

## Matthew 28:1-10

<sup>1</sup> 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.”

Easter is the foundation of our faith. It can't be proven but can be enjoyed, accepted, and experienced. We sense something special about today, from dressing up to more folks in church, rousing music, a special meal with family, and the joy of kids hunting Easter eggs. All this and more are Easter. It means looking for the good in our lives and putting aside all the negativity that can overwhelm us for a moment. The day affirms life itself. We may not always be sure why, but we know this day is special and different.

What does this foundational story mean for us? There are as many different answers as there are people here, but they all revolve around Jesus' resurrection.

Easter is all about Jesus' resurrection. It affirms Jesus' life and teachings, his love and compassion as the heart of the universe.

Once, when some youth in a confirmation class were asked what Easter means, my son answered, “God wins!” Another declared, “Jesus Lives!” Those answers have stuck with me for years.

Let's hear this story about God's victory over sin, which separates us from one another and God. It is also the story of God's victory over the last enemy, death, in

the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection declares twofold: first, there is nothing you can do that will stop God from loving you, and second, Life is the final word from God, not death.

Our story begins with these women going to Jesus' tomb. While the disciples had fled in fear, these women had looked on from a distance as he was crucified and followed his body as Joseph of Arimathea took the body for burial. Then comes the Sabbath, and the women return to the tomb when it is over. What are they doing there? Some stories indicate it was to anoint the body with spices so the smell of decay would not be so bad as the body decomposed.

Other scholars suggest they came because they didn't know what else to do. The one whose ministry they had supported was gone. They had bet their lives on Jesus, and now he was dead, and they were grieving. The sudden trial, torture, and execution of Jesus tore their world apart. It was a profound grief that we all know when we have lost someone dearer to us than life itself. They didn't know what to do, so they went to where they had last seen him.

They grieve for their loss but also remember that he had said something about being raised by God as a response to the way he lived and died. Could it be true? Maybe, just maybe.

So, they show up for one or all of the above reasons, and something earth-shaking occurs. The Scripture describes it as an earthquake. They encounter a messenger from God who rolls away the stone.

Like that First Easter morning, most of us have or have had massive stones in our path to keep us from getting where we want to go. They prevent us from realizing our dreams, goals, and plans. Many of us desire to accomplish something that is good for ourselves and meets other people's needs. We could describe it as our call from God. We want to do something, but it looks hopeless. Age or doubt whispers, "You can't do this; give up." But Easter says it is not hopeless. Easter promises that God sends us help to roll away the stones that block us from living out our dreams of doing something. Good is always sending us help; we have to be alert and accept it when it comes.

I know it's well-worn, and most of you know it many times over, but it gets to the point. In a flood, a person climbs to the roof of a house and cries out, "God, save me!" So, a canoe comes by, and the person says, "Go on, I am waiting for god." A

motorboat comes by, and the same thing happens. Finally, as the flood waters are at his ankles, a Coast Guard helicopter comes by, and he refuses help. He drowns, gets to heaven, and demands from God, “Why didn’t you save me?” and God replies, “I sent two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?” God sends us help. But we must recognize it and accept it.

After rolling away the stone, the messenger, for messenger is the biblical meaning of the word angel, the messenger sat on the stone. But wait, there is more. Even when the stone is removed, things seem possible but daunting. Fear can stop us dead in our tracks. That is when we need the messenger's powerful words: “Don’t be afraid.”

Whenever we hear that in the Bible, we know something astounding will happen. Now, this is not a command. We also know you can’t command someone not to be afraid. Instead, these are words of comfort, not command. It is like the sticker on my desk: You got this! It reminds me that I am not in this alone; God is with me and I can do it.

The messenger tells them what they had barely hoped was true: “He is risen.” And this is the heart of Easter, but wait, there’s more. The messenger is not done. It is all about Jesus, but it is also about the women. They have a job to do.

So, then, the messenger says, “Go.” The stone is gone, and the fear is tempered with hope; now go! “Go tell my brothers and sisters, the disciples, that I will meet them in Galilee.” So, off they sprint, overwhelmed with joy, awe, and a bit of fear.

So, these women are the first witnesses to the resurrected Lord, for as they leave in a hurry, they encounter Jesus, not just an apparition, but Jesus. They grab onto his feet. He repeats the words of comfort: “Don’t be afraid. Go tell my disciples to come to Galilee and we will meet up there.” He again is calling, “Follow me.” Just like he did when he first called them to “follow me,” it is a message that “You may have deserted me, but I will never desert you.”

In addition, he reminds the disciples that he is not asking them to go anywhere he hasn’t been. That is great news. When Jesus calls us, he is not calling us to go anywhere; he hasn’t already been. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he leads us to where we need to be and will also be there to meet us. The message from the women is the same message for us. Jesus wants to meet up with us, walk with us, and lead us.

This command to get his siblings is one of the scripture's most powerful signs of hope. Jesus has not given up on us. The people he is sending the message to are the same ones that, just a few days ago, deserted, denied him, and left him to be tortured and killed, accompanied only by fellow condemned people. In his time of most profound need, when he cried out “My God! My God, why have you forsaken me?” They were nowhere to be found, and they knew it.

The disciples must get past what they did, which won't be easy. It is so easy to get stuck there on Good Friday, focusing on the negative aspects of their behavior. Indeed, it is so much easier to dwell on their failure and Jesus' death. They need to get to the resurrection.

It is the same for all of us. We must get past our despair; with the news, social media, and divisiveness. There is so much negativity to focus on. As a teacher once told me, it is easier to be against sin and evil than for faith, hope, and love. We must get past these Good Friday Words, or it will destroy our hope. Our lack of hope makes us miss the wonderful world of new life all around us.

Good Friday words remind us that the world, his followers, you, and I did the worst we could do. We rejected God. That can hold us down and have us utter words like “What's the use? It will never work, and you can't.” They are words that can destroy our lives and the lives of those around us. They are words of spiritual death. But those words of despair and hope lost are not the last words.

So, these women, the first witnesses to the resurrected Lord, leave in a hurry with the message for his followers I still want to be with you. He says **I still love you, and you are still needed**. Meet me in Galilee because **You are still my family, no matter what**. As they rush back to the disciples, they hum the old Sister Sledge song, “We are Family.”

No matter what we have done, Jesus still considers us family and will bring us home to God's love. If the worst we have done can't keep God from loving us, then nothing can. Now, these are Easter words,

He is risen. Jesus is not dead, God raised him to tell us how much God loves us and that we are family. The cross, torture, denial, and betrayal are not the last words. They can't separate us from God. Death is not the final word; life is the final word from God. There are Easter words from God, from Jesus. God raised Jesus to send us this message.

That is the story of that first Easter morning.

Jesus is alive. He is risen!

May you enjoy that good news for the rest of your Easter celebration and life. He is risen!

He is risen indeed!