

TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see 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 on 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; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

LAST NIGHT as I sat pondering today’s message, something amazing happened. My email sensor began dinging right and left. Over the period of a half hour, messages began bursting into my mailbox with the words: Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

My preacher pals in Australia and New Zealand were shooting off email like fireworks, and soon other ministers in various time zones around the world began to shout the good news: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

I loved it! In fact I needed it. I needed reminding that the joy we are sharing today, the wonderment and gratitude and promise, are being celebrated everywhere, in all sorts of cultures and climates. I needed reminding, in the midst of my final preparations, that our Easter experience is not dependent on my words or perfect coordination of this service, or whether the butterflies hatched on schedule.

My preacher pals had already experienced the greatest moment in the entire church year while it was still dark in San Francisco. But the miracle of the resurrection had already begun.

Actually -- isn’t that how resurrection always happens -- while it is still dark?

Certainly that’s how it started for the two women, the two Mary’s, who went to the tomb at Sunday’s dawn. In other gospels the women were fulfilling the task of anointing the body; but in Matthew, they were simply distraught and lost people who could not and would not wait any longer to rush to his tomb. Defeated by the powers of imperialism and oppression, they went to sit *shiva*, to wail and weep, to try to make sense of it all, to baptize their memories and experiences of Jesus with their tears and loud cries.

I know that all of us can identify with some sort of nightmare of darkness, tears, and torment, a floundering toward the tomb without a shred of Easter hope. I know that there’s not one person here who cannot say that at some point or another they’ve not seen

their hope crucified. Loved ones die; relationships end; jobs are lost, terrible illness strikes not only the old, but the young and vigorous.; addictions claim us or impact us.

While it is still dark all around us, we can identify with the two Mary's seeking the solace of the tomb.

But can we also identify with what they find? An earthquake! A dazzlingly radiant angel of the Lord! Several stunned guards! An empty tomb!

And then, an experience of Jesus himself!

We read these stories with such casualness, with a sort of anticipated familiarity, a pre-understanding, as scholars Borg and Crossan call it. I wonder if this familiarity gets in the way of experiencing that inexpressible, undeniable, outrageous dawning that a horrific loss has been redeemed; that the imperial powers of the world have not won after all; that love has become the soul of justice and justice is the body, the flesh, of love; that death and despair will never have the last word -- And that with the very first words, of the risen Jesus, "Do not be afraid" we can dare to live into realities that have seemed impossible! We can free ourselves from the bondage of self and from the bondages of oppressive systems and powers.

Do we understand that the earthquake is the absolute promise that God never has and never will forsake us, that "good" will ultimately triumph, that we are never alone, that we can absolutely resist temptations to abuse power and to be abused by power, that passion and compassion are the hallmarks and guarantees of the risen Jesus?

What else are the Easter stories about? Yes, God raised Jesus, and that has something to do with our understanding that Jesus is indeed God's Son. And yes, certainly there is the promise of an afterlife.

But Easter is not a passport to another world. It is a quality of perception for this one.

Even the idea of resurrection offers us hope, and hope offers freedom. Easter is about lives changed, grounded in promise; reshaped and renewed by hope, cultivated by the Spirit of a living God who lives in us and through us. Resurrection is the absolute and radical trust and knowledge that we do what we can, the best we can, working toward all the good we can; and then we leave the rest to God. Without this personal centering in God, without trusting in God to make things right, Annie Sullivan would never have been able to teach Helen Keller to speak; Albert Schweitzer would never have founded his hospital in east Africa, nor left us the definitive statement: "The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

Without the resurrection promise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would not have had the freedom and courage to engage in a conspiracy against Hitler within Nazi Germany itself. Without it, Desmond Tutu could not have opposed apartheid with such courage,

infectious joy, and a reconciling spirit. Without it, Martin Luther King could not have held on to his dream even as he held it out to all people.

Do not be afraid, Jesus says, for I live. I live as surely as the butterfly has come out of the cocoon. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, says Jesus. And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.

There is no question that we live in a Good Friday world. The evening news reminds us that the powers of the world still seem to rule. We just marked the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq, with no end in sight. The Federal government has had to step in to save our financial system from its own bankruptcy. Prices are rising while wages are stagnant or worse. And there is an unending spiral of violence and vengeance in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, some of South America. There's global warming and a growing pessimism that this new millennium of ours is turning out to be even worse than the old one

But even as we sit in dark and fret, even as we cling to our anxieties, the Wall has been torn down in Berlin. Apartheid has crumbled in South Africa. Relationships between Catholics and Protestants have been built in northern Ireland. Sarajevo, virtually destroyed in the longest siege in the history of modern warfare is now rebuilt and growing. Even as we clutch our fears, remain paralyzed by our anxieties, we see just this week, the political deadlock that threatened to split Belgium has ended with a coalition agreement. We note that the Kenyan government has approved unanimously the first of two bills needed to enact a power-sharing deal between the two rival presidents. And with joy we hear that the Christian community in Qatar – the Arab emirate adjacent to Saudi Arabia -- has just opened the first official Christian Church in that Gulf state. Even as we despair of any reasonable urban solution to rampant homelessness, the city of Dallas nears completion of a series of high-rise downtown apartments built for poor residents.

There is hope, if we will look for it. There is hope, if we work for it.

There is a passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians that begins with Paul saying, "So if **you** have been raised..." Not Jesus, but you and me. For Paul -- and for the core of the Christian tradition -- the faith isn't primarily about what happens to us after we die. The faith is about the transformation of our life *now*, our being raised from the power of fear and despair *now*.

Afraid and yet joyful, the two women become the first witnesses to an event that has changed the world. Doesn't Easter call us to do the same? Abraham Heshel was quoted in Newsweek last year as saying that "...there are no absolute proofs for the existence of God, there are only witnesses." We are called to be witnesses by living out God's inclusive passionate love, both God's mercy and God's justice, every day of our lives.

To borrow words from the Good Friday walk through the Tenderloin: Jesus rises from the dead when we love and could hate. Jesus rises from the dead when we forgive and we could hold a grudge. Jesus rises from the dead when we hope and we could despair.

Jesus rises from the dead when we believe and we could doubt. Jesus rises from the dead when we stand in solidarity with the homeless, the drug addicted, the mentally ill, the poorest of the poor. Jesus rises from the dead when we bring meals to shut-ins, when we weep with those who are sorrowful, when we write letters to politicians, when we swallow our jealousy or rivalry and replace competition with cooperation.

Several months ago my grandson Miles came darting into my office just before Sunday service. “Nana, nana,” he demanded: “You know that Jesus was killed, right? Well, when he came back from the dead, from being killed, did his body get skin on it again and his blood start to flow again? Or was he more like a ghost or a zombie? Or did his heart just start glowing and growing with love?”

All I could do was say, “That last one Miles, that’s the truth, the last one.”

Easter comes all over the world, in your life and in mine – because God is alive and real and active in our lives. Easter is not about preserving the memory of a dead person. It is about living fully and freely into your life with joy and confidence, believing in every impossible thing.

Sometimes the night is so dark, it seems dawn will never come again.
Sometimes a caterpillar looks like it has wrapped itself up like a mummy to die. .Sometimes the snow is so deep, and the ground is so cold, you can't imagine green grass and purple flowers.

But morning comes,
And a butterfly is born,
And the spring flowers fill the world with color.

Amen.