***“Rising Up With Christ”***

**Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10**

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**April 9, 2022/Easter Sunday A**

One of my neighbors—who lives a couple of blocks from my house—set up an illuminated nativity scene with large plastic figures shortly after Thanksgiving. But with the repeated heavy snows that we have had over the past several months, the plastic figurines (Joseph and Mary, Baby Jesus in the Manger, a Shepherd, an Angel, a Donkey, a Camel, a Cow, a Lamb, and the three Wise Men—among other Christmas themed figures) became buried in the front yard—even though each is a couple of feet tall. In fact, the snow has been so deep in this steeply sloped, north-facing, front yard that for months the only remaining sign of their presence was the tops of the heads of Mary and Joseph, the Shepherd, and the Angel, peeking out from the top of the snow.

However, I am now happy to report that with the recent warmer weather and snow melt of the past week, *Baby Jesus* has reappeared just in time for Easter!

You know, whoever tied Easter to the spring equinox made a very good decision. For those who are so inclined, there is no better time for feeling *alive,* as the whole world wakes from winter and makes new birth look easy. Barbara Brown Taylor, speaking of her native Georgia, put it this way: *“Clumps of green grass erupt from the flat tan lawn. Bluebirds appear on the clothesline. There are so many redbuds in the woods that a pink haze seems to waft through the trees. [We] may have blood instead of sap, but*something*inside [us] rises once the earth rounds the winter bend and heads back in the sun’s direction.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

So, Easter, in a very real sense, is about *hope.*

Hope, however, seems to be in short supply for many people today. Several years ago, John Buchanan said: *“A friend of mine recently announced that he had lost hope for the human race. The news each day was so consistently and relentlessly depressing, he said, that he was certain that the human project had run its course. We might flail about for a few more centuries, but the end of civilization was in sight.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

An example of this loss of hope is a study published in Science magazine almost a decade ago [and considered *“alarmist”* at the time], announcing that global warming was approaching a tipping point after which no reversal would be possible. Marine life will perish, more and more species will become extinct, coastal areas will flood regularly, and there will be more violent weather more often.

Sadly, we’ve been seeing this play out in recent years right before our eyes.

And just in the past couple of weeks we’ve experienced another school shooting in Nashville, violent, destructive, climate-driven tornados in numerous places around the country, anti-“transgender” laws being enacted in many red states across the country that are intended to bully and intimidate vulnerable people, increasing violence in Israel as Ramadan and Passover raise tensions at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the toxic mix of white-supremacy, antisemitism, homophobia, and misogyny, the curtailment of reproductive rights, and the recent expulsion of two black Tennessee state legislators (one who was a college classmate of my son, William) from the Tennessee House for having the temerity to speak out on behalf of the victims of gun violence and the need for common sense gun legislation.

Not to mention the pandemic we have all been living through. It’s a lot—and many of us are tired, exhausted.

To many, our society—and our world--seems ungovernable, hopelessly divided, susceptible to creeping authoritarianism, and incapable of enacting social policies that reflect the will and needs of the majority of people.

But we often forget that the world that Jesus and his disciples lived in was much like our own in this sense. I mentioned last week in my Palm Sunday sermon that:

*“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30, … one from the east largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a* ***donkey*** *down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a* ***war horse*** *at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. (Pilate) has come from Caesarea Maritima (on the Mediterranean Coast) for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus’ procession proclaimed* ***the kingdom of God,*** *while Pilate’s proclaimed* ***the power of empire,*** *thereby embodying the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

It’s a big, bold, unmistakable statement of defiance to Rome!

Which brings us to our gospel reading from Matthew this morning where something completely surprising and unexpected happens.

In Matthew, *two women* go together to visit Jesus’ tomb. There they become witnesses to a profound phenomenon--a great earthquake, followed by the descent of a heavenly angel who rolls away the stone. The men guarding the tomb are immobilized with fear. But the women remain alert, despite their fear. They remain conscious enough to receive the angel’s message for them: that they don’t need to be afraid, and that the one they came to see is not in this tomb. Jesus is alive, the angel tells them, and he wants you to go tell the others.

Thanks to plenty of biblical commentary on the subject, many of you already know that at the time and within the culture that this story takes place, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Not just colloquially but legally--a woman’s testimony to an occurrence like this one would not have been admissible in court. And so it is all the more remarkable that Jesus would entrust this profoundly important message to two women.

Times have changed and American women today can, of course, speak without the accompaniment of a man, share news and information in the public square, and testify in court. Yet residue of the ancient ways persists. Women who suffer sexual assault often bear the burden of proof--proof not just that the assault occurred but that they are reliable witnesses at all. Their character, behavior, emotional capacity, and judgment are all brought into question by the accused, often turning the woman into the one who must defend herself. Women in the public eye who express vulnerability and strong emotions frequently have their witness discounted as subjective or somehow tainted, while men who do the same are applauded for their passion and authenticity.

According to Ayanna Johnson Watkins, what Matthew’s version of events highlights is the power of women standing together as witnesses. Together, the Mary’s are fearful but not immobilized. Unlike the lone Mary Magdalene in John, in Matthew’s Gospel the two women recognize the angel as a messenger from heaven--and Jesus as their own beloved one returned to them. Perhaps most importantly, they recognize themselves as reliable witnesses who can be entrusted with the most important message of their time and ours: *that the crucified Savior lives, that faith prevails, that love overcomes.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

*Hope.*

You see, the central question of Easter is not *“What happened to Jesus way back then?”* but rather *“Where is Jesus now—for us*?” Or even more strikingly, as theologian Gareth Jones asks, “When is Jesus? When is Jesus for us?” Easter becomes not a matter of our questioning the resurrection but of allowing the resurrection to question us. Who are we now, and what must we become, in the light of the risen Christ?

In other words, Easter is *now!* And resurrection has *consequences!*

The resurrection, although breaking into history on a specific temporal occasion, is not the property of the past. As God’s future showing itself in our present, it belongs to all times and seasons. Jesus is alive, still showing up as a *transfiguring presence* in a world fraught with absences. Jesus is not over, and his story is not over. According to Jim Friedrich, it will only be completed in the divinization of the cosmos, when God is in all, and all are in God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So, Easter isn’t just something we remember or commemorate. It’s something we *live* and *breathe.*

Resurrection also has *consequences.* The resurrection is more than an idea we talk about or believe propositionally. It’s something we *become,* something we *“prove”* in the living of our stories. Rowan Williams describes it this way:

*the believer’s life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment, and enlargement—a pattern, a dance, intelligible as a pattern only when its pivot and heart become manifest. The believer shows Jesus as the center of his or her life.*

In Orthodox iconography of the resurrection, [*Jesus is never by himself*](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/rising-christ)*.* He is always depicted taking the dead by the hand and pulling them out of their own tombs. Christ’s hand snatching us from death is a vivid image, and George Her­bert, a 17th-century poet-priest, em­ploys it artfully in “Easter”:

Sing his praise
Without delayes,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise . . .

But the things that are killing us exert a powerful gravity. We sag under the weight of our despair; we resist the hand that pulls us upward. Nevertheless, Christ persists. “Arise, sad heart,” says Herbert in “The Dawning”:

if thou dost not withstand,
Christ’s resurrection thine may be;
Do not by hanging down break from the hand
Which, as it riseth, raiseth thee.

Do not by hanging down break from Christ’s hand. Christ came to save us from our least selves.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Friends, that’s the gift—and the challenge—of resurrection, and it applies to our common life as well as to our private selves. The first disciples, so scattered and shamed by the events of the Passion, made this perfectly clear when their broken and bewildered community was restored to life. *And so it is for all of us who follow today.*

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Practicing Incarnation,* The Christian Century, April 5, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Buchanan, *Reason for Hope,* The Christian Century, March 25, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem,* Harper, San /Francisco, 2006, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, *The Mary’s Are Stronger Together,* The Christian Century, April 13, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jim Friedrich, *Preaching on Easter Sunday Isn’t About Convincing People,* The Christian Century, April 3, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)