

"With Fear and Great Joy"
An Easter Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT 2023

Please Read:
I Corinthians 15:3-8
Matthew 28:1-10

In the introduction to his edited collection *Joy: 100 Poems*, Christian Wiman writes that “joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone. The only antidote to the nihilism that wafts through our intellectual atmosphere like sarin gas.” With the world being what it is, despair is a constant. Joy must be sought.

Today we gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because it is the foundation for hope and joy. As some of you know, we have had some fantastic speakers with us recently: Miroslav Volf spoke about his new book, *Life Worth Living*, and then we heard Mark Yaconelli reflect on the healing power of stories. But let me draw a subtle but important distinction between “story-telling” and “telling stories!”

Too many people think of Easter as a fairy tale. Fantasy literature. But the story we tell today is the greatest story ever told, the story that changed the world. The first thing we have to realize is that people in the first century were perfectly aware that you don’t come back from the dead. If you read Homer to Socrates, Plato to Pliny, they may mention the possibility of resurrection, but say, “Come on, give me a break!” C. S. Lewis says too often we imagine the ancients didn’t know the laws of nature, and that now that we have modern science, we do. But *apropo* the virgin birth he says the reason Joseph was worried about Mary’s pregnancy was *not* because he *didn’t* know where babies came from, but because he *did*!

Notice that Matthew writes the first disciples were experiencing simultaneously “fear and great joy.” They knew this was a strange, singularly unique event.

It’s interesting, as a kind of negative example: Some twenty years after the resurrection happened, the apostle Paul is reciting what had become the church’s “official version” in our passage from I Corinthians 15, “That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.... then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and lastly as to one untimely born, he appeared to me.” But who were the first to experience the risen Lord? Women! In the ancient world, their testimony wasn’t acceptable so they got airbrushed out of the picture. Do you see that if you were going to *make this story up*, you wouldn’t construct the plot around witnesses who weren’t even considered reliable in a court of law?!

You may say only fools would believe this story... But some of the greatest minds, some of the greatest *scientists* have found the Resurrection to be a rational belief. Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, James Maxwell, Gregor Mendel, Isaac Newton, William Phillips, Francis Collins... Or people always bring up Darwin. Do you know where Darwin is buried? Westminster Abby! He was a believer. The point is, some of the greatest scientists in the world find it completely rational to trust in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But I must be careful here, for the resurrection is still a mystery that requires faith... There's nothing obvious or even sensible about the resurrection, but faith in the resurrection changes everything. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christ did not come into this world so that we might understand him, but that we might cling to him in order to be caught up in the immense *event* of resurrection."

Perhaps just as important as the questions of the if/how of the resurrection, is the *who*. Why *this* Jesus? Is it because he stood up to the powerful forces of death and destruction with nothing more and nothing less than self-giving love? With forgiveness and compassion? As Rowan Williams said, "You only get anywhere near the truth when all the easy things to say about God are dismantled, so that your image of God is no longer just a big projection of your own self-centered wish fulfillment fantasies." Indeed, the life, death and resurrection of the Crucified-Risen Lord reveals and glorifies a very different kind of God...

What does the fantastic fact of the resurrection mean for you and for our world? Well, perhaps it would mean a lot more if Christians lived as if we believed it. In his poem "Six Lectures in Verse," Czesław Miłosz reflects on our gospel text. "Christ has risen," he writes. "Whoever believes that/ Should not behave as we do." The poet laments that we "have lost the up, the down, the right, the left"; we cannot even distinguish the heavens from the abysses."

So, Matthew the gospel writer, is determined to get our attention, to set our course with God. He's fond of earthquakes and uses them often. Matthew uses the Greek *seismos* to describe the "storm" on the sea in Matthew 8:24, the earthquake as an eschatological sign (24:7), the earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death (27:54), and again here at the empty tomb (28:2): "Suddenly, there was a great earthquake!" Matthew doesn't want us to miss that this dramatic event...

Indeed, we need something seismic, because we live with too much drama in our lives... Ukraine. The Covenant School. Silicon Valley Bank. George Santos. Inflation. Depression. Divorce. Child Abuse. Cancer. Teen Suicide. Criminal Defendant #4913961R and 34 felony counts. We live in a world where belief is

down and gun shootings are up. And all of us have lost loved ones, or will have to deal eventually with sickness and death. Scientists in the mental health field say we are in the middle of one of the worst mental health crises in history. We live knowing we are destroying our planet. But we don't seem to care...

Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to see the tomb, our lives are sometimes abruptly interrupted with a need to understand and give meaning to the reality of our world, of our lives. Whether it be on an international or personal level, we are desperate to seek a *Life Worth Living*, to weave the story of our lives into a greater story that gives meaning and purpose.

Like those two women early on the first Easter morning, we are curious. We are searching. We are tentative, and maybe a little afraid. Most of us aren't as bold as the women, but rather like the rest of the disciples, we stay at home. We'll just read about it in the papers or catch a summary on the web or evening news.

Resurrection intrudes upon our predictable lives to signal radical change, whether we understand it fully or not! In the New Testament, there are two words for resurrection. One of the words, "anastasis" means to "raise up" and is used to describe miraculous healings by Jesus or his coming messianic glory. This is the word Jesus uses when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life..."

The second word for resurrection in the New Testament is also fascinating to me: "égersis." "Égersis" is distinct from "anastasis" in that it expresses the *concreteness* of an action, and in common usage it meant, for example "to raise up" a wall or building. It gets more at the *existential reality of being lifted up*.

And surprise! *This* is the word Matthew chooses in our passage today to describe the resurrection of Jesus. "He is not here; for he has been raised, just as he said..." The linguistic tools Matthew uses here spell out a resurrection *rooted in reality*.

Keith Ward will be speaking to us from Oxford in June on the topic of the Trinity. He is a fellow of the British Academy and an Anglican priest. He was the Queen's philosopher, dean of Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, and Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford... He's one of the greatest intellects I've ever encountered. He tells of a converting moment in his life when he was head of the Hindu society at Cambridge University. Some Christians invited him to a prayer service and while they were praying he had a vision of Jesus. He recalls that it was simple, yet profound. Jesus appeared to him and said simply, "I'm not Krishna!"

“I’m Jesus!” The experience of the Risen Lord changed his life. He became ordained after that experience. But here’s the thing... You can’t make stuff this up! Well, at least Keith Ward wouldn’t make this stuff up! Keith is committed to interfaith dialogue and progressive ethics, *because of God’s love revealed to him in the crucified-risen Lord.*

There is a solid foundation for overcoming our despair, and it is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the historic cosmos-crashing reality of Easter. There is a basis for hope and true joy, and it is the simple mantra: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.* There is nothing to fear, but every reason to pursue joy...

One last thing... Some of us have lost loved ones this past year. There’s a long list of people that we will miss. I appreciate Terry playing Widor's *Toccata*, in a way, to celebrate how our loved ones will share in the resurrection of the Lord. That's a part of the resurrection story that is of some comfort to me and to those who have felt the sting of death recently. God promises to us all the experience of resurrection, that death will *not* have the last word in our lives, that with Christ, we also shall be raised with him to new life, a life of grace, of forgiveness, of generosity, of self-giving love, of compassion and justice for all...

Friends, Easter is not an escape from reality. It’s a deeper reality. Resurrection makes all the difference between truth and fiction, fantasy and reality. So, I invite you, even with fear and great joy, to hear and believe, to receive and share the Good News of Easter:

"Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed!"