the trips to the emergency room, the way he'd keep every Halloween costume and put them on when people would come to visit, how many places we'd live before he entered the fifth grade, the way he'd develop that winning smile and a carefree ability to laugh at himself, the gracefulness with which he throws a pitch or fields a ground ball in the hole. I only knew that everything would be different, the same way I know now that his adventure is only beginning. And I'm feeling the same mixture of joy and fear as the unknown stretches out before him.

We've all experienced major moments – moments that have changed the entire trajectory of our lives – new jobs, new homes, births, deaths, some of those just since last Easter. Though none have been on the scale of the Resurrection, we have witnessed moments that changed the world – the advent of the worldwide web, the turn of the millennium, September 11, the invention of the microchip and sophisticated handheld technology, the COVID pandemic. None of us knew at the time how those moments would change the world, only that they would. It's hard not to be afraid when facing the unknown.

Sometimes, even when we should be joyful, the fear that lurks just beneath the surface creeps up and steals our joy. Memories of past hurts, lingering self-doubt, inability to let go, anxiety about the future – rob us of the joy we long to experience. For some of you, that may be your experience even today.

That's why Easter is so important. We gather in the midst of sorrow and loss, uncertain of what the future holds, fearful of what it might bring. We've seen what the world does to hope. Another surge. Another betrayal. Another school shooting. Another promise broken. Another death. So we've learned to steel ourselves, to become jaded and cynical, guarding our hearts lest our hope get too far ahead and our hearts broken again. The story of Easter isn't that once upon a time a man named Jesus died and came back to life. It's the story of God breaking into our world, living among us, knowing our pain and our fear, transforming it. Resurrection wasn't just a singular event, but a lived reality every day for those who have faith. Evil and injustice and despair seem to gain the upper hand, but Christ rises again in us, God triumphs still. And the living Christ dwells in us, lifting us up when fear tries to hold us down, raising us with him to new life and new hope.

The women were filled with both fear and great joy as they left the garden that morning, hurrying to share their experience with others. But then Jesus appeared to them and said, “Do not be afraid.” Overcome with joy, they fell at his feet and worshiped.

When we encounter the living Christ, we do not know how we will be changed – only that we will. Christ is risen. From now on, everything is different. But do not be afraid. Easter invites us to have the faith to place ourselves, our fears, and our hopes in the hands of the Risen Christ, the one who came to save, the one who holds the keys to life. Because when fear is gone, all we have left is joy.

Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!