

Easter 2017
Matthew 28:1-10

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HPMF

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

Jesus’ mother probably did not call him "Jesus." Since Aramaic was likely her first language, she probably called him *Yeshua*—the same Hebrew word that you will find in your concordance under the listing for "salvation." Chances are that *Yeshua* first learned what his name meant when he was young and heard the story of the Exodus, which is one of the all time great Bible stories of salvation. As you will recall, it is not a story about believing certain things or even about doing certain things in order to gain God's favor. Instead, it is a story about God's gracious rescue of those who had run out of every other kind of hope. Our resurrection story, it is built upon this story of God’s rescue.

In Christianity, our highest point is today – the story of the resurrection of Jesus. Not just a story of resuscitation, but a story of resurrection. And Easter Sunday, the Sunday of the

Resurrection, is not only the greatest day of the church year; it is also the only one that is set by the moon. Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox. As complicated as that sounds, it makes ancient sense, since it means Easter coincides with the greening of the earth. Easter coincides with springtime. Christ is risen and the whole world comes to life. Sap rises in dormant trees, tulips start blooming, buds start budding, and trumpet lilies spill their sweet smell on the air. Putting the Sunday of resurrection in the Spring, this was a good move by whoever set the church calendar – guaranteed to renew our faith in the creative power of God.

And yet, it also a misleading one, because spring is entirely natural. Buy a daffodil bulb in the winter and it looks like nothing in your hands--a small onion, maybe, with its thin skin and scraggly roots. If you have had any experience with bulbs, however, that does not worry you. You know that all you have to do is wait. Come spring-time it will escape the earth and explode with color. As miraculous as it is, it is completely natural.¹ Even with the extreme hardness of this past winter, I never once doubted that Spring would eventually come...eventually.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, we do not expect to see them again here in our version of reality. We know this from an early age. Just two weeks ago our scripture text for the morning was the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and during the Children's Time I retold that story – hoping to inspire awe and wonder at the miraculous power of God. And as I got to the climax, where Jesus calls,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor brings up this concept of the 'natural' movement of springtime as opposed to the 'unnaturalness' of the resurrection in her article "The Unnatural Truth" from the *Christian Century*.

“Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus emerges from the tomb after four days, one of the kids said every so faintly (just barely loud enough for me to hear), “that couldn’t happen.”

I thought that perhaps I just need to work on the awe-inspiring nature of my story-telling skills, but I was relieved when recounting this story to a pastor friend of mine – he told me of his experience teaching 1st and 2nd grade Sunday school on Easter Sunday at his church in North Carolina, where after reading the Easter story, one of the first grade boys stood up and said to the whole class, “That is impossible.”

And these children are correct – this is impossible, it is unnatural – and yet, we gather here on this day to say, it is so. We gather to say that we live in a world of impossible, that we follow the God who makes a way when there is no way. Every year we gather in anticipation of this story, every year we gather together on this day to hear the story of resurrection. Because we need to be reminded, at least once every year, of resurrection – we need to be reminded that we serve that God who brings life where others can only imagine death; we need to be reminded that we are loved by the God who is not satisfied with redeeming 99 out of 100 – only 100 out of 100 will do for this God of ours²; we need to be reminded that our God rescues even those who seem to have run out of hope.

When we retell this story every year we remember that those closest to Jesus found his resurrection to be just as impossible and unnatural as you and I do today. Jesus’ female disciples went to his tomb to mourn, and in two of the gospel stories, to anoint his dead body. They did not come expecting resurrection. And his male disciples, they were locked behind closed doors in

² Wendell Berry uses this 99 out of 100 imagery in his essay “Health is Membership.”

fear and uncertainty. Unexpected. Unnatural. Yet in his resurrection, God proclaims that no bloodied, tortured killing or violence will ever have the last word. That despite what we see happening around us, despite the reports we hear – we remember that in the resurrection, God has proclaimed that violence does not redeem, love does.

Facing the reality of the cross, some of Jesus' disciples fled in fear, their hopes broken; some stood there and watched Jesus' slow and painful death, their hope slowly fading away with each moment that did not bring an army of angels to defeat the Roman; and a few disciples took Jesus down from the cross and wrapped his abused and broken body and laid it in a tomb, burying with him their hope for a renewed world.

Like those disciples, we can find our hopes crushed almost daily by news of violence. Perhaps we want to believe in resurrection, but the evidence on the side of death is simply too great. In the past two weeks alone, our communities have been rocked as terrorist bombs killed Coptic Christians who were celebrating Palm Sunday in their church; our Syrian sisters and brothers were gassed by their government and then bombed by U.S. missiles; our country dropped one of the largest bombs in our history, and for the first time that I can ever remember in my own lifetime, my unconscious mind woke me from sleep in the middle of the night with fears of nuclear attacks. And so I have found myself wanting to do what Jesus' disciples first did: in hopelessness and fear, to find a secure room and my lock myself in, hoping it will all pass me by. But it is those same fearful disciples that renew my hope. At the resurrection the Romans did not give up their power, they did not lay down their swords, or even stop executing people on crosses. The Sanhedrin and the Pharisees, upon news of the resurrection, did not admit they had

made a mistake and vow to make some changes. Nor did suffering and pain in the world cease. And yet, reality changed. The world changed. We see this change in the disciples who are changed – from fear to freedom; from silence to boldness. In their experience of the risen Christ, they understand that there is no wreckage so total that God cannot redeem it. There is no cause so lost that God cannot breathe new life into it. There is no hope so far gone, that God cannot renew it.

This is, for me, what renews my hope in resurrection the most, not so much the empty tomb, but the change in the disciples. When Jesus is arrested, they flee his capture in fear, they deny being associated with him for fear that they will come to the same violent end, and finally, after his death, they go into hiding – they gather in a locked room in fear, their hope in his transformation is gone and probably the best they are hoping for now is for everything to calm down so they can return to their old lives.

And then they experience the resurrected Jesus. And in that experience they go from hiding behind locked doors to proclaiming this story; they go from a paralyzing fear to living by a new freedom which ends gets almost all of them killed at the end.

They move out of their locked room in which they have been hiding and start telling and sharing all that they have seen and heard. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all of their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. In this way, their way of life becomes contagious. They tell the story of this unnatural

resurrection with their lives – in how they live hope. In a cultural that lives in fear and works to maintain the status quo, their lives start to look as unnatural as a resurrected body. All anyone has to do is to look: this is how resurrection people live.

And every time Jesus came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him. Those appearances cinch the resurrection for me, not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment Jesus said to the women, “Greetings!” and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening—not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord. In the end, that is the only evidence we have to offer those who ask us how we can possibly believe such an unnatural thing and impossible thing. Because we live, that is why. Because we have found, to our surprise, that we are not alone. Because to live otherwise, for me would simply be too hard. Because we have seen that violence only brings more violence, and so we chose to live instead by the light of the God of love.

And so I think the question for us is, how will you tell this unnatural story of resurrection with your life? In what ways will you tell of this impossible truth, of this unbelievable reality, that the creative power of God is still on the loose; that where death has been dealt, the people of God can anticipate resurrection to happen? Of course, in a world of materialism and militarism, a resurrected life will look unnatural and peculiar.

As unnatural resurrection people, how will we live the impossible truth of resurrection:

- Will you make the unnatural claim that, in a polarized nation, having conversations and building understanding can lead be glimpse of God's kingdom.
- The unnatural ways where we pass a basket around, saying what we have does not belong to us alone, but to God and God's creation.
- In the unnatural ways we will refuse to vilify our enemies, but seek their salvation as well as ours.
- In the unnatural ways you are trying to be a parent and grandparents in ways that seem odd to those who live by different values.
- In the impossible ways we might enter countries at war, armed only with the weapons of love and reconciliation

And so, hear with me, once again the words of the angel – the words that I need to hear again at least once more: “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.”

Remember, when Jesus stood among his disciples after his resurrection, he said, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” The Lord is risen! Every risk we take on behalf of God's reconciling mission in the world, we take in the power and joy of Jesus' resurrection. “Do not be afraid...remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Thanks be to God.

Amen.

