

Welcome

Welcome to Easter at Catalyst! Today is the day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It's the most important day in the Christian year, and it's my favorite Sunday every year!

Obviously this year is different. We've been worshipping only virtually for a month now, and we've been social distancing and ordered to stay-in-home for a month. By all accounts, we've got quite a ways to go before this is over.

Needless to say, we're not where we expected to be today. Spring is supposed to be a time of joy, of hope, of rebirth and expectation. Instead, a lot of us are stressed and afraid. Anxious and depressed.

For some of us, the idea of 'celebrating' today feels strange, out of step with the reality of our world.

So it would be good for us to remember that the first Easter broke into a world that was anxious and afraid. Today, I want to invite you to take a journey with me - one that moves from fear to courage, from anxiety to hope. I want to ask what the Resurrection means for all of us living in the time of Coronavirus.

[Downloads, interaction]

[**Scripture Slide**] If you have a Bible, turn with me to John 20. We're going to look at the day of Easter in John's story of Jesus.

Remember where the disciples were at this time: only a week earlier, they had accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem, welcoming him as a conquering king. They were sure the week would bring victory after victory.

When they imagined this Sunday morning, they imagined themselves flanking God's chosen ruler, watching him ascend to the throne of David to usher in God's true rule.

Instead, the week went from bad to worse. The city of Jerusalem turned on Jesus. He was arrested. Condemned in a sham trial. And, barely 40 hours ago, he was crucified as a traitor to Rome.

Their week ended not in triumph, but defeat. And the worst part was that nearly every disciple abandoned Jesus. Peter denied he even knew Jesus. Only the Beloved, Jesus' mother and Mary Madelene made it to the foot of the cross. Of the hundreds who came from Galilee with him, only three saw where he was buried.

They thought Sunday would dawn on a triumphant Messiah. Instead, their Sabbath night was dark and full of terrors.

John's story of the Resurrection opens on this Sunday morning, early - before the sun had even risen.

If you're feeling defeated, scared, anxious about the future, depressed... then you need to know that the Easter story is for you. You're in the same place those first disciples were.

So let's read the first bit of the story:

Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. -- John 20:1-3

Mary came to the tomb - the other Gospels tell us she was planning to anoint his body with perfumes - a burial custom that would've been denied to a victim of crucifixion.

But when Mary finds the tomb empty, she freaks out. She assume someone has stolen Jesus' body. So she finds Peter and the Beloved disciple.

In fear and anxiety of their own, they set out to see for themselves.

This is the beginning of the Easter story, friends. Not triumph. Not victory.

Fear. Uncertainty. Worry.

So we're going to celebrate now. But as we celebrate, I want you to keep in mind: Easter is not a day we whistle past the graveyard. It's not a day we hide our heads in the sand.

Our Easter celebration is grounded in a world of fear and uncertainty. So as we celebrate, as we sing, don't hide your anxiety about the future. Don't ignore your worries. There's room for them as we celebrate.

The resurrection isn't good news *despite* those things. It's good news *because we live in this world*.

[Music Break]

When we left the disciples, they were hurrying to the tomb, to see whether or not Mary's report that it was empty was, in fact true. And this is a strange moment:

Jesus repeatedly promised his disciples that his death would not be the final word, that God would in fact raise him from the dead. But in the shock and pain of Holy Week, the disciples either forgot or just couldn't believe. So watch what happens as Peter and the Beloved reach the tomb:

They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed—for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. Then they went home. -- John 20:2-10

They reach the tomb, and it's just as Mary said (even back then, it was important to believe women!). The tomb is empty. But the Beloved notices something - the cloth that wrapped the body are still there. That's strange, because if someone had stolen the body, surely they would've left it wrapped. And more than that, the cloth that covered the head was separate from the rest of the clothing.

Something in the tomb leads the Beloved to an impossible conclusion: no one has taken Jesus' body. No, Jesus has been raised from death. Jesus' promises suddenly come ringing back into his ears - after three days, I will be raised from the dead.

And just like that, the Beloved believes. All because of the head cloth lying separate.

That's a curious detail for John to note. My New Testament professor in college pointed out that the Beloved is the one sitting next to Jesus at the Last Supper. Of all Jesus' followers, he's the closest. My professor speculated that Jesus had a tic - maybe there was a specific way he always folded his napkin after a meal - something only those who ate with him and close to him often would've seen.

Could that be the small clue the Beloved saw? Whatever it was, something about that head cloth made him slap Peter on the back and say, "Elementary, my dear Watson!"

He believed. Before he saw.

Friends, our Easter journey is the same. We begin in fear and anxiety. And then in a moment, we remember the words of Jesus: I will never leave you or forsake you. I am with you always. I no longer call you slaves but friends.

And the question before us then is: will we believe? Will we allow hope to infect our anxiety? Will we allow possibility to corrupt our fear? Will we begin to believe?

If we can, we may be prepared for something truly miraculous!

[Video: Quarantine Resurrection]

Peter and the Beloved have returned home. But Mary can't quite bring herself to leave. So far as we know, the Beloved hasn't mentioned his suspicions to anyone else. So Mary remains near the tomb, a living ghost haunting the dead. Let's continue in her story:

Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. “Dear woman, why are you crying?” the angels asked her.

“Because they have taken away my Lord,” she replied, “and I don’t know where they have put him.”

Now she looks in the tomb again and sees two figures dressed in white. Does she recognize them as angels? It's unclear. She doesn't seem impressed. When they ask about her grief, she's honest with them, and they say nothing to her in return. She turns to leave and runs into yet *another* person (sheesh this graveyard is crowded for a Sunday morning!).

She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him.

“Dear woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who are you looking for?”

She thought he was the gardener. “Sir,” she said, “if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

Mary doesn't recognize Jesus.

And again, I think we understand Mary here. How many of us have had a hard time seeing past the moment this last month? How many of us are blinded by the tyranny of the urgent? With so much change, upheaval, uncertainty -- how many of us haven't even stopped to ask if God might be with us, working in our midst?

Is it possible that God could be with us, just as he promised, but we can't see because we're not looking?

What if God is standing right there, with you, calling your name?

“Mary!” Jesus said.

She turned to him and cried out, “Rabboni!” (which is Hebrew for “Teacher”).

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the Great Shepherd. He promises that, when he calls their name, his sheep will know him by his voice. And that's exactly what happens here. Mary, blinding to Jesus' identity by her grief - and by the sheer impossibility of resurrection - doesn't see Jesus for who he is *until he says her name*.

Can you imagine this? That in the very midst of your grief, your fear, your anxiety, Jesus is standing with you, calling your name?

Jesus who is no longer in the tomb. Jesus who has removed his grave clothes and folded his head covering and has walked out of the tomb in power, in life. He who has conquered death once and for all is now standing with you, calling your name.

What would you do?

I imagine that, like Mary, we'd want to hold on for dear life. But Jesus has other ideas:

“Don't cling to me,” Jesus said, “for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ”

Jesus says, "Don't cling to me." He's got more to do, and so does Mary. Jesus sends Mary to tell the other disciples that Jesus has been raised, and that he is ascending to the throne of Heaven.

This is an important bit. The word 'apostle' in Greek means "the one sent". It was how the early church identified those whom God had chosen to go tell the world about Jesus' resurrection. So in this moment, Jesus appoints Mary the Church's first apostle and preacher. She is the first person sent with the good news of the Resurrection.

In essence, what we're seeing here is Jesus saying, "Mary: I know you want to stay here with me. But I have to ascend to the throne of Heaven. And *you* have work to do too. You have to go and tell what you've seen.

Which is exactly what Mary, the first apostle, the first Christian preacher, does:

Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, “I have seen the Lord!” Then she gave them his message. -- John 20:11-18

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to his table, calls us by name.

1. What moments of light and hope have I experienced in the last week?
2. WHEN have I experienced fear and worry in the last week?
3. What worries and fears do I have as I consider the days ahead?
4. How can I breathe in God's Holy Spirit in this next week?

Blessing

Our Easter journey has been one from fear to faithfulness, from anxiety to hope. With Mary, we found the tomb empty. With Peter and the Beloved, we began to believe. And then, with Mary again, we were called, sent into the world to announce the good news that darkness, fear and anxiety do not have the final word.

But we're not finished with our journey. Because, if we can be honest with ourselves for a moment, this task feels too big. Especially right now, when we're so limited on social interaction, having to pay closer attention to our resources and means.

Which is why Easter night is so important. Again, the disciples are hiding and in fear. By now, they've heard the rumors of his resurrection. But look what happens next:

That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." -- John 20:19-22

Jesus appears among them. He shows them his crucifixion wounds, demonstrating that he is, in fact, raised from the dead. And then, he sends them in the same way he sent Mary. But he also breathes on them, filling them with the Holy Spirit.

Friends, this is the key moment of the Easter story. It's not *only* that Jesus has been raised from the dead. It's that he has given us the power of his Holy Spirit - the same power that raised him from the dead.

You want to know why we can hope? Because Jesus has given us the power of his resurrection.

You want to know why we can face the future with faith, rather than fear? Because we have the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead alive and working within us.

So God is sending us into the world, but God doesn't send us alone. God gives us the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us.

Over the next several weeks, we're going to explore exactly how the Holy Spirit transforms our lives. But for now, we want to close with a celebration.

Closing Cover