

## *He Is Not Here*

April 5, 2026 – Easter

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### **Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSVUE)**

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

The women who went to the tomb that morning must have felt hopeless. Things had been so promising. Just a week ago, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he was cheered by crowds of onlookers, who staged an impromptu parade. They shouted, “Hosanna! God save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” He began to heal people and perform miracles. Everyone in Jerusalem seemed to be excited about him. Finally, Jesus and his ministry that had inspired such hope were gaining attention and gathering momentum.

But the celebration was short-lived. When he spoke not of rebellion, but God’s love, some people lost interest. When he spoke of sacrifice and personal responsibility, others turned away. When he helped people in need, he offended the religious leaders. A few days later, one of his own disciples betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest disappeared, leaving him alone. He was arrested on trumped up charges, rushed through a sham of a trial, and handed over to the governor. Even so, things could have been different if the people had stood by him. But many turned on him and called for death. Others simply couldn’t be bothered to show up.

What passed for the wheels of justice moved swiftly and brutally. Jesus was executed and hastily placed in a borrowed tomb. There wasn’t even time to properly care for his body. Now he was dead, his followers were nowhere to be found, and his dream was in tatters. The people still suffered under an oppressive political system. The religious leaders still cozied up to the empire to preserve their self-interest. It was like nothing had changed. Except that having hope and then losing it was almost worse than if they’d never had any hope at all.

The women who went to the tomb that morning may not have even known why they did. Mark and Luke say that the first visitors to the tomb went to anoint Jesus’s body, since they couldn’t on the Sabbath when he was crucified. But Matthew simply says that the two women, both named Mary, “went to *see* the tomb.” What did they go to see? There wasn’t much *to* see. The tomb was hewn out of rock, a large stone rolled in front of the opening then sealed. Maybe they went to place flowers or other signs of

remembrance. Maybe they went to perform a ritual of mourning. Or maybe they needed to see the tomb to know that it was real, to force themselves to confront the painful reality that Jesus was gone. They expected to find things just as they had been on Friday: a tomb, sealed by a giant stone, with two guards making sure no one got anywhere near it.

What they experienced was a complete shock. The earth shook. An angel appeared out of nowhere, rolled away the stone, then defiantly sat on top of it. The soldiers guarding the tomb were so terrified that they shook with fear and passed out. But the women were strong, and the angel assured them not to be afraid. “I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go and tell his disciples. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.”

*He is not here.* The angel said it all so matter-of-factly that it didn't sink in at first. *This is the tomb. This is where he was. This is where we put his body. But he is not here.*

Still in shock, they ran to tell the disciples. But they only got a few steps before Jesus met them. The women fell to their knees and worshiped him. Then he told them the same thing the angel did: “Go and tell the disciples to go to Galilee. I will meet them there.”

It has always struck me as odd that the angel proclaims to the women that Jesus isn't here, and yet just a moment later, they see him. Jesus is not there...and then he is. I've often wondered if there was an error in translation here, or perhaps if verses were added to the original later on. It can't be that Matthew was confused or that he made a mistake. The writer of Matthew was always so careful about what he wanted to convey.

But there's a phrase that captures my attention in what the angel said to the women. “I know that you are looking for Jesus, *who was crucified.*” Could it be that Matthew is pointing to a deeper meaning than just physical proximity?

The women went that Easter morning expecting an occupied tomb, a dead body, a place of sadness and mourning. The angel showed them the empty tomb and sent them to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard. If they were looking for Jesus *who was crucified*, they wouldn't find him here. The Jesus they encountered *wasn't* the Jesus they had placed in the tomb. They were looking in the right place, but for the wrong thing. If it sounds like I am being critical of the women at the tomb, that is not my intention. The women were the ones who were there, the ones who never left Jesus's side. Where were the men? Hidden away, waiting for someone to tell them what to do next. Because of their courage and their fortitude, God chose *women* to be the first witnesses to the Resurrection. *Thank God for the women.*

Jesus sent them to share the good news with the disciples and to direct them to meet him in Galilee. They would be together again, but they were not going there to pick up where they left off. There was no going back. There was no resumption of the status quo. Everything Jesus did led them to this moment. And soon they would go where they had never dreamed they would go and do things they never dreamed they would do. Life was forever changed. *The crucified Jesus wasn't there. The risen Christ was.* That distinction means *everything*.

We gather on Easter for many reasons: to carry on tradition, to mark an important day, because our parents made us come, to be inspired by joyful music, to hear this ancient story again, to remember we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, to believe at least for one day that there are still reasons to hope in this life.

Unlike the women on that first Easter, we are not surprised to find an empty tomb. We know how this story goes. But there may be more similarities than we realize. We, too, know what it means to live in an uncertain and often chaotic world. We, too, have been hurt and let down by those closest to us. We, too, have had to let go of carefully made plans. And even though we have the benefit of two millennia of Christian witness, the faith handed down generation to generation, and sacred texts to guide us, our lives do not always embody the hope of the risen Christ. Given the way we have been let down by our leaders, our institutions, even the Church, our anticipation of life may be no more hopeful than the women at the tomb.

There are many reasons today to despair. We can all name them. War in Iran, in Lebanon, in Ukraine, Sudan, Congo, Myanmar, and elsewhere. Rising gas prices and an unstable economy. Persistent inhumane treatment of immigrants and foreign nationals. Increases in antisemitism, anti-Islam, and racist expressions. Extreme polarization in society and in government. Lack of faith in science. Climate change and extreme weather events. Erosion of trust in institutions. Fewer people observing or even claiming a faith tradition. We are all wandering in a political, spiritual, and existential wilderness.

Do we believe things will get better? In time, wars end. Economies rebound. Politicians leave office and new leaders emerge. The pendulum will swing back and maybe not swing so far for a while. Even in the face of fierce opposition and well-funded lobbying, scientists diligently research and seek solutions. Faith persists, with or without the Church as we have known it. But it doesn't require much faith to point to those things, just a knowledge of history. We didn't come here today to proclaim a continuous improvement plan, but to embrace a radical promise. We're here to celebrate Resurrection, not resuscitation. God isn't in the business of recapturing the past. We serve a God who makes all things new.

But we need to be clear: when God is involved, things change; and not just the things we would select. If the best we can imagine is for everything to be the way it used to be, or to return to some imagined time when everything was great, we are missing the point.

Lu Little, Director of Operations at Church of the Saviour, has adopted as a kind of mantra a quote from Winston Churchill: "Never let a good crisis go to waste." She gets lots of chances to practice it. For example, when we have to close the sanctuary for structural repairs, remove everything from the room, and put up \$100,000 worth of scaffolding, we will use this opportunity to also refurbish the pews, refinish the floor, and repair and update the lighting fixtures. The organ will be fully restored. The sound system will be rewired. The next time we worship in the sanctuary, it will still be the sanctuary we know and love, the sanctuary that generations before us have called home. But it will be remade and renewed, better than ever.

That's a crude example, but it demonstrates a point. All we set out to do was restore the organ. But God opened our eyes to see how much more was needed, and God continues to open doors to the resources we need to remake this remarkable place of worship. God does the same thing in our mission, in our outreach, in our discipleship – always way ahead of us. And God can do the same thing in each of our lives and in our shared life, if we believe and trust God to do it.

The crucifixion was a profound testament to the depth of God's love. It closed the gap that sin created between us and God. But Jesus's death isn't the end of the story. If he were still in a tomb outside Jerusalem, there would be no Easter proclamation, no worldwide sharing of the Good News, no Church. In the early morning hours, the disciples awoke in grief, wishing things could be as they were before; Christ rose to make all things new. That is

why we gather in places like this today and every Sunday. That's why we keep telling this story and living this story. Why would we settle for restoration when what God wants is new life?

We do not know how or when the mounting number of wars will end. We do not know when or how the economy will shift. We do not know whether our nation will experience a movement toward civility or end up in revolution. As they say, *we do not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future*. But because we are people of faith, we can stand together on this Easter Sunday daring to have hope – not for things to be as they were, but for God to use this moment – and us – to bring about a life greater than we can yet imagine.

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



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