

Matthew 28:1-10
First Sunday of Easter

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¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

²And 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.”

The Sermon

A lot happens in these ten verses from Matthew, especially remembering the pain and trauma that these two women brought with them to the tomb—the freshness of the agony of watching the terrible events that

have unfolded, making Jesus the victim of a series of appalling betrayals, a perverse miscarriage of justice, and a sickeningly bloodthirsty society every bit as obsessed with the power to inflict suffering and death as our own.

As if these two Marys hadn't been traumatized enough, they come to see the tomb on the morning after the sabbath, and they experience something that would feel entirely supernatural if not for the fact that an earthquake is taking place as a messenger from God descends from the skies and rolls away the stone in front of the tomb.

And then the messenger does what the rabbi does when it's time to preach: he sits. Right on the stone.

Seasoned, brutal, disciplined Roman guards were so terrified they quaked along with the earth and then became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid."

By that time, Jesus was already gone from the tomb.

They ran to do as the angel told them—to go and tell the disciples.

I am most interested in the five-word description of what was going on inside these two people as they left the tomb and went to deliver the message they had been given: they left the tomb *meta phobo kai charas megales* (μετὰ φόβου καὶ χαρᾶς μεγάλης), "with fear and great joy."

I'm particularly interested in that right now because Easter often brings a sense of triumphalism, which is not inappropriate for recognizing and celebrating God's triumph over the last barrier, death, in the resurrection of Jesus.

But when we shine that light of triumph so brightly that it seems to be reflecting on us, we can start to think of ourselves as the source of that light, and then we start to *celebrate ourselves*, and then we start claiming

triumphs that we did nothing to create, and that do not belong to us, and, in fact, remain somewhat beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

So you get churches whose pastors are having them meet right now in large numbers, even though their doing so puts tens of thousands of lives at risk—not just the people there, but the secondary and tertiary people whom they will inevitably affect and infect, and the reason given is, “I’m bathed in the blood of Christ; so how could any virus compete with that?”

It’s a triumphalism that not only puts humanity at risk but also puts God to the test, mistaking irrational belief in supernatural immunity for faith that’s rooted in the lived experience of being human together in God’s creation.

Hey, I’ve done a lot of things I’m ashamed of, and probably a lot of things I *should* be ashamed of but I’m too dumb to realize it; and those choices that I’ve made have put God to the test and pounded the nails into Jesus’ hands. I’m not speaking from some position of superiority.

But it’s the fear alongside the great joy in these two people of exemplary faith that draws my interest and puts me to shame.

I want my Easter, *especially* this year, to be unmitigated joy; I want to forget about fear and its cousins:

uncertainty;

incomprehension of things

I think I’m supposed to know to a certainty:

about God, about what life is, about justice and hope

and exile and faith and the different kinds of love;

questions about the future;

occasional misgivings about my place in the world—

am I doing what I’m supposed to be doing;

am I the person God wants me to be,

am I using these miraculous days
 for what they were given to me for?—
 and occasional questions if not outright doubts
 about everything I think I know and believe in.

This year especially, I want to skip all that, and I just want the joy.

But then I realize that what I *really* mean by that is: I just want happiness all the time.

And if joy depends on being happy, we're all in trouble.

But it does not. These two Marys, exemplars of faith, have demonstrated that. They ran from the tomb carrying the greatest, most liberating, wondrous message there could ever be.

And they ran with fear and great joy.

Dr. Sam Thielman has shared some of his fascinating research, which includes Assyrian medical texts written 2,000 years before Christ, which talk about what today we would call psychological distress:

“where a person is continually worried,” sorrowful, exhausted and unhappy;

and elsewhere, “If a person continually has...depression,” and their heart ponders untruths... *If they rejoice and are terrified....*

As in, “with fear and great joy,” which these two faithful Jewish women experienced 2000 years after that Assyrian medical writing was produced.

And for that matter, the Assyrian medical text also lists in the same writing if someone “continually sees dead persons.”

In other words, these two women, experiencing everything they've been going through, would have every right to question themselves, to wonder maybe even about their own well-being, with all that they've experienced and the deeply conflicted ways they are feeling—

and it would be the height of faithfulness for them to do so.

The fact is: Easter is huge. It is good and right and faithful for us to find ourselves disoriented, and to reckon with the reality that God's reality is too enormous for us to get our heads or our arms all the way around.

It's God whose arms are all the way around us.

Which means we can't control God. But we can bask in the love of the all-encompassing God who is love.

And rather than diminishing it or running and hiding from it, we can *live into* the reality that Easter is bigger than all of us.

Resurrection is bigger than all of us because it is bigger than life, and infinitely stronger than death.

Easter is bigger than our egos and our institutions,
bigger than our knowledge and our wisdom
and our theologies and church traditions.

Bigger than the scope of a coronavirus;
bigger than a pandemic.

The resurrection of Christ,
and the invitation to live your whole earthly life as a disciple
and one day follow him into eternal life,
is bigger and stronger and even deeper
than the searing pain of our losses and griefs.

The goodness of being fully human
 and embracing our humanity by living for others
 is even more uniting—vastly more uniting—
 than the sum of all the fears in the world,
 even when we're all afraid at once.

No wonder we stumble around in the light,
 like somebody who just walked out of a cave.

Or a tomb.

Overhearing a conversation two weeks ago between Tom Long and
 Donyelle McCray, I heard Donyelle refer to the passage from the Book
 of Revelation that says:

“I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne
 a scroll written on the inside and on the back,
 sealed with seven seals...
 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth
 was able to open the scroll or to look into it.
 And I began to weep bitterly
 because no one was found worthy to open the scroll
 or to look into it.

Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep.
 See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,
 has conquered,
 so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:1-5).

The most elevated theological minds and the most sanctified disciples in
 the world stand in humble awe that before that mighty scroll, and before
 that heavenly throne, no one on earth can stand and say, “I have the key;
 I get it; I have no fears or questions or uncertainties.”

God loves the world so much that God has given God's only Son so that you and I, who wonder and question and stumble around in the dark—so that we in our vulnerability might be saved through him.

That's Easter.

In that same conversation, Tom Long mentioned the orchestra conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his version of Handel's Messiah, which I went looking for and finally found. It's unorthodox and I'm a little uncomfortable with it, but partly for those reasons, it has become my favorite version.

Where I'm used to big, bold, self-confident triumph, Harnoncourt's interpretation looks back to those days when the disciples knew fear and great joy together, and did not seem to need to find a way to subsume or hide one underneath the other.

In the second half of Messiah, there's a short passage where the alto and tenor soloists duet, asking repeatedly, "O grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" Those lines come from the apostle Paul, and of course they're rhetorical.

But in Harnoncourt's version, the singers seem to vacillate:

at moments mocking death and the grave for having been soundly defeated by the resurrection,

but at other moments they sing as people who have heard the good news but haven't yet actually lived it or seen it for themselves. They sound almost alarmed and a little disoriented, like a couple who are frantically looking for their keys—

like they're trying not to get too excited about the good news; like this promise is so good, but so counter to so much of our lived experience that they need some assurance.

The piece right after that then has the chorus coming in with I Corinthians 15:57: “But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

But in Harnoncourt’s rendition, it sounds furtive, like a rumor of something great and triumphant, but it has to be whispered, lest the authorities and the pundits and the wet blankets in the press hear about it and move in to stamp out the young embers of this new and thrilling faith before they can grow into a flame.

The reviews of Harnoncourt’s interpretation of Handel’s Messiah are funny to read now because they’re so obviously baffled by all of this.

They, too, even in the secular world, seem to demand an Easter that’s all about the glory of spectacular human musicianship rather than faith that fumbles and gropes its way through the darkness.

“And so it goes,” wrote one reviewer: “One or two thrilling sections are followed by another marked by shaky ensemble [or] strange tempo. Or maybe just weird interpretation, as in Harnoncourt’s “Hallelujah!”, which takes off like an overloaded cargo plane, the most laid-back opening to this powerhouse chorus I’ve ever heard. It eventually picks up and really socks a punch,” says the reviewer, but he still can’t figure out what the point was, of, in his words, “the as-if-we’re-not-sure-if-we’re-really-happy beginning?”ⁱ

Another music critic said, “This is an unusual performance of Handel’s great Messiah,” he says, “and the results are often mixed... Some [tempos] are oddly slow, others wackily fast... Those who like their choral sound full-bodied are bound to be left befuddled by the lack of potency they’ll hear here—the “Hallelujah” Chorus begins so modestly you’ll think it is a rehearsal... Very odd.”

And then he rounds out his review with a phrase that, apparently

accidentally, encapsulates what I assume is the whole point of this interpretation: he concludes by saying, “The recorded sound is glorious—there’s not a note that’s not clear—but there are plenty of finer, and more interesting Messiahs available.”ⁱⁱ

And isn’t that the truth.

From the moment Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, it was obvious even to those who hadn’t read Isaiah what was going to happen to this man, when it became obvious that there are always “plenty of finer, and more interesting Messiahs available” to choose from.

There are louder and more brightly illuminated and infinitely more arrogant and self-aggrandizing people, things and ideas claiming to offer you and me salvation. Turns out they’re as susceptible to Covid-19 as we are.

Frederick Buechner said about the resurrection, “It’s not really even much of a story when you come right down to it, and that is of course the power of it. It doesn’t have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth... The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, I guess each one of us remains, in Leonard Cohen’s line, “the baffled king composing ‘Hallelujah.’”^{iv}

Saved by the risen Christ, we children of God find ourselves realizing that we ourselves are not personally in charge or in control of anything having to do with Christ’s resurrection.

We realize it now in quarantine perhaps even more strongly than we did in those long-ago carefree days of our youthful innocence—you know, February.

I wish for you an Easter of clarity and triumph and bright light and loud certainty. But I will be proud to be your sibling if, for you, this is an Easter of simple goodness and kind humanity.

The governor of Minnesota gave his State of the State speech a few days ago—from his residence—and without saying so, he preached, in my opinion, a whale of an Easter sermon.

He said, “I know this is scary...But what you are doing matters... Your sacrifice is keeping people safe... Thank you.

He said, “This same spirit flows between the high rises of downtown Minneapolis where people go out on their balconies to clap, cheer, and bang pots and pans to celebrate health care workers when they get off a shift.”

He said, “In North Branch, a state trooper pulled a woman over this weekend for speeding.

“It turns out, she was a doctor in town for work.

“The trooper noticed some medical masks in her bag that she had been forced to re-use due to the current shortage.

“Instead of handing her a ticket, the trooper handed her a stack of masks that he had been given to keep him safe.

He said, “While we may be separated physically, we stand united...

“And a new day will come.

“The sun will shine. The trees will bud. The birds will sing.

“We will grieve all that was taken from us. But we will also celebrate all that’s given to us.

“Unity. Humanity. Gratitude...

“We will gather again in our houses of worship.

“We will have a renewed appreciation for the calming power of a warm embrace.

“We won’t just make it to spring. We will come out better on the other side of this winter.”^v

These days, that’s all the Easter celebration I need.

Friends, rejoice: the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed.

Keith Grogg
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ⁱ David Vernier, “Handel: Messiah/Harnoncourt” (<https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-12202/>)

ⁱⁱ Robert Levine, Amazon.com review of Niklaus Harnoncourt’s recording of Handel’s Messiah, retrieved April 6, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, “Easter,” in Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 42

^{iv} Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah,” 1984

^v Gov. Tim Walz, State of the State Address “Governor Walz Remarks as Prepared” (April 5, 2020, St. Paul, MN), <https://mn.gov/governor/covid-19/news/?id=1055-426785> (retrieved April 11, 2020)