

EASTER SUNDAY
Rev. Thomas Bartha
April 12, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10 "The Threads of Easter---More Hope Than We Can Handle"

ANNOUNCEMENT: **This morning, sometime before daybreak, God raised from the dead Jesus of Nazareth.** That is really my assignment this morning in this Easter message—to make that announcement. The story begins at dawn. Two women quietly make their way toward the tomb: Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and John. They are coming to anoint Jesus' body with oils, wipe the caked blood from his beard, hold his lifeless body one final time. Even as they walk in silence, they know what awaits them: a large stone blocking the entrance. What will they do when they arrive? They have no idea. Yet where else could they go? The morning promises only one encounter: with a body. DISCOURAGEMENT is the first thread winding its way through Easter morning.

Mary and Mary are not coming to receive anything, only to give. "You women go on ahead," the other disciples say. "Pay your final respects. Maybe we will come out later, maybe not." But why? Their hopes have been nailed to a cross, their dreams buried in a borrowed tomb. Their spirits are as gray as the pre-dawn sky.

Some of you are here today, knowing well the path these women walk. Discouragement winds through your life: plans unfulfilled, dreams unrealized, circumstances that have blanketed you like darkness. The Corona virus has upended your world, loved ones out of reach, growing uncertainty. Maybe Mary and Mary feel as though they are the only ones who care. "Where is Lazarus? He should be here. Jesus raised him from the dead." "Where are James and John and Peter and the rest?" What if the women had quit right there on the road? "Ah, what's the use? Let somebody else take it from here." What if they had given up, turned around, and headed home?

Sometimes the most courageous and needful thing to do is take one more step in the direction of your heart. Mary and Mary have no way of knowing that all heaven is watching as they make their way to the tomb. "Look at them! Oh, if only they knew what this day holds..."

A shattering earthquake is their call to worship. A blazingly brilliant angel descends, effortlessly rolls back the stone, and sits on it, as if it were a bench in the park...or a bench in a cemetery. As if to say, "Well, so much for that!"

The guards have the unluckiest assignment in military history. An angel, earthquake: They shake and become like dead men. Everything is reversed on this day: the men outside the tomb look dead; the one inside is very much alive. Just when the world had become so dark, God does what no one ever imagined God to do.

Do you still have room in your life for a God who surprises you? A God who brings about reversals? Or did miracles end with the empty tomb?

"Do not be afraid," the angel says, "For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior..." Whoops, wrong fear. FEAR is all over the place right now—the second thread of the day. The fear of the guards, the women. "Do not be afraid," the angel says. "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, just as he said." Among the most astonishing words ever spoken. THIS MORNING, SHORTLY BEFORE DAYBREAK, GOD RAISED FROM THE DEAD JESUS OF NAZARETH.

A question for you: Why did the angel roll away the stone? Did you wonder? So Jesus could come out? Do you honestly think Jesus needed that stone rolled away so he could emerge from the tomb? After defeating death? "Say, it's been a rough few days, Jesus. Let me just move this rock. Uhhh."

No, not so Jesus could come out, but so Mary and Mary could see in. "Come, see the place where he lay." God will move heaven and earth to affirm faithful disciples. This is more hope than they can handle. The women peer into emptiness.

"Now go quickly," the angel says, "and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and indeed he is going ahead of you into Galilee and there you will see him. This is my message for you."

"Tell his disciples he has been raised!" The same disciples who abandoned Jesus, failed him. What if the angel's message was, "Go to Galilee. Jesus will meet you there and he is going to start over with a fresh crop of disciples, higher caliber; this time we will get it right!" No. "Go back to Matthew and Bartholomew and Simon Peter and the rest." God knows that Good News is best told by forgiven failures. This is HOPE RESTORED, the third thread, and I never tire of hearing it, or proclaiming it, or being reminded of it. We worship the God of the second chance and the third chance and the 60th chance. God still bring breakthrough, restores hope.

"So the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and..."

Wait a minute. I thought Jesus was going to meet them in Galilee. Isn't that what the angel said? Now he is here. "Greetings!" We are not told why this change of agenda. But I like to think this: Maybe Jesus could not wait to see them. Maybe he is just as happy to be back among the living as they are to have him back! The women fall to their knees and worship. "Do not be afraid," he tells them. "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee..." "My brothers." Forgiveness and restoration.

Someday God is going to call your name and greet you: "Hello Chris. Greetings Pete. Hi Lori, Nancy, Vince. Good morning Joseph, Barb, Mary." That is the thread of a CERTAIN FUTURE winding into your day, God tying all things together, giving us more hope than we can handle.

The day is coming when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain, nor corona virus, nor death. It is not here yet; the future is still on its way. But until it arrives, do not settle for less than God has in store for you.

"Up from the grave he arose..." God is still moving stones. God still brings life out of death, hope out of despair. Wrap yourselves in the garment of Easter. There are threads of discouragement and fear; they are very much a part of the fabric of life. Yet woven in today are the brighter colors of FAITH, and HOPE REBORN, and a CERTAIN FUTURE. Are you interested in getting on the road with Jesus, journeying where he leads? All it takes is a heartfelt prayer: *"Lord, I do not have it all together. I do not pretend to. But I invite you into my life, into my heart. I ask you to be my Savior."*

When you pray that, God hears it, and it is done! To share the message of the empty tomb and celebrate Jesus' resurrection with you is an unspeakably good gift...whether in person, on video, or on page. All praise and thanks to our God on this resurrection day! Amen.

This prayer is from Anna Braithwaite Lehn's wonderful book, [Ash and Starlight](#), entitled, "When I'm Surprised, Scared, and Need to surrender":

Spirit of surprise and faithfulness, when I encounter changes I did not choose... When life feels out of control (my control) unpredictable, scary... When my normal coping mechanisms aren't available this time around... When the overarching question is, "*What do I do now?*" Your reassuring, Spirit-filled wind comes blowing at my back, announcing I'm not alone, that you will fill me with everything I need to take on what's next and do the things I didn't think possible.

You are the master Improvisor; and I will learn from my Teacher: This is how you do it...yes and yes and yes and yes... Help me ride the current of this Pentecostal wind. Use this change in plans to be a change in heart, that I might not move forward with a dead soul, clinging to what's known, yet no longer there.

Open my heart to what you will do in this pocket of open space between before and after (even if this involves a lot of blowing around and burning). Today, I say yes and yes and yes and yes...Amen.