

Easter Sermon

Matthew 28:1-10.....The Holy Gospel According to Matthew...The Gospel of the Lord

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Alleluia. It's a word that means literally, "Praise God!" So we say, in hope and with great joy on Easter morning, "Christ is Risen! Praise God!"

But is Alleluia a word that comes easily for you, today, on *this* Easter morning? After all, **I'm** delivering this sermon from my dining room to a phone camera. **You** are gathered around televisions, computers, and iPads, perhaps wearing your Easter best, but most likely (and hopefully) wearing your sweatpants.

We can't smell the lilies. We won't hear the organ or the trumpets.

When I was growing up, the big church we always went to on Easter morning had huge, colorful bundles of helium filled balloons all around the sanctuary. During the sermon, my sister and I would count how many balloons were in each bundle – they weren't always equal, they varied from about 25 to 30 balloons. At the end of the service, we would run to the bundle with the MOST balloons, untie it, and take them home...giving a few balloons away as we made our way to the exit.

This year, there are no balloons. No beautiful pastels. No big family gatherings around ham, pork, or lamb.

How are you feeling these days, church? Let's be honest with one another. No pretending. Is *joy* one of these feelings? Is *hope* one of these feelings? Is *Alleluia* one of these feelings?

Maybe it's a mistake to compare Easter 2020 to past Easters of our lifetime – Easter 1987, or Easter 2004, or even Easter 2019. Maybe we should compare this Easter to the very first Easter morning – Easter year 33, or thereabouts.

The morning of Easter 33, three days after Jesus had died a horrible, shameful death on a cross, two women – both named Mary – wake up at the break of dawn in order to go visit the grave. The first Easter story gives us people in *grief*. People who are *afraid*. People who *don't know what to do*.

And yet...these two Mary's, by God's grace, don't give into these feelings. They don't deny them either. But there they are, courageously and through tears approaching Jesus' grave that is being guarded by two Roman soldiers! Mary and Mary, on the first Easter morning, go to the very place that is the hardest, most frightening place for them to be at that time.

And then, something happens. Did you catch it? There is an earthquake! As if these two poor women weren't frightened enough by the guards, a full-blown natural disaster takes place right under their feet. An earthquake!

It feels as though we are living through an earthquake of sorts right now. A world-shaking event that is rattling the foundations, shaking us up, making us afraid. COVID-19 will be, for us, a life-defining event. When we tell the story of our lives, there will be a “before coronavirus” and an “after coronavirus.”

As if we weren't afraid enough already. As if we weren't isolated enough already. As if we weren't suspicious of our neighbors enough already. Along comes this...*thing* that only increases our loneliness, our fear, our distrust. An earthquake.

But, my friends, the earthquake in the Easter story is *not* this kind of earthquake. The earthquake in this story is a world-shaking event that points these two grieving, fearful women to the truth of what has happened.

The earthquake in the Easter story opens up a tomb that is *already empty*. It shakes the women awake to what really matters, to the truth of God's victory over death that is just...a fact. A truth that is already there, beneath and within the women's courageous, heartfelt grief. LOOK! The stone has been rolled away! The armed guards have been disarmed! The place of death is empty!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Yes, these words may feel awkward coming out of our mouths on Easter 2020. But may they reorient us – like an earthquake – to an indisputable fact, to a reality that is deeper and truer than anything we are feeling in the moment: Christ is Risen. Life has won out over death. Hope is ours forever. Through Christ, nothing will ever separate us from the mercy, love, forgiveness, and grace of God.

The news the angel brings starts its own earthquake: “Jesus is not here. He has been raised from the dead.” Forget coronavirus. When we tell the story of our lives, may we always begin with the before and after of *this* moment, of *this* news: God, who has entered into our humanity, who has born the weight of our pain and our sin, has overcome it once and for all.

Yes, friends, there is an earthquake going on right now. And, on this Easter, may it reorient us to what really matters, to what is really true. In fact, I might suggest that those two women – Mary and Mary – don't simply *witness* an earthquake. Maybe they *cause* an earthquake.

After all, it is only *after* they have brought themselves to a hopeless place that God reveals the good news with an angel and an earthquake.

The witness of these women to Love and to the deep bonds of human fellowship – their witness to how we are called to love God and each other – *literally* shakes us into understanding once again the mystery of Jesus' eternal life that underpins everything else. The women don't *make* the Resurrection happen – only God does that. Only Jesus does that. But, as Easter morning people, their act of faith and hope brings this good news to the earth in real, tangible ways.

Who are these two women for us today?



Might I suggest they are people putting their bodies in front of this freight train of death, who are serving the most sick and vulnerable in this time. They are the nurses, the doctors, the first responders, the ICU workers, the ventilator manufacturers, the bureaucrats diligently processing unemployment checks, the food shelf workers, and the online teachers.

They are all of you, gathered not in a crowded, festive church but in the isolation of your own homes. You who bear witness to this story of life and salvation while, all around, all the talk is of death. You who dare to hope, who contribute generously to organizations trying to make it through, who suddenly are home-schooling now (!), you who make the phone calls to shut-ins and the elderly and give a personal touch to those who are alone.

The earth is shaking. Jesus is alive. The Resurrection is true. May we join with Mary and Mary as resurrection people, remembering even amidst the darkness that the tomb is empty. God is here. So say it with me, church:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!