

## EASTER CHANGES EVERYTHING

Matthew 28:1-10

April 17, 2022

Let me tell you what is going to happen today. A little insider information just among the few of us. Earnest, well-meaning, hard-working preachers will *explain* what happened that morning as the new day was dawning. Commentaries will be quoted. Ancient sources will be cited. The peculiar story will be set down next to other miracle stories recorded in sacred texts around the world. The experience at the tomb will be recast as the fuzzy memory of grieving friends, feelings and perceptions recorded as if they were actual encounter. That's what will happen, and the intent will be to find a rational or reasonable way to relate to the sophisticated, smart, savvy worshipers (folk like you) that fill our churches today.

And they will *fail*. Why? Simple. The impulse is backwards. We do not explain Easter. Easter explains *us*.

Now, I have to confess that my sympathies lie with those seeking a more palatable proclamation, especially on Easter Sunday. After all, as someone told me this week, today is the Super Bowl of the church year! It's our biggest chance to draw a crowd, and with a little luck or skill, some of you may even return next week. I know my role. I need to give you a message that makes sense. You need to leave here today with a gospel decoder for complex times. Something you can take home and immediately put into practice. A message that pleases you enough to elicit from you Presbyterians some agreeable nods or, heaven help me, an audible *Amen* at the end...please?

I want that palatable proclamation, and here's what I have to work with: a story with angels and earthquakes and shiny clothes. And Jesus, who was

dead—really dead—raised, resurrected, really alive. Good luck with that, preacher!

I want to deliver a message today about how *you* can make a difference in the world. I want to offer you some tips for self-improvement, some practices to grow in faith and perhaps achieve greater happiness. I want to offer a list of ways that people of faith can transform the world if only we band together, work together side-by-side. I want a memorable message all about *us*.

After all, in a time of such dramatic polarization and bitter division, the *only* conviction that seems to unite all of us is this: *we run the show*. We are the protagonists in the story. Masters of destiny, we humans have the capacity to control the circumstances and consequences of our lives. Whether you prefer to emphasize individual or collective responsibility, whether you focus on personal transformation or social change, the core principle is the same, unquestioned assumption of life in a secular age. *We are in control here*. Meaning and purpose are to be found from within. We are creators of the world we inhabit. Ultimately responsible and incomparably powerful.

Can I be frank this Easter morning? These assertions of unlimited human power are destructive and deceptive *lies*. They are lies. Destructive because they drain the wonder and sacredness from a world overflowing with both. Deceptive because they relentlessly require more from us than we are capable of producing.

Surely our hearts know better. Surely our lives are immersed in mysteries beyond our control, outside our understanding.

Let me suggest that all the experiences that impact us most deeply and change us most profoundly do not come as a result of our careful planning or creative genius, but purely by grace. By grace! They do not require an explanation. Only a witness.

The way you feel when the one to whom you have given your heart walks into a room. The breathtaking beauty of a world you did not create coming to life again. The irrational impulse you cannot control to help a stranger in dire need. The tug on your heart when you must speak or act. The unprovoked tears that fall in a moment of pure joy or profound sadness.

Almost everything that matters most lies outside our influence and comprehension. To try to explain it is to extinguish the meaning. Try to give a logic for love, and you've lost it.

And so, let me say this, with some trepidation: Easter defies explanation. The resurrection story stands as a stunning testimony that, by God's grace, everything can be changed. That nothing is impossible. That fear can be vanquished. That life can triumph. That love will win. No explanation here. Only witness.

Remember, that's how it started. Really the whole thing comes as a shock. It's the first day of the week, and darkness lingers as two grieving women get up before sunrise and make their way to the graveyard. Two nights ago, these women stood at a distance and saw their friend, the source of their hope, crucified as a dangerous criminal. They watched as a great, heavy stone was rolled in front of his tomb.

And I'm not sure why they decided to return, to go back just as the new day was dawning. Maybe they needed to be sure that the painful events of the previous days really took place, that they weren't just a nightmare. Perhaps they felt the need to do *something*. I imagine them like my grandmother who baked cookies for the hospice nurses the morning after my grandfather died. Maybe they just couldn't sleep. Matthew only tells us that they went to see the tomb. Perhaps pay their respects. But I do wonder. I wonder if their hearts remembered the promise. "On

the third day," he had said. I wonder if, even in that darkness, some faint hope persisted.

Whatever their intention, whatever they were expecting, what happened next was unimaginable. First, the earth began shaking beneath their feet. Then an angel, bright as lightning and shining like sunlight on freshly fallen snow. The first words the angel speaks to the women are absurd, completely impossible given the circumstances. But they also comprise the most common command in all of scripture. The gospel message in two words: Fear not.

And now, the angel, perched atop that massive and now pointless stone, continues, "You are looking for Jesus. He was crucified. But he is not here. He has gone ahead of you to Galilee. *You will see him.*" And then, they do. First, they hear the news, and then they see him. Then they take hold of him.

And in these few, simple verses, these divine encounters, *everything* changes. You can sense it in the way the pace of the story picks up. Go quickly. Suddenly Jesus meets them. They run to tell the others. The slow march of death's dominance becomes a literal sprint to breathlessly publish the news. It's not over. We saw him. You will, too.

Matthew says the women leave the tomb with fear and great joy. Of course, they did! The fear of Friday persists even as the joy of morning dawns. Fear and joy are always interwoven.

But make no mistake about this. You and I are here today because their joy outmatched their fear. It was joy that led them back to Galilee, where these women become the first preachers of the gospel, the first witnesses to the triumph of God and the fresh start for a broken world. It was joy. Joy in what only God could do. They do not have a proposition to deliver, an idea to try out. They have a story to tell. A story of being confronted by a living God. We saw him. You will, too. It still happens. I can't explain it, but I have seen it.

I've seen someone feeling far off from God, afraid, alone, stopping by to pray in the peaceful quiet of

a sanctuary. I've seen it. A man beaten down by the exclusionary message of his childhood church, just sticking his head in for old time's sake. I've seen it. A young family, just settling into the neighborhood, just looking for a preschool in the area. I've seen it. A teenager just trying to find a path through the pain of their parents' divorce. I've seen it. I've seen a woman grieving the loss of her husband, just here for one Sunday because he always went to church. They always sat together. I've seen it. A parent at wit's end, nowhere left to turn. I've seen it. Someone looking for directions...or direction. I've seen them sitting in the parking lot. I've watched them just stopping by, just looking, just because, just trying it out, just in the area, just out of options, just desperate for hope, just sitting in the back on Easter Sunday, just needed a break from it all, just this once, just one more shot.

And, just like that, something happens. At just the right moment, someone finds that person. A living God reaches beyond the bulletins and the pews and the hymns and the sermon and speaks to them. I've seen it. Jesus finds them, *and everything changes*. Friends, I do not believe in the resurrection of the dead because I understand it, but because I have seen it. Lifeless souls reborn. The walking dead given a whole new beginning, a fresh start. And maybe this is your story.

It can be. It can be your story today. Because, on Easter Sunday, in spite of our fear and our doubt and our weariness and our guilt and our despair over a world in the grip of terror and held by hatred, we can be changed. Please hear this. No matter how deeply buried you feel today, there is no stone large enough, there is no guard strong enough, there is no bitterness bitter enough, no darkness dark enough, no silence silent enough, no cynicism cynical enough that God cannot reach you. It still happens. It can happen today.

There is a second ill-advised practice among preachers on this day each year. You may have experienced it yourself. It involves standing before the large crowd of worshipers on Easter Sunday and

scolding you, bitterly reminding you that we worship every week at the same place. Perhaps wishing you a Happy Thanksgiving. Now, you won't hear that from me today. Not today. For if ever there was a day to come to church, you've chosen the right one. If ever there was a ray of hope for a broken world, that ray shines this morning. *We saw him*. You will, too. Everything can change.

Maybe your heart carries that persistent hope that defies explanation. Perhaps, like those women who rose early on the first day of the week, some part of you believes the promise of new life is for *you*. You see, the power of these resurrection stories is that they have no end. Each one is punctuated with the assurance, "To be continued..."

As long as this is true, anything is possible today. Not because it makes sense, and not because you or I could make it happen. Only God could do this. Easter changes everything.

I do not have an explanation. But I do have a story. A college freshman intent on law school, a future in politics. Aimed solely at achievement. Driven to succeed. A clear ten-year plan and a burnished resume. And then, everything changes. An encounter I was not expecting. A call I was not seeking. An assurance I didn't know I needed. A life I could never have planned. A faith that found me. A light undimmed by time's passage. A purpose that invigorates me still.

So, here is what my heart knows—my message for you this Easter Day. Every dead end can be a fresh start. If you stay alert, keep engaged, this journey will shape your soul in ways you could not imagine. Meaning beyond monotony. Joy beyond fear. Hope beyond despair.

It's not over. Jesus Christ is risen. I have seen him. You will, too. Tether your life to this truth. Stake your life on it and then hang on tight...because *everything will change*. Amen.