

**Matthew 28:1-10 N.T. 32 (NRSV)**

<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.”

**Matthew 28:1-10 N.T. Page 32**  
**“Unexpected Joy”**

**Opening Prayer:** Please bow with me in prayer. O God, it’s Easter Sunday, the day when you declared victory over sin and death. Keep us this day and forevermore alive in the grace of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Introduction:** **This is a cross**, the symbol recognized around the world for the group of people that are followers of Jesus Christ. This particular cross was presented to our church by Shari McBride of Happi 92 Radio last fall.

**The original cross** on which Jesus was crucified on Good Friday was of course much larger than this one, but it also wasn’t as clean and neat as this one. There were **nail holes** in that cross. There were **bloods stains** on that cross. It was apparent that **someone lost their life on that cross**. The horrors that happened on Good Friday on that cross are more than we can bear. The injustice, the suffering, the inhumanity of what happened on that original cross is staggering. **So, we clean it up**, we put putty in the nail holes, we scrub off the blood stands and cover it with a fresh coat of varnish. The cross that has come to symbolize our faith has been sanitized and sterilized. **And now days we** even fashion the cross into stylish jewelry we wear around our necks. **I sometimes wonder** if we truly remember what exactly it was that happened on the cross, the original cross of Calvary on which **Jesus was crucified and died**.

*“Alas and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I? At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away; it was there by faith, I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day.”* The cross is an instrument of death, **but it’s the empty cross that lead to an empty grave** that has become for us a **symbol of life**. Lord Jesus, thank you for the cross.

**PAUSE**

**Move I.**

**It takes a miracle to get from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.** We all know that, but I sometimes wonder if that has ever really sunk in. At our Tenebrae service this week, **at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> reading** Samantha said, “*When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*” **The crucifixion was completed.** Jesus had breathed his last breath. His lungs stopped sucking in air. His heart stopped pumping blood. His brainwaves stopped wiggling around inside his head. Jesus was dead. Jesus had given up his Spirit. And what do you do when someone dies. You have to deal with the body. **So, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate** for permission to take Jesus’ body for burial. And then with the help of Nicodemus and a few others they laid Jesus’ body in a nearby garden tomb. The sun was setting, and the day was done. Friday was giving way to Saturday, but I can assure you that in none of their minds has Friday been in any way a “Good” day. **In fact,** it was one of the worst days in any of their lives.

**We’ve all stood** at the side of a loved-one’s grave as the casket is lowered into the ground and the first shovel full of dirt is throw in. There is no more somber feeling than the moment when you turn to walk away realizing the you will never see this one who has been so dear to you ever again in this life. Death has chalked up yet another victory. But we’re Christians, we hold onto the **promise of the resurrection.** Resurrection is a promise that depends upon a miracle. Turning to our trusty *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, second edition, we learn that the word miracle is derived from a Latin word whose root is “**to wonder.**” The full definition reads, “Miracle– **an event** that is considered unusual or extraordinary in that it appears to be contrary to what is currently known in nature.” When someone is dead, their body stays in the grave and we never see them again in this life. **The dead stay dead.** Resurrection requires a miracle.

**From the time** Jesus' body is laid in the grave at the end of the day Friday, until the events recounted in our Bible Lesson today which occurred at dawn on Sunday morning, the Bible tells us nothing about what Jesus' followers did, or about what they were thinking, or how they were feeling. The intervening time was the **Jewish Sabbath** day. A day which is to be kept holy unto the Lord. **Did the disciples** eat the traditional seder meal? **Did they** go to synagogue to hear scriptures read and recite prayers? **Or did they** just hide away in disbelief and fear? **God has chosen** to leave this up to our imaginations.

**Most of us have experienced** the death of a loved one. We know the fog. It's hard to keep your thoughts straight. For you it's as if the world has come to a halt. Grief is unavoidable and instantly becomes overwhelming. You know you should eat but you have no appetite. You know you should sleep but your muddled thoughts keep you awake. Your life, your world, your very being has forever changed and you can't even begin to come to terms with what that means.

**We Christians** have a variety of names we've given to the day between *Good Friday* where Jesus died on the cross and was laid in the grave and *Easter Sunday* when God raised Jesus back to life and he walked out of that grave. In the eastern tradition it's known as the **Great Sabbath**, the day on which Jesus rested in the grave. In the western tradition is called either **Easter Eve** or simply **Holy Saturday**. I've even heard it called **Black Saturday** because it's a day for mourning and mourners wear black. What ever you call it, it's **a day in between**. **A day between** death and life. **A day between** despair and hope. **A day between** sadness and joy. It's a transitional day. **A day haunted** by the past and yet subconsciously yearning for deliverance from this present suffering. **“Who shall rescue us from these bodies that are subjected to death?”** (Romans 7:24, NIV). **Yes, it does take a miracle to get from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.**

**End I.**

**Move II.**

**But like the first disciples, we're not expecting a miracle.** We say we believe in God. We say we trust Jesus with our lives. **But we seem to doubt** that God's in control of anything that's part of our world today. **God might have been** the God of those ancient Israelites **and of those** first-century Christians, but that was a long time ago and this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most people, including most Christians alive today have never witnessed a miracle. **Sure, we've seen medical science** heal a person now and then, **but unusual or extraordinary events** that appear to be contrary to what's currently known in nature are few and far between. **Oh, and resurrections**, those are unheard of.

**But before we get to hard on ourselves**, I want to help you with some perspective. **Jesus coached and encouraged** his first disciples for three years before Jesus offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for everyone's sins. During that time the disciples walked and talked with Jesus most every day. They heard what Jesus had to say and they were eyewitness to Jesus' miracles. And what they didn't see with their own eyes, they heard about from people they knew who did see it firsthand. **Jesus cured** people of leprosy. **Jesus made** a lame man walk. **Jesus made** a blind man see. **Jesus even** raised people from the dead. In the Gospels we're told about three people Jesus raised from the dead. **First there's** the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). **Next there's** Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:46-56). **And there's** Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Each of Jesus' original disciples were either eyewitness to these resurrection miracles themselves or knew someone who was. They knew God could miraculously raise people from the dead. **But when Jesus died**, that was that, and none of them were expecting resurrection. **Even after entering** Jerusalem back on Palm Sunday, during the first holy week **Jesus had hinted** to his disciples that he was going to raise from the dead, but none of them got it. It all sailed right over their heads.

Let's look at John's account of that exchange between Jesus and his disciples. **When Jesus turned the money** changes tables over in the temple those present asked Jesus a question. So, this is **John 2:18-22 (NRSV)**, **“The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”**

The disciples weren't expecting the resurrection, they only saw it with hindsight. The point is that *God's faithfulness isn't dependent on the strength of our faith.*

**It's Easter Sunday**, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. **This Easter Sunday** is unlike any we've experienced before. Nature has raised up in rebellion against humanity and we're in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. **A tiny little microscopic virus** has brought everyone to their knees. Who you gonna call, **“Virus Busters?”** Are you gonna call? **Dr. Anthony Fauci? Dr. Deborah Birx? Surgeon General Jerome Adams?** What are you gonna to trust? **Are you gonna trust** the Imperial College of London or the SEIR model? **Are you gonna trust** social distancing?

**Quarantines** have long been used to curb the spread of infectious diseases, but past quarantines only separated the sick from the healthy. **But now we're** quarantining everyone from everyone else. **I heard** Kathy Dahlkemper say at one of her press briefings this week, **“Assume everyone you meet is potentially infected.”** **Sounds a lot like** stranger danger to me. But who am I? I'm just an engineer tuned pastor and I'll never be an epidemiologist. **Yet, God's** still in control. **But just like the first disciples, none of us are expecting a miracle.**

**End II.**

**Move III.**

**Yet unexpected joy is yet to come to those who faithfully follow Jesus.**

In this time where the norms of society have been upended. **In this time** when some businesses are closed, **and others** are booming. In this time where some are considered life-sustaining **and others** are consider non-essential. In this time when spring has barely sprung, **and school has already** let out for the summer. **In this time** where many church buildings are empty seven days a week, **and many homes** are over crowded 24/7. In this time, **Easter still comes**. Good Friday gives way to Black Saturday which gives way to Easter Sunday.

**In our Bible lesson** today, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother and James and Joseph head out at the crack of dawn to go to the garden tomb. As they are on their way suddenly there's a **great earthquake**. I expect that would scare the bejeebers out of most anyone but what happens next would be downright terrifying. **The Angel of the Lord**, who's appearance is like lightning and who's clothing is white as snow, descends and rolls away the stone at the entrance to the tomb. The Angel then tells the two Marys, "**Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised**" (Matthew 28:5-6a, NRSV). A miracle has indeed occurred. A resurrection. "*Death could not hold him; the grave could not keep Him from rising again. Living, He loved me, dying He saved me. Buried, He carried my sins far away. Rising, He justified freely forever. One day He's coming, O glorious day.*"

**It's then that we're told** that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary "**left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples.**" (Matthew 28:8, NRSV). **They went to the tomb** in despair expecting to see Jesus' dead body, but they left with the "*Unexpected Joy*" of having seen Jesus alive again. And because Jesus lives, we shall live also, **and no puny little virus** is ever gonna change that.

**Our church** like so many others has stepped up our use of technology to help us stay spiritually close even though we're physically separated. **In addition to live-streaming**, and using email, this week **we tried using Zoom** for the first time. Zoom is a virtual meeting application where people can see and hear each other in real time from anywhere via the Internet. **We used it for the Finance Committee meeting** this last Thursday and we're thinking about how to use to help our **City Youth** group stay connected. Zoom is proving to be very versatile. **Our Bishop** along with pastors representing each district from our conference used Zoom to record a Tenebrae Service while everyone was safely at home. I put a link to that Zoom recording on our church's Facebook page.

**But one of the more fascinating** uses of Zoom has been for choirs to get together and sing. There have been a lot of posts like this one on Facebook this week. (I linked this one to our church's Facebook page too.)

**This is the Evangelical Covenant Church** in International Falls, Minnesota. The church's worship leader, **Seth Bjornrud**, got his choir together on Zoom a couple of days ago and recorded them singing "*He Arose*" for their on-line Easter worship service today. Let's watch and listen:

{**Play Video: "ECC—Christ Alone HD.mp4" [1:49]**}

Sure, we're all stuck at home in the middle of a global pandemic. **Yet unexpected joy has still come and is yet to come to those who are faithfully following Jesus.**

**End III.**

**Conclusion:** The cross is an instrument of death, but it's the empty cross that lead to an empty grave that has made the cross a symbol of life. Thank you, Jesus, for the cross. **Yes, it takes a miracle to get from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.** Nature tells us that the dead stay dead. Resurrection is contrary to what is known in nature. Resurrection is a miracle. **But just like the first disciples, none of us are expecting a miracle.** But all thanks be to God, God's faithfulness isn't dependent on the strength of our faith. **Yet unexpected joy has still come and is yet to come to those who are faithfully following Jesus.** Because Jesus lives, we shall live also, and no puny little virus is ever gonna change that. Today is Easter, and Jesus was and still is a source of "*Unexpected Joy.*"

**Closing Prayer:** Let's pray. O God lead us to the cross where we first saw the light. Fill our hearts with joy because of your great salvation so rich and free.  
**Amen!**

**9:00 a.m. Closing Hymn: "*Easter People, Raise Your Voice*"**

All Three Verses

**Red Hymnal No. 304**

**Sending Forth:** Sure, we're stuck at home. Nature's rebelling against humanity. But God still performs miracles. Go forth, secure in the hope of the promised resurrection, our source of everlasting "*Unexpected Joy.*" **And all of God's people said...Amen!**