

## **Listen** to the Easter Proclamation

*Matthew 28:1-10*

2After 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. 4 For 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.” 8 So 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 brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

When my son was in a youth group, they were asked what Easter means. I have never forgotten his words that I used in my newsletter message: “Easter means God wins! God wins!” And that is good news for us, as God’s victory tells us that, through the resurrection of Jesus, sin and death have been defeated, and we have a home with God.

The story of Easter is our most important story as it reminds us that God loves all of us, everyone. Yes, I said everyone, no matter what. Maybe we can’t, but God can.

Easter reminds me of a Jimmy Buffett song: *Just when you think it won’t happen again, good guys win.*

Jesus lives. And we know that Jesus is much more than just a good guy. He is God’s word of love to us.

In this cynical, divisive, and troubled time, it is hard to see God winning, which is why we need our Easter faith.

It gives us hope because now we know the rest of the story, we know how it ends: love conquers hate, hope displaces despair, compassion overcomes fear, forgiveness defeats vengeance, and life, not death, is the last word. Whether we are aware of it or not, our hearts yearn for this kind of connection with the holy center of all things. We know how things turn out in the long run. God wins! Jesus lives!

Now Easter is not some naïve declaration unaware of all the sin, tragedy, and pain of life. On Good Friday, just a few days ago, Jesus was deserted, betrayed, denied, mocked, and crucified. Except for

crucifixion, we have all shared those kinds of days. Family, friends, faith, vocation, and life itself seem to betray, deny, mock, and desert us. It is leaving us feeling hopeless, like one beaten and left by the side of the road as people we trusted pass us by, wondering if anyone will stop. God stops.

We all have faced great pain and tragedies of loss in our lives, and some, even old ones, are still open wounds. Our faith does not protect us from this pain; everyone experiences it. Suffering, pain, tears, and heartache touch each one of us. Grief is a universal experience. While this realization doesn't make our pain hurt any less, it can help us deal with it, knowing we are not alone and that we can find solace in God and by forging bonds of empathy with others. We can share our pain with others and theirs with us. As the old hymn *Blessed Be the Tie That Binds* declares:

We share our mutual woes,  
our mutual burdens bear,  
and often for each other flows  
the sympathizing tear.

What led up to that first Easter?

Tensions built up during Jesus' ministry, particularly over his criticism of the religious elite. And then his entry into Jerusalem, like a peaceful king with accolades from the crowd, and his turning over tables and driving merchants out of the temple caught Rome's eye; this man is trouble. The powers that be, the religious elite, led by Caiaphas and the authoritarian government of Rome, represented by Pontius Pilate, decided the world would be a better place if we were rid of this troublemaker and the disturbances he causes. They knew his movement would be crushed without him. Those who followed him would disperse, and things would go back to business as usual. They had a solution, a final solution: crucify him, a torturous form of execution that would end his life, and that would powerfully discourage even his most devout followers. That would be the end of him and his troubling movement.

They were wrong, of course. It's ironic, isn't it, that the only reason Caiaphas, the high priest, or Pilate, the Roman governor, are remembered at all is that they are a part of the Easter story. Little did they realize that they would be remembered as part of the story that shows just how wrong they were.

Rather than silencing Jesus and his message, they play a role in communicating God's eternal declaration of love through Jesus' resurrection.

Easter shouts "No!" to those like the Caiaphases and Pilates of the world. They represent for all times the powers that be, those of death, violence, denial, betrayal, mockery, and hopelessness.

God's answer to all that pain, then and now, is the resurrection. God raises Jesus from the dead. In doing this, God declares nothing, not even death, can separate us from God's love. The powers that be believed that they had silenced Jesus. They thought they had the last word, Death. But then God spoke a "no" to his death and a "yes" to Jesus' life and ministry and raised him from the dead; God will do the same for you and me. Easter is God's loving gift of life to Jesus and to us. And God's love makes a way for us to live and enjoy life.

Think of the most important blessings we have and have enjoyed: Family, Friends, Faith, and Vocation. These are a few of the gifts of God and signs of our life's meaning. Easter is a reminder to thank God for all that is good. It teaches us that God's way of love, forgiveness, and abundant life is how the world is supposed to be. And it will not be defeated.

Even people who don't believe or are simply curious know that, like Christmas, something is going on here. People dress up and go to church, to lunch, and join with people they love. Kids of all ages hunt easter eggs. It is a day of celebration and chocolate bunnies with solid chocolate ears. Some may not believe it, but almost everyone knows the story, and for many, the day is special to them.

It reminds us that the worst humanity could do in denying, betraying, torturing, and executing God's son cannot stop God from loving us; indeed, the resurrection is the declaration that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Our sins, our failures, our denials, and betrayals are forgiven. They can't keep God from loving us. While the first Easter changed the world, it started with uncertainty. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, maybe Jesus' mother, came to the tomb, not sure what to expect, probably out of deep grief; they wanted to visit with the one they loved, supported, and followed. Most of us know that kind of grief.

Unlike the others who traveled with Jesus and then deserted, denied, and betrayed him, the Marys stood by and watched at the crucifixion and were at his burial, and now come to his grave. While the disciples tremble, locked up by guilt, fear and shame, the women come to the tomb. The Marys come to grieve at a graveside. And maybe, just maybe, they come to see if the resurrection Jesus told them about was real.

As they arrived, a great earthquake occurred. They felt the earth move under their feet as Carol King sang. A seismic event to accompany this cosmic event. And isn't that what Easter and resurrection are, an earth-shaking, world-changing event? After which, nothing is the same. An angel, the biblical word for messenger, came to them, rolled away the stone, and sat on it. He sits on the rock and speaks, a parody of the guards falling into a trance-like state. The angel tells

them to see for themselves, “You are looking for the crucified Jesus, he is not here. What he said is true. He is risen.”

“Don’t fear,” he says to the women. Like the birth announcements foretelling Jesus’ birth, and the angels speaking to the shepherds in their fields **Don’t fear** is the message. As I have said many times, when you hear “don’t fear,” it’s something wonderful, powerful, and awe-inspiring that is in the offing.

The angel then says, “Get a move on,” and tell his brothers and sisters he is risen, and he will meet them in Galilee. It is amazing that in a patriarchal society where a woman’s testimony was not to be believed or even allowed in court, God has chosen as the first two apostles, messengers of the resurrection, these two women. I think it is precisely because they represent powerlessness and dependence, but they also represent faithfulness.

These two women were also present during his hardest times as they looked on at his crucifixion and burial, while the disciples were nowhere to be found.

Tell the disciples that he is risen and will meet them down the road in Galilee.

In fear and joy, they run off. As they hurry back, the risen Jesus meets them and says an ordinary hello. Overcome, realizing it is really true that he is alive, they fall down and worship at his feet, clinging to him, amazed that the angel told the truth, the truth they had heard from Jesus. He really is alive.

Jesus repeats the angel's words, “Don’t be afraid; go tell your brothers and sisters. We will meet up in Galilee.”

This “don’t fear” is as much for the disciples as it is for the women. The disciples know that they just denied and deserted Jesus, and one of their own betrayed them. They deserted him and hid in fear.

The disciples know what they have done. They worry, “If he is alive, what will he do to us? What will he think of us?” They need to hear, “Don’t be afraid.”

This “don’t be afraid” is a word of comfort to the rest of his followers, assuring them that he understands, loves, and forgives them. Jesus will meet them in Galilee.

It is vital to note the meeting place, which was called Galilee of the Gentiles in scripture, symbolizing the rest of the world, beyond just the Jewish world. The message of resurrection is for

all God's people, all the world. Easter proclaims that sins are forgiven and death is conquered, not just for some, but for everyone, including you and me.

That is the message of Easter: He is risen; death is defeated; he is risen; sin has been forgiven, and nothing keeps God from loving all creation.

That is the good news of Easter.

Let's end with the call and response of the day

Christ is Risen.

**He is risen indeed!**