

Coming Out of Hiding

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Matthew 28:1-10 ¹ After the Sabbath, as Sunday morning was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ² Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled the stone away, and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid that they trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel spoke to the women. "You must not be afraid," he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said. Come here and see the place where he was lying. ⁷ Go quickly now, and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from death, and now he is going to Galilee ahead of you; there you will see him!' Remember what I have told you." ⁸ So they left the tomb in a hurry, afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Peace be with you." They came up to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ "Do not be afraid," Jesus said to them. "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

The Easter story according to Matthew's gospel contains two amazing events. The resurrection is one, of course. But the other one we tend to overlook because we aren't aware of its significance.

Let's remember the setting: the Sabbath day of rest had come to an end with sunset on Saturday night. As dawn was breaking on Sunday morning two women—both named Mary—returned to the tomb where the linen-shrouded body of Jesus had been placed.

Sometimes we forget that in addition to the twelve disciples, there was a larger group of men and women that had been following Jesus and the disciples since his days teaching and preaching to the people in the region of Galilee to the north. Some people in that larger group had left their homes and families in order to follow Jesus and the apostles when they left Galilee headed for Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus were two women who were part of that larger group. They were the ones returning to the tomb on this morning.

Unlike the account told in the other gospels, Matthew's gospel doesn't say that Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus went to the tomb that morning to anoint the body with oils and spices; Matthew says that that had already been done. No, they came simply to keep vigil... to sit near the burial place to mourn, to pray, to think, to talk, to remember.

Without warning an angel—a messenger from God—suddenly appeared with majesty so brilliant and powerful that it immobilized those guarding the tomb but not the women. The angel told the two women unimaginable good news: Jesus has been raised from death. He lives again!

Let's stop here for a moment. In a culture where women were treated subserviently, in a culture where women weren't allowed to worship alongside the men, in a culture where women could not offer legal testimony unless a man vouched for them, in a culture like that, the first people to *learn* this good news were these women. The first people told to *spread* the good news were these women. The people charged with the responsibility to *tell* the disciples that their master Jesus had been resurrected—raised from death to life!—the first people to *tell* the good news were these women!

And why did the angel have to give the women those instructions? Because the disciples were behind locked doors. When Jesus had been arrested they had run away and gone into

hiding, fearing for their own safety. They worried that the hatred and violence directed at Jesus might spread to them. They didn't know if or when or from where the threat might come. We could say that the disciples had self-quarantined for their own safety.

Right now we may be identifying with the Easter experience of the disciples more than we ever have in our lives. With all of us in Ohio – and many people in other parts of the world – living under public health orders to stay at home, we, too, are “hiding behind locked doors” in a sense, on account of threatening conditions we can neither see nor control. And yet, while this necessary imposed separation is uncomfortable, it is not preventing the spread of God's word of hope.

It's natural for us to see the Easter event as proclaiming the greatness and power of Jesus. We might liken the events of Easter to some superhero who appears to be inescapably bound by the chains of death, only to suddenly and unexpectedly summon superhuman strength and shatter the bonds that bind him, rising up triumphantly in a display that shows the hero's power and the villain's weakness.

In fact, some English translations of the Bible encourage that impression when they say that Jesus “has risen” – suggesting that it's something Jesus did to himself. But the original Greek words used by the gospel writers are more accurately translated that Jesus “has been raised,” not that Jesus “has risen.” The difference, of course, is that Jesus didn't raise *himself* from his condition of true and total death. God raised Jesus. From the infinite abyss of Death God brought up true life, new life, everlasting life in the resurrected Christ.

God's promise of resurrection is for us as well. As St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:14, *“We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus to life, will also raise us up with Jesus and take us... into his presence.”*¹

Christ calls you and me to follow in his footsteps:

- learning to live lives full of unconditional love and acceptance;
- learning to live lives offering gracious mercy and forgiveness;
- learning to live lives of generous compassion and abundant hope.

We're called to entrust our lives to the Risen One, to follow in his footsteps. God blesses us with the promise of resurrection. In the gospel of John Jesus himself said, *“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”*²

The joyful irony of this Easter is that our church building is closed and yet our faith is perhaps more visible than ever. We are worshiping God despite not being able to come together. We're praising God despite inconveniences and true hardships that afflict each of us in some way or another. We're serving God through simple words of friendliness and small gestures of kindness, as well as acts of true sacrifice not only toward loved ones and acquaintances but for the sake of strangers near and far. Through all this, we're the ones who are being blessed. As happened to the women who went to keep vigil at the tomb, God's messenger now charges us to hear the good news and to share it: Our Lord and Master lives! Christ has been raised! *Alleluia!*

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¹ 2 Cor. 4:14 Good News Translation

² John 14:2-3 New Revised Standard Version