

With Fear and Great Joy

by

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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. 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; 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 to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

It seems providential that Matthew's gospel is the appointed reading for this year. There is no other telling of the resurrection quite so bold and cosmic in scope as Matthew's proclamation of the first Easter morning. Matthew's testimony is the largest and the loudest of all the gospels with global dimensions not found in Mark, Luke or John. In the verses just before today's reading, Matthew's account of the death and burial of Jesus goes into great detail to make sure we know the body really was dead, how it was wrapped, where it was placed, and the huge size of the stone that sealed the tomb.

While Joseph of Arimathea attended to those details we are also told there were witnesses, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and that there was a governmental decree from Pilate himself who said "make the tomb as secure as you can," and then post a guard of soldiers beside it. By Matthew's account the dead body of Jesus was so well guarded that it would be absolutely impossible for it to go missing or get stolen or whatever.

In this gospel God's power to raise Jesus from the dead reaches through deep layers of death dealing security. And how?? The great stone rolled tightly against the tomb is moved out of the way by an angel descending from heaven who brings on an earthquake. You know, in the other gospels, the angels wait quietly inside the tomb for the women to show up. But Matthew's angel has attitude! This angel has sass! This messenger of resurrection comes down from heaven riding an earthquake, rolls back the great stone and then sits on it dressed up as lighting, his clothes white as snow.

As one commentary suggests: This angel knows how to make an appearance, and comes in with a flourish, rolling his eyes, as if to say, "Take that, Caiaphus. Take that, Pilate. That's what God thinks of your effort to put the Messiah in the tomb. Imprison the Prince of Peace? Forget about it. A tomb for his final resting place? I don't think so."¹

¹ Alyce McKenzie, "My Favorite Angel: Reflections on Matthew 28, Patheos.com, 4/20/14.

At the sight of all of this Pilate’s guard of soldiers, shook with fear and became like dead men, and this angel could not have cared less about their fear. Instead, he turns his bright angelic eyes toward Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and says, “Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised, just as he said.” Then the women go quickly with fear and great joy, and on their way to tell the disciples, they run into Jesus who again says, “Do not be afraid.”

We understand their fear maybe more this year than ever. The women had witnessed the death and burial of Jesus and God knows we are facing death now through this pandemic in an unprecedented way; we understand the fear of the women. They went to the tomb expecting one thing, to find the stone sealed against the body of their beloved Jesus, and they discover something altogether unexpected, unimaginable really. We understand their fear.

Their fear, and ours, is addressed first by the angel’s “Do not be afraid,” and then by Jesus saying, “Do not be afraid.” and we are told their fear is also overmatched by even *greater* joy. There is a pattern that runs through Matthew’s telling of the resurrection, and it hinges on that word, *great*. A great stone is rolled to the door of the tomb. A great earthquake accompanies the angel. The women run to tell the disciples with fear and great joy. With their fear of the unknown and the unexpected comes great joy.

A few weeks ago, when we were told to stay at home and not to gather in groups because this terrible pandemic was spreading, I began re-reading Rebecca Solnit’s book *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian and an activist who lives in San Francisco. The book begins looking back a hundred years to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and moves forward through a century of major disasters – the Halifax explosion during World War 1, the earthquake in

Mexico City, September 11, 2001, and it ends with Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Studying a hundred years of major disasters that devastated cities and resulted in huge losses of life, Solnit discovers that people rise to these occasions, and they often do so with joy. Disasters, she argues, uncover an ordinarily unmet yearning for community, resourcefulness, generosity and altruism. The subtitle of the book is *The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*.

She writes, “In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones... Horrible in itself, a disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, and we become our sister’s and brother’s keeper.” She goes on to say, that in each disaster which ruptures everyday life, something about the immersion in the moment and the solidarity with others results in an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive. We don’t even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear.

We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological. “What is that feeling that crops up during so many disasters?” Rebecca Solnit asks, and after researching a century’s worth of storms, fires, bombings, floods, and earthquakes, she says the emotion is joy. Joy arising from a renewed sense of community; joy in rediscovering solidarity with all fellow human beings; joy enacted by altruism and generosity; joy lived with a new-found sense of urgency, purpose, and meaning.²

² Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*.

Friends, today in the midst of the death and disaster in which we are currently living, we can and we will emerge with a more profound joy. Joy in community with one another; joy in solidarity with the world; joy in greater generosity; joy in the more urgent sharing of faith, hope and love.

We will emerge from this season of crisis more faithful because we will remember the women who went to the tomb, encountered a powerful angel, and left quickly with fear and great joy to run and tell the disciples. They ran into Jesus along the way who met them with a cheerful, “Greetings!” – which is actually better translated “Rejoice!” and then Jesus sent them to share the good news with others.

The earth itself which previously spun under the exhausting power of Pilate and his soldiers, under the weight of death by violence, greed, poverty and disease now quakes with new life. Matthew’s proclamation of resurrection is huge, earth-changing and global good news. This was not simply a personal spiritual awakening, not an isolated, local event. The resurrection did not occur, as the Apostle Paul would come to say, “in a corner.”³ It occurred in and for the world.

So in the midst of all the world’s grief and fear this day – we celebrate the Lord of life walks forth from the grave. In Jesus Christ God cannot be defeated by death. And we will not be defeated by death.

The Risen Christ is already ahead of us in Galilee, which is, of course, the place where God’s children live. In our world, in our time, in our life together, this is joyful good news. And we, like those first Easter witnesses, are called to share this new with others in great joy.

ALLELUIA! AMEN.

³ Acts 26:26