

Resurrection of the Lord (Year A)

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not 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 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.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Each and every Easter Sunday since I've been ordained, I've had a tradition. I get to the church building several hours before worship begins, usually because I want to put the finishing touches on my sermon. I enter my office, turn on the lights, set up my computer, and sit down at my desk. Then I crank up my 5.1 surround sound, making sure the bass is turned up nice and high, and I listen to Widor's Toccata at full blast. The last movement of his Symphony for Organ No. 5 was composed in 1879 and has since been a common piece in joyous occasions, such as weddings, Christmas, and Easter services.

I remember as a child growing up at First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia, going up to the choir loft, which was situated in the rear of the sanctuary. Each Easter Sunday, the organist would play Widor's Toccata. He was also my piano teacher so he had me turn his pages so that I could practice my music reading. I'll never forget being awed as a little kid by watching his hands dance around the keyboard, playing the staccato arpeggios rotating in the circle of fifths around the scale. All the while, his feet tapping on the pedals making the organ thunder in a triumphant roar of victory.

20 years later, I would do the same thing, turning the pages for my dear friend Michael Morgan as he played the organ at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia on Easter morning. He used that exact same organ to play Widor's Toccata as the postlude to mine and Tricia's wedding. But my obsession with Widor's Toccata began with Easter.

Because of that, like many other people I suppose, I cannot listen to Widor's Toccata without associating it with the resurrection.

This morning, I repeated my ritual. I got to the church building at about 7:30 and opened my office and got everything situated. I lit a candle and sat back in my chair. I cranked up my sound system and let it go! And, as I almost always do, I began to cry towards the end of the song when the organ hits last last high note and sings by itself for a moment before final "amen" chords shake you to your very core. I cried, as I almost

always do, because when those final chords hit I can't help but think about God breaking Jesus out of that tomb. I can't help but cry with joyous tears because the toccata is an unabashed, unapologetic victory song, rubbing it in the face of death and destruction. I cry because I remember just how desperately I need resurrection. I cry because though I can't explain resurrection, I sure know how it feels when it shows up.

Some 2,000 years ago, two women were by a tomb in the early morning. One was named Mary and so was the other. They knew Jesus well and had cried more than their fair share of tears upon his gruesome death. They had come to the tomb to resume their lament. But then the ground began to shake, though it wasn't the chords of Widor's Toccata that shook the earth, it was death's back breaking. It was the deep magic from before time, as C.S. Lewis would describe it in "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." The earthquake shook the women to the ground, the stone rolled away, and an angel descended from heaven, sitting almost casually on the stone that had been disturbed from its solid setting.

The Roman soldiers who were guarding the tomb froze because, let's face it, in a contest between an earthquake and a spear, the earthquake's gonna win every time! The angel said to them, *"Do not 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 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."*

And so, the women left, we're told, "with fear and great joy."

I don't know about you, but those five words have gone unnoticed by me in recent years. But this year, *this year* those five words stand out to me. With fear and great joy. They stand out to me because today is a mixture - for us all - of fear and great joy.

As I said before, for most if not all of us, this is an Easter Sunday unlike any other. Typically, we would be gathered physically, dressed in our Easter best, ringing bells together, and this room would be shaking with more than 100 people singing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" at the top of their lungs. We would have a brass quartet and the choir loft would be full. Smiles would be plentiful and the pews would be filled with pastel colors and Easter-y bowties. After the service, families would gather out by our courtyard for the socially-mandated family Easter photo. And then, many of us would retire to our homes to welcome family and friends over for an Easter meal.

But none of that is happening this year, at least not in the way we would prefer it. And that causes fear. We feel fear because fear is the natural by-product of change. I suppose the women at the tomb felt fear. Fear because of the trauma that they had been through. Fear because perhaps the stinging grief made what they had just seen feel too good to be true. And so, they ran from the tomb with a mixture of fear and joy, a curious concoction of emotions if there ever was one.

I suspect that we know what those women felt like. Today we are in our homes worshiping. In order to protect the most vulnerable around us, we have exchanged the public rituals of Easter for hunkering down in our homes. Even though we know it's the right thing to do, it still feels weird, it feels sad. We fear for ourselves, our communities, our elderly loved ones. We fear the loss of physical connection. We fear for those on the front lines of the coronavirus. And, friends, I'm here to tell you that that fear is ok. Fear is not a bad thing. Fear is a natural human emotion that is healthy, and - as Mr. Rogers would tell us - both mentionable *and* manageable.

But I have good news for you this day! Fear has never been too strong a barrier to prevent God's love from erupting into the world. Today, our fear is mixed with a double portion of joy because we've been reminded of something today: Resurrection does not depend on our worship to happen.

The resurrection doesn't have to wait for us to be in the same room to erupt into the world. The resurrection doesn't have to wait for the Alleluia Chorus or even Widor's Toccata. The resurrection doesn't have to wait for the sanctuaries to be filled and the sermons to be preached. The resurrection does not depend on us dressing in our Sunday best or even leaving our homes.

The resurrection doesn't need us to do anything. But we most certainly need the resurrection. And the resurrection is the most relentless force in creation. And that, my friends, is joyful news.

And while that may not do away with our fear, it certainly gives us something beautifully potent to hold in tension with it.

Joy and fear. Fear and joy. Today, these two emotions are locked in a beautiful dance with one another.

And such was the case 2,000 years ago when those women came running from the tomb to tell the disciples. But before they could reach them, they found someone else...or someone else found them.

Suddenly, we're told, Jesus met them and they came to him. They fell at his feet and felt his flesh. You see, Thomas wasn't the only one who needed to touch Jesus to believe it. The women had to do the exact same thing. And, you know what, so would I! They felt his feet and they suddenly understood that it wasn't just some cruel joke. They suddenly understood that he was real, that resurrection was real, and the Roman Empire wasn't as powerful as it said it was on its Twitter feed.

The women held their friend who then turned to them and said to them the same thing the angel said to them, "do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

And so, they did just that. Remember, my friends, every time someone says that a woman doesn't belong in the pulpit, that the first Christian sermon wasn't preached by a man like me. The first Christian sermon was preached by these two women, mixed with fear and joy, to Christ's disciples. These two women, mixed with fear and joy, preached to those men and to us today, that resurrection doesn't wait for *anything*.

So, friends, I hope you remember this day that fear and joy are not mutually exclusive. I hope you remember this day that the first Easter had *both* emotions and that it's ok to have *both* emotions today.

But I also hope that you take comfort and wonder in the fact that the first Easter did not have a brass quartet or a big choir. The first Easter did not have people dressed in their Sunday best. The first Easter was an angel, some terrified Roman soldiers, two scared and joyful women, and the resurrected Christ.

Nothing flashy, but everything "fleshy." Jesus stood there - in skin as real as yours and mine - resurrected, triumphant, and victorious.

And so, today, we raise our alleluias. We raise them from our homes without all of the bells and whistles that we're used to. But, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. Resurrection will come anyway. Resurrection won't wait for the coronavirus to go away because God doesn't make exceptions when God makes

promises to us in our baptisms. Our baptism seals us into the life and love of God and God promises to snatch us from the jaws of death and say, “No, you’re mine. And you always will be.”

So, friends, raise your alleluia today however you can. No matter how big and no matter how small. Raise your alleluia because Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen!**