

## LOOKING INTO THE TOMB

Sermon Preached by the Dr. Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Matthew 28:1-10

As I was leaving a Zoom meeting the other day, someone said to me, “I hope you have a blessed Easter.” It was a natural thing to say. I don’t think it was just pious language; I think he meant it. And so do others who say it in more conventional terms, “Have a happy Easter.” For this is the normal expectation for Easter Day, isn’t it? That it will be marked by joy. This is its dominant mood: the joyful celebration of victory over the suffering and death and darkness of Good Friday.

But it’s a strange circumstance that in the narrative accounts of the resurrection, like the one I just read from Matthew’s gospel, joy was not the initial reaction. The initial reaction was one of fear, of awe.

Now we do not know precisely what happened when the disciples looked into the tomb on the first Easter morning. It’s clear from even a casual reading of four Gospels that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not agree in detail as to how this experience of Christ alive-after-he-had-been-dead first came, or even as to where it occurred. It’s generally acknowledged by scholars that the biblical accounts were written well after the events which they describe, that they incorporate a generation or more of oral tradition and that they may well be embroidered by legendary additions.

And yet, granting all this, it is still a curious fact that in all four gospels it is clear that the immediate impact of the experience of the resurrected Christ is not joy, as we might well expect. The biblical narratives of Easter use words like “terrified,” “shaken by fear,” “dumbfounded,” “frightened out of their wits.” And, of course, the wonderful event of the resurrection itself—the dead Jesus returning suddenly to life—is not even depicted.

All this suggests that the disciples and followers of Jesus certainly did not expect an empty tomb that first Easter morning. They went to anoint his dead body, to grieve. Jesus alive, apparently, was the last thing they expected. They were frightened, confused, awe-struck. And, if we are to recapture the authentic message of Easter, its substance, we have to come to terms with the initial reaction of these first witnesses, their *absence* of joy.

But it’s not easy for us to recapture the same mood of surprise and fright. Easter is hardly surprising or frightening for us. All through Lent and Holy Week and Good Friday, we anticipate Easter’s joy—as we should! We’d be playing a morbid game of charades if we didn’t. And so each year we anticipate reliving the joy that Easter brings. In fact, most of us would rather have Easter fall late rather than in the early days of Spring, so that nature can more obviously join in the joyous celebration, the daffodils and tulips nodding their silent hallelujahs too. But in all of this annual anticipation, this looking forward to the expected joy of Easter, we lose something from our understanding of the substance of the Easter message.

One reason we take the news of Jesus' resurrection in stride, I think, is that many of us have unconsciously absorbed the old Platonic notion of the immortality of the soul or its various New Age cousins—you know, the idea that there is some indestructible inner core inside of us which death cannot touch, which makes its claim on God to see to it that when we die, we really don't. The Christian church has never shared that comfortable belief. Rather, Christians believe that human beings, like all other forms of life on earth, really and irreversibly die. Jesus on Good Friday was crucified, dead—completely dead—and buried. That he would in some sense go on living in another, heavenly realm from that time forward was nothing his followers would have conceived. We moderns may understand that with our minds, but we've taken the notion of intrinsic immortality in with our nursery rhymes and fairy tales, our culture is filled with hints of it, and it dies hard. Yet as long as it persists, there's not much surprise when Easter rolls around with its announcement that what we've felt all along to be true is now given its annual Christian sanction. Death cannot be the end, we assume, Easter or no Easter.

For some of us, it's not romanticism or New Age fancy that gets in the way of our empathizing with the surprise and fear of that first Easter morning, but rather a resistance to any spiritualizing of the gospel message which deflects attention from what Jesus taught about peace and justice for all God's people in the here and now. In that perspective, the resurrection as a happy ending—this supernatural business of a dead man suddenly brought back to life again—spoils the whole story. Wouldn't the story of Jesus of Nazareth be more powerful and truer to itself in being less self-centered if his life in obedience to God's will had ended in death? Certainly, it would be more in tune with how we traditionally define tragedy. Some people say they'll take their Christianity straight, thank you, without any Hollywood ending which leaves everyone living happily ever after.

I understand this skeptical reaction which rejects the resurrection stories as pious fiction. The only trouble with it, apart from the fact that it denies the sum and substance of the earliest Christian records we have, is that it disregards entirely this strange reaction in the Easter narratives. When they experienced the resurrected Christ, they didn't go walking off hand in hand into the sunset with a choir of angels singing softly in the wings. On the contrary, "They were terrified ... dumbfounded . . . ran away beside themselves with terror."

We may not be able to recapture this mood after all the years, but perhaps, if we can understand what lies behind it and why it persists in all the resurrection narratives, we may better appreciate the substance of the Easter message, that Christ died and rose again.

For what Easter means, to begin with, is that we cannot escape God—even in death. And in particular, doesn't the resurrection mean that we cannot escape the startling ways in which God acts? Obviously, the disciples, the women, the followers of Jesus, were distraught and disillusioned in the face of his death. They wept at the cross and on the way to the tomb. But they had accepted it. They had come to terms with it. "They went with their spices to anoint him." How that little detail underlines how quickly they learned to accept Christ's death and live with it. For doesn't all life end so? You and I quickly learn to come to terms with grief and disillusionment and death. We learn to live with it. We have to.

So, wasn't part of their astonishment and fear the sudden realization that God would act *through* suffering and disillusionment and death? To be sure they'd had their hopes, their dreams, all the promises of life abundant which he had held out to them. But never in their wildest moments had they considered the possibility that God would accomplish his vast purposes of love *through* death and suffering and disillusionment. It's one thing to come to terms with death and disillusionment, to live with it and accept it. We all have to do that. It's quite another to be faced with the reality that this is how God acts, how God works out God's purposes for the world. No wonder they were dumbfounded and terrified. For now, they knew. God doesn't save us *from* suffering and death; he saves us *through* them. "Take up your cross and follow me" was no longer a possibility to be held at arm's length as a conceivable course of action alongside some others perhaps less stringent. Now it was there, living before their eyes. Life—abundant life—is not cheap.

And that brings us to this: before Easter brings its inevitable joy, it brings judgment. And no doubt that's what terrified them too. For as they buried him in the tomb, they buried not only their hopes and dreams and all the promises he had held out to them, all the love and care he had shown, all his concern for the unlovely and downtrodden—all this was buried with him. But this was not all that was buried. Along with all this they also buried their shoddy faith, their shabby quarrels as to who was to be greatest in the kingdom, all the petty jealousies and impatience with him, the ugly scenes of denial and betrayal—all this was buried with him too. We bury and we begin to forget. As they buried him, they also buried the fact that they all forsook him and fled in the not unreasonable hope that that unpleasantness would soon be forgotten too.

No wonder they were "beside themselves with terror" on that first resurrection morning. For all of the reality of their imperfect human relating to him was now alive again! The promises, the love, the vibrant life they had known, to be sure, but all the sad betrayals and shabby pettiness and indifference too. It had all come back! For there is no forgetting. Now it is all alive again. "And they were afraid." Is it surprising? Death was no longer a forgetting; it was a remembering.

And so, the most characteristic initial word on Easter is not, "Be of good cheer," but, "Be not afraid." For the One who returns, who brings it all back to life again, who permits no escape into death, who allows no burial, no forgetting, is the One we know. And with recognition, the fear, the embarrassment, turns into joy: "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." For now, despite the judgment, the bringing alive of all he had been and of all they had been, they knew they could trust that the judgment he brought alive was the judgment of love. That was who he was. So, Easter becomes a commentary on John's words, "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear."<sup>1</sup>

Now, is this gladness, this joy, possible until the last enemy, death, has actually been overcome? Not just for ourselves but for others? There are those who say that the meaning of Easter is primarily the reality of the new life Christ brings here and now; what happens to us afterward is secondary. And there's much to be said for that, of course. For it's true, what God has to offer to us now through the life, death, and

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:18.

resurrection of Christ is the conquest of all life's enemies in the world around us: the injustice and prejudice and indifference and fascination with ourselves, the anxieties and resulting pride and self-justification. All of these enemies of life here and now are overcome in the reconciling love of God in Christ. We don't have to run around like scared rabbits or frightened hyenas—bolstering our little insecurities by feeding on the lives of those around us. Life—abundant life—is a possibility for us here and now. All the doors that shut us in here and now, fear and estrangement and hostility, all of these are overcome. The doors are opened to abundant life.

But if death, the last enemy, is not destroyed, the last door not opened, then what is the ultimate outcome of our earthly lives? Are we to be nothing but fertilizer for the generations to come? To be sure, the martyrs and heroes of our faith—the apostles, the Reformers, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, the dear saints who have gone before us at Union Church—they have all provided a strong foundation for the building of God's realm here on Earth. But is the last door, the door that banged shut on them—death—to remain shut? The door which says No to all life's ultimate hopes and dreams? Are our dear, departed ones to remain lost to us forever?

Perhaps, it makes no difference. The door can remain shut since there's so much in life to be realized here and now. But is this not, in the end, at least tainted with a self-centered view? What of the thousands upon thousands of people who have known nothing but closing doors in life here and now: the mentally challenged, the unloved children, the refugees of Syria and Rohingya and Central America, the warped and twisted minds and bodies that know little if anything in this world but doors banging shut in their faces from childhood on until the last door, the last enemy, bangs shut. What about them? What about the tens of thousands on whom COVID-19 has and will close the door before their lives have fully blossomed?

T. S. Eliot puts a haunting line into the mouth of one of the Magi coming to seek the child born in Bethlehem:

... were we led all that way  
for Birth or Death? ...<sup>2</sup>

No, says Paul. All of life's enemies, including the last enemy, are overcome. "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death...Death is swallowed up in victory."<sup>3</sup>

The good news of this day is that death is given over to life, and the darkness has been overcome by the light.

So, the Easter cycle: from death and grief and disillusionment, through fear, and even terror, to the joy that is its ultimate and predominant mood. For God's Yes will not abide life's No or death's No. He is not held in a tomb, nor shrouded in grave clothes. The myrrh and aloes cannot weigh him down, and the stone could not keep him bound. He is risen, the Lord is risen indeed! All the heavens proclaim a truth too great to deny.

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<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi," *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 69.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:25-26, 54.

There is reason to rejoice today. Life has overcome death, and neither will ever be the same again.

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:57.