

## *Appearance Like Lightning*

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Matthew 28:1-10

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United Church of Christ  
Easter Sunday / Feast of the Resurrection  
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### I.

In case I've neglected to mention it yet, today is Easter Sunday.  
Today is the culmination of the season of Lent and of Holy Week.  
This is the day of the big show. Everyone is here.  
The brass and the woodwinds are here. A piano *and* an organ.  
The handbells are in full swing and the choir ranks have swelled.  
At Easter, dressing in our Sunday best takes on new meaning.  
Our Easter Sunday best is just about the best that we have.  
The newspapers, usually indifferent to religion, were very happy to showcase ads for  
Easter services, and we churches were happy to oblige.  
After all, if you're going to promote one service all year, it'd better be Easter.  
Who cares what happens on the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time?  
Even breakfast and brunch take on a certain largesse today, not to mention baskets  
of chocolate eggs.

An alien from another planet arriving to earth on Easter would be justified in asking,  
"Why all the hoopla?"

(Hoopla, in case you don't know, is a word with extraterrestrial origin. I'm not sure  
which galaxy.)

Why all the hoopla?

It's Easter!

What's Easter?

Well, it's a holiday, a celebration of new life.

Tell me more.

It's the day Christians celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Resurrection?

Yes, Jesus, who was crucified on a Friday, rose from the dead early on Sunday  
morning.

And who was this Jesus?

He was a Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of David, a prophet and teacher who  
came to proclaim God's kingdom of righteousness and peace.

And he rose from the dead.

Yes.

And what does that mean?

It means that we need not fear the power of death anymore.

Really?

Yeah, really.

That's amazing.

I know.

Pardon me for asking – this is a particularly polite space alien – pardon me for asking, but you don't seem fully convinced.

Fully convinced of what?

That this Jesus was raised from the dead and that you need not fear the power of death any more.

No?

As I entered your atmosphere and circled your planet deciding which church to attend this morning, I noticed a lot of signs that death is alive and well, and I also noticed a lot of you earthlings are very much afraid.

Oh.

And even here in your lovely church, I'm not convinced that, as you say, Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday morning.

Is there something you're not telling me?

Hmm. I'd have to think about that.

## II.

I went on a walk this week looking for an Easter sermon.

I found pieces of sermon scattered here and there.

Preschoolers across the courtyard from my office were singing bits of it on the playground.

Some quail were nibbling at pieces of it in a dew-strewn field.

I overheard it in phrases of conversation in a check-out line.

I ran into one person who paused on her jog to greet me.

Pastor, how are you? What are you doing?

I'm just out for a walk.

Oh, well I'm out for a jog.

I see that.

You know pastor, sometime, if you think it would be of benefit to you, I'd like to tell you my story.

Oh yeah?

Yeah. You see, I had a near death experience once and here I am. I used to think nothing of dreams, but now I pay attention.

Sure, I love hearing people's stories.

You do?

Yeah. Stories are everything.

Maybe you can hear a few strands of sermon in that conversation.

When I was almost done with my walk a car stopped and the window rolled down.

Pastor, do you need a ride?

No, I'm just out for a walk.

Working on your Easter sermon?

In fact, I am.

Just tell 'em, "He is risen." That'll be enough.

I think that person is right.

"He is risen" is enough, or, at least, it should be.

But then again, it isn't enough, is it?

I mean, if I had just stood before you today and said, "He is risen," some of you would have begun to wonder whether you were paying me too much.

The words "He is risen" sure are nice and hopeful and appropriate on Easter, but for some reason we have to take the time to convince ourselves that they are true.

Most of us, even those of us who attend church regularly, have yet to be convinced.

And the truth is that there is no proof that "He is risen," at least no proof in the modern, empirical sense.

There is no incontrovertible proof that Easter ever happened.

There are only witnesses to the resurrection.

There are only those who have heard the story and have learned how to tell it.

### III.

The Gospel writer Matthew learned how to tell the story.

In all likelihood, the person who wrote the Gospel of Matthew was not an eye witness to the events described.

Instead, Matthew, like a documentarist, compiled the oral accounts that had been handed down to his community over the course of about 45 years.

As he compiled and crafted his Gospel, he wove in his own theological commentary on the story he was telling.

His story is very similar to the one we find in the other Gospels.

The four evangelists are obviously telling the same story, but each of them add their own accents.

If you read, or even better, if you hear Matthew's story, and if you listen closely, you might discover some surprises.

The first surprise is that the rolling of the stone from the opening to the tomb happens in plain view.

Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” – how would you like to be known as “the other Mary”? – these two Marys wake up early to attend the Easter Sunrise Service in Ragle Ranch Park.

They’ve come empty handed – no spices to anoint the body, not in Matthew – and they don’t expect to find much, just to grieve the death and absence of one they had grown to love.

Right about the time the guitar music was about to begin, there was an earthquake. Matthew, like a good Californian, knew earthquakes well.

In Greek, *seismos*. It was the second one in three days.

And then an angel, that is, a messenger of the Lord, descended from heaven and rolled back the stone.

Surprise. The women didn’t arrive to find an open tomb.

The stone was rolled away right there, in front of them, by an angel whose appearance was like lightning, that is, sudden, bright, obvious, beautiful, and frightening, all at once.

After rolling away the stone, the angel sat on it, having barely broken a sweat, as if to say, that wasn’t so hard, was it?

In Matthew’s story, the resurrection is a public event that happens right out in the open.

But Matthew offers a second surprise.

The women aren’t the only ones who came to the Sunrise Service.

There were Roman guards there.

If you read all of Matthew’s story, you learn that the guards were there to make sure the disciples didn’t steal Jesus’s body and try to fake a resurrection.

In other words, they were there to prevent fraud.

It’s a strange part of the story and we wonder why Matthew insists on including it, but pay attention to the effect the appearance of the angel has on the guards and the women.

This is what Matthew wants us to see:

The guards faint from fright, but the women do not.

And because they are still conscious, these two women form the first Christian congregation and hear the first ever Easter sermon.

Don’t be afraid, the angel preaches. (A good opening, clear, to the point, reassuring.)

I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. (A good sermon identifies with the needs of the congregation.)

He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. (The meat of the message, astounding news clearly communicated with the necessary citation.)

Come, see the place where he lay. (An invitation to experience it for yourself. The text doesn't say whether they moved and inch.)

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." (Bringing the sermon home by giving the congregation a mission to accept and a message to share.)

Finally, a clear indication that the sermon is over: "This is my message for you." In other words, Amen, now stop hearing the Gospel and start doing it.

And as they go, Matthew sneaks in one more surprise.

Doing as the preacher said, they went quickly to go find the disciples.

But as they went, the text says, "Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!'"

This is totally unique to Matthew.

Mark's Gospel ends with the women leaving the tomb and not telling anybody anything about nothing.

In Luke, two disciples enter the Emmaus 10K and are joined en route by a participant whom they don't recognize until after the event is over.

And in John, Mary Magdalene looks right at Jesus, right at him, and thinks he's the gardener.

But here in Matthew, Jesus reveals himself to Mary and Mary, and Jesus says, "Hey. How ya doin'?"

And whereas John's Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him, in Matthew the two women take hold of his feet, and worship him, or to repeat the phrase from the beginning of Matthew's gospel, they pay him homage.

And while holding his dirty, cracked, calloused, pierced feet, Jesus confirms the words of the angel.

"Don't be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

#### IV.

Can I ask you something? What's up with this story?

I'm mean, seriously.

First of all, what kind of story is based on the witness of a couple of marginalized women?

Apparently, the story of our faith is.

And secondly, the order of event is all off, isn't it?

They're supposed to see Jesus walk out of the tomb, then to go and tell what they've seen.

But in this story, the women have come expecting the quiet sorrow of death and have instead shimmied their way through an earthquake, shielded their eyes from a flash of lightning, and heard the strangest sermon ever recorded.

And only then, when they had left the tomb to tell the news, only then did Jesus meet them and greet them on the road.

This, according to Matthew, is how Easter happens.

Our world is rocked.

A blinding appearance like lightning.

A story too strange and good to believe.

No proof, just a strange and simple message: "He is not here; for he has been raised."

## V.

I have a hunch that Matthew, in telling this story in this way to his own congregation, is not only telling the story of the resurrection.

He is also telling the story of the church.

Whether we come regularly every Sunday, or regularly every *Easter Sunday*, we come hoping to find him here, to find Jesus, or at least God, here in the church on Sunday morning.

But on far too many Sundays we leave feeling empty, like something was missing.

The organ, or some bass in the choir, may rumble like an earthquake, and the sermon may or may not shimmer like flashes of lightning, but still, what is missing?

He is not here; for he has been raised from the dead.

Do not be afraid.

Go quickly and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee.

*There they will see me.*

Perhaps we should not come to church expecting to find God.

When we worship a God who is always where we expect to find him, we worship at a tomb.

When we worship a God who remains just where we left her, we worship a corpse.

The tomb is empty and he is not here.

He is risen.

Do not be afraid.

Follow the lead of *Mary and Mary*, the first witnesses.

Go tell the others: God is on the move, has gone out ahead of you.

Just to be clear, I'm not telling you not to come to church.

We need you, I need you, to come to church, next Sunday even.

But don't come here to find God.

Come here to tell us about the time when you went out and Christ greeted you on the road.

Amen.