

Matthew 28:1-10

Earth Shattering Hope

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Early this morning, before dawn, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the tomb where they had left Jesus dead and buried. In better times, they had thought this man was their Savior. They saw him heal the sick and feed the hungry, forgive sinners, cast out evil, and even raise a dead man named Lazarus. But, last Friday they watched in horror as Jesus was nailed to a cross. With their own eyes they saw Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus' dead body and place it in a tomb. That was when the world went dark.

There is no telling how many times these women have been to Jesus' tomb in the last couple days. Somehow it helps the grief just to be near the dead body. Maybe this morning, as they returned again, the women told stories about those better days with Jesus back in Galilee. Ah, Galilee. How far their beautiful home seemed from this place of death. Or maybe the women made plans about what they would do now that Jesus was dead. Would they go back home, or would they stay in Jerusalem and look for a new Messiah? Or maybe they just walked along the road in silence, lost in their grief.

Then, they got to the tomb. "And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid.'" [Angels are always saying things like that. They show up with lightning and earthquakes and say, "Do not be afraid."] "Jesus is not here, for he has risen, as he said."

The women did not respond, "Oh, yes. Isn't that just like Jesus? I knew this would happen." No, they were terrified. But at least the women were conscious. The guards passed out. Why would they all be so afraid? Because they'd all been at the cross. They saw Jesus die. He wasn't sort of dead, or pretend dead. He was dead. And if he is no longer dead, then they do not understand how life works. That's a terrifying realization.

As a pastor, I have learned that the one thing we all believe in is death. No one has ever told me that he or she is agnostic on the subject of dying. We believe not only in the eventual death of our bodies, but also in the death of our relationships, dreams, careers, and all the good moments we gather in life. It confronts us all the time because death comes at the end of every story. It certainly isn't our favorite part of the story, but we know it is real. Our mental defenses may protect us from dwelling on death, but don't kid yourself—we believe in death.

Our lives are organized around it. The way you believe the story ends affects the way you live the rest of it. This is why we work so hard to achieve our dreams before it is too late. We know life is short and so we try to grab all the good things we can before someone blows the whistle and tells us to get out of the pool.

So if you are really paying attention to the message of the angels this Easter morning, and you consider the implications of the resurrection, then you will be terrified also. Like an earthquake, Easter shakes the foundations of our lives. If death and loss are not the great enemies, then we do

not know what we are fighting. We don't even know life's mission anymore. You don't understand Easter if it does not scare you.

Easter is not some sentimental reassurance about springtime hope. It is certainly not about bunnies, decorated eggs, or little girls in cute dresses. It is about women with their dresses hiked up to their knees running in terror out of a graveyard. "He is not here. He is risen." The women were right to be terrified. Everything that we assume about life has just been turned upside down. Our morals, ethics, and mission in life have to change. If the story doesn't end with death, then life can no longer be about taking care of yourself while you can. Now life is going to have to have a holy purpose.

No wonder the Roman soldiers passed out. They thought they had killed this Jesus. "It was nothing personal," they would say. They were just doing their job. But if he was now alive, then what does that say about their job? What does the resurrection say about your job? Your family? Your life? These are the pressing questions of relevance.

Every year as I prepare the Easter sermon, I am always amazed at how the Biblical commentaries wrestle over the historicity of this event. "Did it really happen?" is what so many scholars want to know. Maybe that is your question as well. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Oh, if only this would have really happened this morning. We would have CNN there with the cameras. We would run DNA tests, and we would find out for sure. Would you believe then? I don't think that would help. I think that would miss the point.

I believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead, but to tell you the truth that is not so difficult. The Gallup polls tell us that 87% of Americans believe in the resurrection, but that is not the real question. The more interesting survey would be to ask: what difference does it make that Jesus is risen? What difference does it make when you walk in the office or classroom in the morning? What difference does it make to your work as a mother or father? What difference does the resurrection make when you are struggling to find hope, when you are lonely and discouraged, or when you are trying to figure out if your life matters? The real question of Easter is: have you discovered the risen Christ in your own life? Is he changing everything about it? Sure 87% of us believe the Savior is alive, but how many assume he doesn't want to get involved? There's the question—not just is he alive, but is he involved?

The angel said, "He has been raised from the dead and indeed is going on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." If you are having trouble believing that the Savior is involved in your life, today the Easter angel directs you to go home. Go back to Galilee. Go back to work, to school, to the ordinary places where life is lived. Go back to the routine. That is where you will find him involved in your life. In the words of the angel, he has gone on ahead of you. He is waiting for you up ahead.

Do you see? No longer do we find death at the end of the story. Now it is the risen Savior who is waiting up ahead. Again, what you believe about the end of the story determines how you live the rest of it. If you believe that Jesus is waiting up ahead, then you have to live the rest of life with this earth-shattering thing called hope. There is still hope for the unresolved business

between the parent and adult child. There is still hope for those struggling with broken bodies and broken spirits.

There is still hope for the city, for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. There is still hope for you because Jesus is waiting up ahead. And if you believe that, if you have hope, it changes the way you live today.

In the year 387, an old preacher climbed into his pulpit in Antioch on Easter Sunday. It had been a hard year for the city. Another hard year. Food was in short supply and the taxes had been raised again. Out of desperation the people took to the streets in riots. In response to the rebellion, Rome conscripted most of the men to fight in distant wars to the north, while women and children remained behind to scavenge for food. The people despaired, believing their lives would never improve. When they came to church, they were looking for empathy but were surprised to hear their preacher, John Chrysostom, say the following: “Your resignation assumes that God is dead. Do not be so certain. He who has embraced death, has defeated its power over us. He who went down to hell, liberated every city held captive by hell’s despair. Christ is risen! Open the doors of your comfortable despair that the great storms of hope may blow life into us once again.”

Over 1600 years later, still, so much of society is designed to help you get comfortable with despair. And it is all because we think the story ends in a tomb. But what if it is a risen savior who is waiting up ahead for you?

Benediction: *“So the women left the tomb with fear and great joy.” What about you? Isn’t it time for you also to leave the tomb? Amen.*

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