

Expecting Resurrection

Matthew 28:1-10

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Easter Sunday – April 12, 2020



I. Empty

A church member recently posted on our church's Facebook page:
"The churches are empty this Easter and so is the tomb."ⁱ

I've noticed at night that when I am drifting off to sleep, there is very little traffic sound.

The streets are empty and so is the tomb.

When you go to the grocery store, there's still food to buy, but not everything is available that used to be.

The shelves are empty and so is the tomb.

Our usual patterns of physical contact have changed.

We're realizing how much it means to get together in the same room.

The chairs are empty and so is the tomb.

We have been avoiding the usual hugs and handshakes and nudges and nuzzles and high fives and fist bumps and kisses and shoulder touches, even with our own kin who happen to live in a different household.

Our arms are empty and so is the tomb.

Another church member directed me to a video produced by the Covid-19 Response Team in Belfast, Ireland.ⁱⁱ

In a ponderous Northern Ireland accent, the narrator says:

"When you go out and see the empty streets..., don't say to yourself, 'It looks like the end of the world.'

What you're seeing is love in action. What you're seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other...

People will lose jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses. And some will lose their lives.

All the more reason to take a moment, when you're out on your walk, or on your way to the store, or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at all of that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn't the end of the world.

It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness."ⁱⁱⁱ

The last minute of the video includes scenes of empty streets and parks and sidewalks. Our public spaces are empty, and so is the tomb.

On Easter, the invitation is, as the narrator of the video says, is:

"To look into that emptiness and marvel at all of that love."

II. Death

But it isn't just eerie emptiness that defines our days in the time of Covid-19.

Death and fear of death seem to be more prevalent than ever.

Our erstwhile hope that we would be back together by Easter had to give way to the experts' ominous forecast that deaths would peak right around now.

Death and fear of death surround us.

Many of us whose life and health situations have largely protected us from constant fear of death have awoken to a new solidarity with those who are well acquainted with mortality and debilitating fear.

- Some who have lived with cancer are sharing with the rest of us what it means to live without the assurance of another month or week or day.
- Health Care professionals are modeling heroism and putting their lives on the line while making do with a health system that has often valued profit over preparedness.
- The Poor People's Campaign is reminding us that before this pandemic, "700 people died from poverty each day in the United States."^{iv}
- Disabilities rights groups have voiced their concern that as hospitals allocate resources during this pandemic, historic discriminatory practices will prevail that have assumed that the lives of disabled people are of less value than those of able-bodied people.^v
- We are facing the truth of health disparities in our country along racial lines - black Americans are dying at a much greater rate than white Americans.

Death and fear and poverty and discrimination surround all of us now, but this suffering is landing more heavily upon those who were already marginalized before this was ever called a pandemic.

I think of the people without homes who sleep in their cars at night in our own church's parking lot.

How do you shelter-in-place when you didn't have shelter to begin with?

Death and fear of death are all around.

Perhaps Good Friday is a misnomer, a sentimental rebranding that calls "good" what began as terror.

The one who came to call fishermen to leave their nets and share the good news of liberation was abandoned and betrayed by those same followers.

The one who preached blessing upon the peacemakers, who said, "love your enemies," who told the crowds "not to worry," died a casualty of political power.

The one who touched and healed and blessed and forgave, who physically bodied forth the radical love of God, was stalked and framed and arrested for no real cause, was bound and scapegoated and beaten and mocked.

The one born to a poor family who were made refugees by political terror; he had two names Jesus - "Saves," Emmanuel, "With-us-God" - was shamefully executed by Rome on a cross.

Death and fear of death is all around.

How, then, do we celebrate Easter in the time of Covid-19?^{vi}

III. Expecting Resurrection

This year, I noticed something different about the account of that first Easter morning as told by the storyteller known as Saint Matthew.^{vii}

In his version, two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" went to the see the tomb.

What's interesting is what they *don't* have with them.

Unlike in Mark and in Luke, they *don't* have spices or oil.

They are *not* going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body.

They are *not* expecting to find a corpse.

They come expecting Resurrection.

After all, they have been following Jesus throughout his ministry.

As his disciples, they have been following and watching and supporting him.

They were listening when he said, on multiple occasions, that he must "go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised."^{viii}

When Matthew says that the two Mary's came "to see the tomb," it doesn't mean they came to grieve.

They came to see, to behold, to consider, to witness the resurrection they had come to expect.

They came in the midst of a world filled with death and the fear of death.

When they arrived, there was suddenly a great earthquake – the second in three days.

Then an angelic figure appeared, looking something like lightning, and rolled away the great stone. Can you hear it rumble?

The Roman guards who were there, Matthew tells us, "faint from fear."

But to the women, the angel says, "Do not be afraid. I know who you are looking for, Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here. But then you knew that because he told you so. Come, see where he lay."

Perhaps the Marys took a moment to look into the empty tomb.

But there was no time to delay.

"Go quickly," the angel said, "because the Risen One has gotten a head start on you. Tell the rest of the disciples he is risen and is going to Galilee where you will see him."

And so the women go, the first two apostles of the church, sent to bring the good news.

And they go, afraid yet filled with joy. Afraid yet filled with joy.

And in their fear filled with joy, Jesus meets them on the way and greets them.

They fall down and bless his feet, which no doubt still show the wounds he suffered on the cross, the marks of death still lingering on his resurrected body.

"Go and tell the others," he says. "Do not be afraid."

IV. Never More than 6 Days Away

Is it possible to be like the two Mary's, expecting Resurrection in the midst of world filled with death?

As Christians, when we celebrate Easter, we are not simply celebrating a hope-filled event that happened long ago which gives us hope in times of trouble, though it can be that.

For Christians, Easter is the hinge point of history, the inauguration of a new age.^{ix}

We weave this understanding into every week by setting aside Sunday as a day of worship.

The reason we worship on Sunday is because of Easter.

Sunday represents both the first day of creation and the 8th day of creation, the day of a new creation.

In this sense, every Sunday of the year is a “little Easter” and therefore Easter is never more than 6 days away.

Easter is the guiding principle of the Christian life.

Christians are no people if we are not resurrection people.

To celebrate Easter in the time of Covid-19 means, like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, going to see the tomb and expecting it to be empty, expecting “to look into the emptiness and marvel at all of that love.”

Even now in a world filled with death and loss, there are nascent signs of resurrected life and embodied love:^x

- Big cities like Delhi have blue skies again.
- Our cherished myth of self-reliance now seems rather silly.
- We have met more of our neighbors now and greet them by name.
- Rents are forgiven. Ventilators are shared.
- Bi-partisan rancor is overcome by the stark reality of human need.
- Grocery workers are heroes, alongside medical personnel.
- Sabbath rest happens. New skills are learned. Relationships are rekindled.

The churches are empty and so is the tomb. Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ Larry Stallings

ⁱⁱ Ginny Embry

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/watch-belfast-covid-19-response-team-urges-public-to-see-empty-streets-as-love-in-action-39078067.html>

^{iv} <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/factsheets/>

^v #nobodyisdisposable

^{vi} *El amor en los tiempos de cólera*, Gabriel García Márquez

^{vii} <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/6/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

^{viii} Matthew 16:21

^{ix} <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/april-12-easter-day-acts-1034-43-psalm-1181-2-14-24-matthew-281-10>

^x <https://churchanew.org/blog/2020/04/01/brueggemann>