

# *Easter's Cosmic Joy*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Easter Sunday

Matthew 27:57-28:10

<sup>57</sup>When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup>He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. <sup>59</sup>So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth <sup>60</sup>and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. <sup>61</sup>Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. <sup>62</sup>The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate <sup>63</sup>and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while

he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’<sup>64</sup> Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and the last deception would be worse than the first.”<sup>65</sup> Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.”<sup>66</sup> So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.<sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.<sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.<sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.<sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.<sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.<sup>7</sup> 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.’ This is my message for you.”<sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Every big story begins small. When you think about it, the most meaningful things in life start in tiny realities, small gestures, fleeting ideas. Big stories always begin small. A long life, well lived, filled with meaningful vocation, family, gratitude and generosity, begins in seven pounds of infant wonder and absolute dependence. A lasting and successful marriage begins with a first date, a chance meeting, a brief introduction. A booming business begins with a little idea; a giant undertaking begins with a first step, a calling to sacrificial service, on behalf of others usually begins in a barely audible whisper. Every big story begins small.

So it is with faith. Jesus once said that “faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains,” and it begins in the seed. This Easter story is just like that, and Matthew’s is the biggest of all the resurrection narratives. In John, we get the intimate scene of Mary weeping in the garden and mistaking Jesus for the gardener; Mark leaves us with an unfinished gospel – because the women run away and say nothing to anyone for they are afraid. The women in Luke are dismissed by the disciples as telling an idle tale, until two of the men run back to see for themselves.

But Matthew – O my God – Matthew gives us an earthquake and lightening; and an angel crossing the great divide between heaven and earth. Matthew describes the stone rolled up to seal the tomb as “great”, a word that means huge, so massive as to be immovable. Pilate’s strong, armed guards - shake in fear and fall out like dead men. Then the dead man – Jesus - shows up *alive* saying, “Greetings!” Matthew is the only gospel which says the women actually *touched* Jesus, enfolding their hands around his wounded, risen feet – and we are left with a story about the once-dead body of Jesus embraced – with no hint of mere apparition, but a full blown resurrected and recognizable body.

This year, in which it seems there is so much unsettled in our world, I am grateful for Matthew’s big, earthshaking account of a cosmic resurrection. This year, we grieve the largest famine ever sweeping across four countries in Africa, with warfare and drought putting twenty million people in risk of starvation. This year, in which there are terrible threats to life, seemingly across the globe; nuclear warheads from North Korea, shifting alliances sweeping across Europe, a global refugee crisis continuing out of Syria, chemical warfare and bombs exploding in churches and over battlefields, so much tragedy and death.

We need Matthew’s resurrection this year, don’t we? The BIG one - with the great stone rolled away, the earthquake, the angel descending from heaven, the power of God proclaimed in full, cosmic display. But

in order to get our heads around this big, earth-shattering good news of resurrection joy, it still helps to remember how it begins small.

Matthew also describes the little details of how Jesus was buried, and how he came to be found alive. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary watched Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus; wrap it in a clean linen cloth, and lay it in his own new tomb. Before we can imagine the earthquake, or the angel in dazzling white, or even the Risen Christ appearing, we do know those Marys, and their small ways of witnessing to the resurrection. Those Marys, they are the faithful men and women who show up. They visit the hospital carrying little arrangements of flowers; they knit prayer shawls, and sit beside beds. They place phone calls and write notes of condolences when the time comes. They arrive early to usher for the funerals of folks they may not even know; they sing louder because the visitors around them don't know the hymns, they mix punch and pour coffee and stay hours after Memorial Service Receptions are over to clean up.

I know Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, don't you? What is it that propels them to keep showing up, even in the most heartbreaking seasons, even when their own hearts are broken? Like the Marys in Matthew's gospel, surely the reason those men and women keep showing up is this: They love Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Those Marys were there when he died, looking on from a distance; they were there when Joseph laid him in the tomb, they showed up in the early morning to make sure everything was the way it was supposed to be. They love Jesus, and their love for him makes them show up and face death head-on. It's a love that takes them into the painful places – beside the tomb, and to hospice care, to the shelter for the homeless downtown, and that Syrian Refugee camp far away. They keep showing up – those Marys whom you and I know so well - despite the sadness, and the loss and the death.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield's Presbyterian Outlook Lectionary blog, 2017.

If the story of resurrection, with angel and earthquake, is just too big to get our heads around; remember the Marys. For the love of Jesus – they just keep showing up. If the pain of the world is too overwhelming to know what to do, or how to help, for the love of Jesus, just show up. Show up where Jesus shows up, and I promise you will catch a glimpse of resurrection: beside the bed of the sick, in the solemn calm after the storm, at the grave of someone you love. For remembering the Marys and their relentless showing up for the love of Jesus – turns out to be no small thing.

One biblical scholar describes it this way: “What Mary Magdalene and the other Mary expected to see was Jesus’ grave, a monument to the sadness they felt in the soul, a confirmation of the cruel truth, that the world finally beats mercy and righteousness to death. Somewhere along the path to the cemetery, however, they left one world and entered another. Without even knowing that, they crossed over the border; they left the old world where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, and peace has little chance, and the weak eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another... and they entered instead the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus of Nazareth, who had been as dead as a doornail on Friday afternoon, was not in his tomb that morning, and the world – theirs and ours – has been turned upside down ever since... He concludes: The wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and the terrible news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, because nothing is nailed down any more... righteousness, mercy, and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword anymore! We have to decide where we stand, and what we will do, in this frightening - and joyful resurrection world.” The best place to stand, I believe, is with the Marys. And the best thing to do – is what the Marys do.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew* commentary in Westminster Bible Companion series, p. 366.

Start small. Just show up where Jesus shows up: At the grave, with the sick, among the poor, carrying food for the hungry. Matthew's BIG resurrection starts small, but the small things have a ripple effect of cosmic joy. Preachers are warned not to try to illustrate the resurrection. There is no story that does it justice, other than the pure telling of the gospel itself. But we do have our symbols which have qualities of that, to which, they point. Our cross is empty, a sign of resurrection. The Easter Lily, with its trumpet shaped blossom is known as the "white robed apostle of hope" a symbol of pure grace and life. And the butterfly, which dies to its old caterpillar self and emerges from the tomb of its cocoon, to take flight.

A year ago, terrible storms with high winds and freezing rain devastated dozens of acres of pine and fir forests west of Mexico City where monarch butterflies migrate for the winter. After making their thirty-four hundred mile migration from North America to Mexico, conservationists estimated that the storm killed as many as tens of millions of butterflies in March last year. Named by those who measure such things it was catastrophic mortality of unprecedented proportions. The entomologists who gathered there to estimate the death toll found thirty-six acres of a gray carpet of decaying wings.

In order to measure the depth of the dead, they reached down through the dead layers of butterflies, and at about eight inches down they discovered a layer of living monarchs, which had been protected from the freezing rain by the ones that had died. Because of the ones who came out from under those layers upon layers of death, they expect the monarch butterfly population can recover.<sup>3</sup>

This Easter morning God is reaching through the layers of death - that we and the world have suffered. Through the death by crucifixion, the great stone rolled up to seal the tomb, and even through Pilate's armed military guard, God reaches through all the powers of this world,

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<sup>3</sup> "Storms Devastate Monarch Butterflies Habitat in Mexico," March 2016, theguardian.com.

and raises to new life a new world of hope and joy. Through the death of Jesus himself, with a cosmic resurrection that shakes the earth, God reaches into the graves of our loved ones, with the joyful news that their life does not end there.

God reaches through our fearful anxiety over a world held hostage by terror, saying, “Do not be afraid.” God reaches into the overwhelming sadness around us, and points to the Marys, who just show up, reminding us that everything big starts small – even the good news of the earth-quaking, cosmic resurrection that changes everything for the good.

You remember how Matthew’s gospel ends. The Risen Christ appears again and tells his disciples to go – go make disciples of others; go baptize in my name, go teach, obey my commandments - to love. And remember, wherever you are, I am with you. I am with you always.

In the grand scheme of things, in something as small as your life and mine, the Risen Christ is with us through the aftershocks of great joy. Alleluia, Amen.