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Proclaiming Easter in the face of Pandemic
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day. Year A
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 worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The women of today's gospel reading were at the crucifixion, looking on from a distance. They'd followed and provided for Jesus since coming from Galilee. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee were there. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (as she's referred to in the Scripture) were also there when Jesus was put into the tomb and the great stone was rolled over the door. They were there opposite the events, sitting and watching. The day after the crucifixion, remembering that Jesus had said he would be raised after three days, Pilate set guards to watch over the tomb to make sure it was secure.

That tomb was buttoned up tight. Jesus was dead. Really dead; wrapped in clean linen grave cloths and laid in the new tomb. The women watched the whole thing. There was really no point in the women going to the tomb that morning. Mark and Luke say that the women went with spices to anoint the body, but Matthew doesn't. Matthew says they went simply to see the tomb. I don't really know *why* they went, but what they did was to look squarely at death and its consequences, even though the Roman guards were there. If it had been me, I wouldn't have wanted to go spend time at a tomb guarded by the very people who'd killed the person who was inside of it. I'd have been scared to go. Not just scared at looking closely at the death of someone I loved, but scared about the possibility of me being killed, too, for being one of his followers. If the Empire crucified Jesus, they could have just as easily crucified any number of his disciples, just to make a point. The Romans crucified both men AND women. The fact that they were women wouldn't have saved them.

The women came anyway. They were the first witnesses to the resurrection. They were the first to be greeted by the resurrected Jesus, and the first proclaimers of the good news. The church wouldn't be here today without their witness and proclamation. They went and told the others that Jesus had risen. Forever after, Mary Magdalene has been called The Apostle to the Apostles. She and the other Mary were the first to proclaim today's joyous phrase, "The Lord is risen!"

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The church has been proclaiming it for 2,000 years since. We continue to look death in the face, not ignoring it, or shying away from it as a kind of self-protection. Religious through the centuries have founded hospitals, hostels for the sick, and provided hospice care to the dying. One of the Episcopal Church's most moving sacramental rites is that of Extreme Unction, or Ministration at the Time of Death.

Even now in this time of pandemic and required social distancing, Episcopal priests across the country are ministering to those dying from COVID-19. Dozens volunteer their time every day for a ministry endearingly called "Dial-a-priest." This service allows priests to be with someone over the phone as they're dying. Nurses and hospital workers hold a phone up to the ear of a dying person and, from a distance, the priest performs the Ministration at the Time of Death and prays for them. Only the physical anointing is left undone.

Christian witness to the resurrection involves being willing to stay at the crucifixion with the women and look at the suffering and impact of death. It involves being willing to set aside fear and do the right thing anyway. Go to the tomb, to the place of death, to see, as the women did. It was in that place that God shook the earth and a messenger from heaven came down to say, "Don't be afraid. The one you love isn't here. Go quickly and tell!" Proclaim the good news that Christ has broken the bonds of death. Christ is risen!" And today, we are the church, and it is our turn to continue the proclamation, "Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed." These are the words of that same proclamation, written 1600 years ago by St. John Chrysostom, which means St. John the golden-tongued, who was then Archbishop of Constantinople. This is his Easter sermon, which is traditionally preached as the sermon in Christian churches around the world every Easter. Today we're going to join with the women at the tomb and join with our brothers, sisters, and siblings in Christ around the world, to look pandemic and death squarely in the face and proclaim the Good News.

Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!

Are there any who are grateful servants?
Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!

Are there any weary with fasting?
Let them now receive their wages!

If any have toiled from the first hour,
let them receive their due reward;
If any have come after the third hour,
let him with gratitude join in the Feast!
And he that arrived after the sixth hour,
let him not doubt; for he too shall sustain no loss.
And if any delayed until the ninth hour,
let him not hesitate; but let him come too.
And he who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
let him not be afraid by reason of his delay.

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For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to him that toiled from the first.

To this one He gives, and upon another He bestows.
He accepts the works as He greets the endeavor.
The deed He honors and the intention He commends.
Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!

First and last alike receive your reward;
rich and poor, rejoice together!
Sober and slothful, celebrate the day!
You that have kept the fast, and you that have not,
rejoice today for the Table is richly laden!

Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one.
Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the cup of faith.
Enjoy all the riches of His goodness!

Let no one grieve at his poverty,
for the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again;
for forgiveness has risen from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.

Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!

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Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!

Amen.