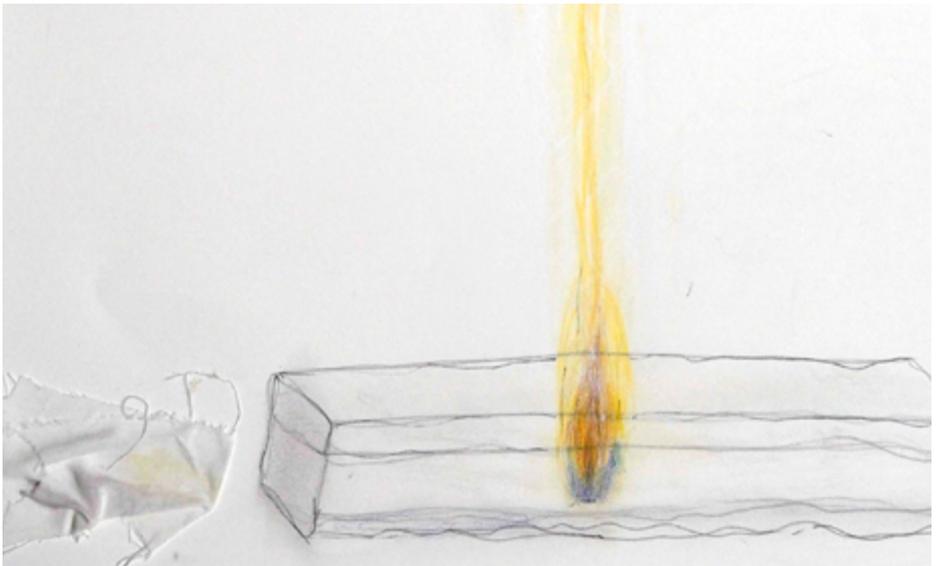




Empty



A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston
Senior Pastor, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church • April 12, 2020

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.'

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Today is our high holy day. Easter is Christianity's big celebration. It is flashing trumpets in the balcony. It is an embarrassment of flowers in the chancel. It is robust singing filling the Sanctuary. It is a packed house for a pull-out-all-the-stops shindig!

Every year, as people file out of our lily-scented services, shaking my hand and stepping toward the funky embrace of the Fifth Avenue Easter Day parade, there is always some eager soul who says to me, "Wouldn't it be great if it were like this every Sunday?"

I smile—a weary, end-of-Holy-Week smile. I nod.

Today, my friends, I want to let you in on something. That nod is a lie.

I do not want every Sunday to be like Easter, the same way I do not want every meal to be blueberry pie. And I really enjoy blueberry pie! You might call me (as my wife does) "an Easter curmudgeon." And you would be right. It's not that I dislike Easter. My faith is grounded in this day, wrestles with the meaning of this day, yearns for the truth of this day like no other day. I cherish Easter.

So what's the source of my grumpiness? Well, I worry. I worry that in our rush to make a big deal about Easter, we sidestep the deep places this day wants to take us. When public figures comment that Easter will be "sad" this year because sanctuaries will be empty, I groan. When *The Today Show* runs a story entitled "11 tips on how make Easter special during the coronavirus," I cringe.

I know, I know. These people are trying to help us cope, but seriously, big crowds and Rice Krispie bunnies are not what makes Easter *special*.

According to the Good Book, the first Easter was not a runway for displaying new outfits, pastel bowties and glorious hats. It was two women walking through a cemetery dressed in black—dressed in the clothes you wear when your heart is torn up by grief.

The first Easter was *not* a chorus of angelic voices. It was (according to the Gospel of Matthew) an earthquake—a cataclysm that cracked stones and opened graves. It was an angel descending on the wings of a storm—an angel that looked, Scripture says, like lightning!

The first Easter was a lot like *this* Easter.

The first Easter was *not* photos of a cozy brunch posted to Instagram. The disciples did not toast their good fortune with flutes of mimosas. On the first Easter, Christ's followers were in hiding. They were sheltering in place. They were shaking in terror—worried (if they stuck their heads out-of-doors) that they, too, would end up nailed to a cross.

The first Easter wasn't a victory lap. It wasn't confetti and applause. It wasn't a celebration at all.

The first Easter dawned on a world saturated with fear, ringed by death, shaken by God and blessed by the loving actions of a few brave souls.

All of which is to say, the *first* Easter was a lot like *this* Easter.

There is hope to be found in this comparison. Sturdy hope. Stick-to-your-ribs hope. Hope strong enough to lift even a curmudgeon's heart.

Let's see if we can spot it. Let's start by looking at fear.

The first Easter *was* soaked in fear. The Good Book makes this crystal clear. It is a refrain. The soldiers guarding the tomb of Jesus fall to the ground **in fear**. On seeing Mary Magdalene and the other Mary standing at the entrance to the tomb, the very first words out of the angel's mouth are "**Do not fear.**" When the women flee the garden cemetery, they run **in fear**.

Fear was in the air that first Easter. We can identify.

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In an interview this past week, Miroslav Volf, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, observed, “Fear is like a virus. Fear is infectious.” When we come in contact with others who are afraid, we become afraid, too. We pass anxiety along, from one person to another. Today, we face a pandemic of fear. And no, we haven’t developed immunity. Fear keeps re-infecting us—waking us in the middle of the night.

What is the source of all this fear?

The obvious answer, of course, is the virus. Covid-19 presents a danger to our loved ones, our finances, our future. Our fears do not stop there. This virus is an insidious thing. We cannot see it. Who knows where it may lurk? This makes us suspicious of each other—nervous and angry with each other. All this fear tears at the already thin fabric of our society.

In this unsettling time, the roots of our anxiety feed off the granddaddy of all fears—the fear of death. We fear the death of family members, the death of friends, the death of artists we respect (God bless you, John Prine). We fear the death that awaits each of us. Nothing knocks our knees together like the grim reaper. Nothing pumps fear through our veins like the pictures of bodies, wrapped in sheets, being pushed toward refrigerated trucks.

Easter gets this. The first Easter was totally in tune with this.

Every step the women take brings flashbacks of those crosses lining the slopes of Golgotha. They are afraid. Who wouldn’t be? They fear for their safety. They fear for their fading faith, their tattered hopes. They fear that the forces of darkness have won and will *always* win. They fear that the world is an irredeemably violent and malicious place, devoid of good and full of makeshift morgues. I mean, tombs.

Death and fear perfume Easter.

But here’s the thing, and yes, this sentiment comes straight from my curmudgeon’s heart: I take comfort in the fact that Easter starts this way. Yes, the backdrop to our holiest of days is dire, but this, my friends, *this* is what makes Easter “special.” This is why Easter matters.

The first Easter was soaked in fear.

We celebrate that first, fear-soaked Easter over and over, because it was there, in the trenches of Holy Week, that we learned who God really is.

God, it turns out, does not do distancing. God steps into places where death lurks and fear unspools us. God stands with us—always with us. And when our hopes teeter, God does what only God can do. The Almighty declares that Jesus—this wise teacher, this caring healer, this gracious friend, this beloved child of heaven—is not dead.

Jesus is not finished—not now, not ever. He is risen.

This changes everything.

Matthew puts it like this: “The two women left the tomb quickly with fear *and great joy*.”

Did you catch the shift? Fear hasn’t been vanquished... not yet. But when Easter dawns, fear finds a companion. Joy. Great joy.

As many of you know, every Easter, at some point during the day, my phone rings. When I pick it up, a voice—with no introduction, no pleasantries of any kind—declares, “Jesus is on the loose!” The next sound I hear is the click of the connection ending. I know who it is. It’s my roommate from seminary. It’s his quirky way of saying, “Christ is risen.”

Over the years, other friends (including many of you) have joined in. Now I get all sorts of texts and emails declaring, “Jesus is on the loose.” It wouldn’t be Easter without this wild, joyful chorus.

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This rambunctious joy has its roots in the actions of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. The two women race to tell the disciples. *He's out there. Death could not stop the goodness of God. The love of Christ persists. The promise endures. His outlandish promise, "I am with you always," it's true.*

Listen again to how Mathew describes it: "Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'"

He's out there. You can find him in Galilee. You can find him in Queens. You can find him in Seoul, Korea. You can find him in New Orleans.

Is that true?

Chrissy and Mark are members of this congregation. For over a year they have been trying to adopt a child from South Korea. Last year, they got really close to an adoption, and then it fell through. It was a sad day, but they were not defeated. Their persistent love kept at it. This past winter, Mark and Chrissy were connected with another child, a little boy named James Han Wool. They fell in love with him and made preparations to leave for South Korea.

Then coronavirus hit.

In an email, Chrissy asked: "What do you do when your child is on the other side of the planet during a pandemic?" Evidently the answer goes something like this:

- You stay up until three in the morning setting up a room for a toddler in your apartment.
- Then you race to JFK and board a plane, not certain what awaits you on the other side.
- You get tested and quarantined in a country where you do not know the language.
- You advocate tirelessly with adoption agencies and a legal system you do not fully understand.
- You are blessed by the grace and hospitality of strangers.

When Easter dawns, fear finds a companion.

- You wear a t-shirt that says, “No bump, still pumped!”
- You hang on to each other and to a picture of your child-to-be.
- And you hope. You cling to crazy, stubborn, faithful hope.

This past week, I video-conferenced with these two persistent souls from their temporary digs in Seoul. Mark and Chrissy toured me around their apartment and updated me on their adventures—all with breathless energy.

It might have been caffeine. Something powerful was animating the other end of our trans-Pacific Zoom—something that sounded a lot like joy.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to the women. “Tell my brothers to go to Galilee; *there* they will see me.”

Beth and Joe Poe are members of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. Beth has given me permission to tell this story to you. Beth and Joe live in the hottest of hotspots in the Big Easy—a place called Lambeth House.

Lambeth House is a multiphase retirement and care facility that has, thus far, lost 28 residents to coronavirus. This has been a challenging time for Beth and Joe, retired professors from Tulane.

Beth, you see, lives in an apartment on one side of Lambeth House, while Joe, her husband, who suffered a severe stroke a few years ago, resides in the Memory Care section of the facility. Every day, Beth

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typically goes to Joe's room and wheels him back to her apartment. There they listen to books on tape, talk and sing together. They always sing the same German hymn: *Geh aus mein Herz und suche Freud*—Go Out, My Heart, and Seek Joy. And, being professors, they sing their own translation.

In fact, Beth and Joe re-translate *Geh aus* from German into English every single day. And every day, for Joe, as a consequence of his strokes, is a little like starting over from scratch.

Five weeks ago, Lambeth House locked down the Memory Care wing. Beth could no longer wheel Joe back to her apartment to begin their daily translation. After three weeks of painful isolation, the facility set up a video chat for the couple. Now, once a day, for 20 minutes, they can talk. What do they talk about? Well, 20 minutes is enough time, Beth reports, to translate a single stanza of their favorite hymn.

When they have finished translating and singing, Beth repeats three phrases that Joe now calls her litany: "I love you." "I miss you." "I have not abandoned you."

"Do not be afraid," Jesus said to the women. "Tell my brothers to go to Galilee; *there* they will see me."

My friends, today the Sanctuary of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church stands empty. It is empty because, in the face of this pandemic, this is the best way we know to care for each other. I have come to see this temporary emptiness not as something sad, but as something sacred.

It is also oddly appropriate. Right? Emptiness marks the start of our most sacred story. On Easter, we celebrate history's most famous vacancy. We cheer an empty tomb. The source of hope and joy for all humanity is *not here*. Our resurrected Lord is out there. In Galilee...

Holding onto the good, strengthening the weak, lending courage to the fainthearted (which is, I suppose, all of us right now), binding the forces of chaos and death with a simple litany:

"I love you. I miss you. I will not abandon you."

Joy. Great Joy.

This, my friends, is the heart of Easter. Even in the hardest of times—especially in the hardest of times—God will not abandon us. Christ will find us. *This* is the truth that makes the women run, the faithful sing, and over which even curmudgeons cannot suppress their joy.

What do you know? Jesus is on the loose.

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Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church offers a collection of spiritual resources on video, including Sunday worship, family worship at home, spiritual practice, sacred music, pastoral messages and more.

See our YouTube channel, [FAPCinNYC](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFAPCinNYC).

For up-to-date information on worship, spiritual and social connections, and opportunities to help others during the current health crisis, go to fapc.org/connect.

Cover: Laura Fissinger, *Jesus is placed in the tomb*, 2019. This piece is part of our Stations of the Cross online devotional series. See the full series, featuring artwork by Laura Fissinger and Laura James, at fapc.org/stations.



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