

Our Pandemic Easter

Matthew 28

April 12, 2020
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Years from now we will look back at this Easter the way parents remember when things happened in their kids' lives. It was right before our daughter was born, or right after our son graduated. We remember things by how they fit into really important events that were going on.

This Easter will always be remembered as our pandemic Easter. *Do you remember that pandemic Easter at home? What year was that? Do you remember the Easter we celebrated the resurrection online?* And the answer for each will be, *Oh yeah, the pandemic Easter.*

Just thinking like that feels good because it gives us hope that someday this crisis will be behind us. But this Easter will live on in our memories. For many, this is the first Easter in your whole life you've not gone to a church building or to Grandma's. No lunch buffets. No family photos. Make sure you take Easter pictures today including all the bedhead and flannel PJs. You know who you are.

We will always remember our pandemic Easter, but let's make sure our pandemic Easter is about what every other Easter is actually about. It has nothing to do with where we worship or how we look or what we eat but who we celebrate and what we remember. In some ways, this Easter brings greater clarity to what Easter is truly about.

Easters are about Jesus' resurrection, an empty tomb, shocked and thrilled disciples, and a world turned upside down by it ever since. It is the power of the new creation in the old creation. The supernatural invading the natural. Hope in the midst of man's oldest pandemic, which is death itself. Let's lift our attention off ourselves and this crisis and rejoice in what happened that first Easter morning as told by the disciple Matthew.

To set the stage, we go back to Friday afternoon. Jesus hung on the cross from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Darkness came over the land as God the Father treated his own Son as if our guilt was his guilt. Somewhere around 3:00 that afternoon, Jesus cried out, *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30 ESV) and died. When he died, Scripture says there was an earthquake. The curtain in the temple was torn in two. The Roman centurion, who just hours before was likely part of the Roman soldiers who mocked and nailed Jesus to the cross, saw all this happening and proclaimed, *"Truly this man was the Son of God!"* (Mark 15:39) Quite a heart change.

Here's what happened next—because the Jewish feast of Passover was starting in just a few hours, the religious leaders wanted the three men dead. To expedite this, Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two robbers next to Jesus. This meant they could no longer push up with their legs to breathe, so they suffocated quickly. This all sounds barbaric because it all was barbaric. The Romans had no qualms with using whatever means, no matter how cruel. They came to Jesus and were surprised to find him already dead. None of his bones were broken, fulfilling prophecy that foretold it. No bones broken. No lack of air. How did Jesus die? This is a very important point.

"No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:18).

Jesus died *on* a cross, but the cross didn't kill him. As the Son of God, Jesus had authority over his own life. Nobody could take it from him. *Jesus died when he died because Jesus chose to die when he died.* Some people think that Jesus was a victim. Things got out of hand. He was overwhelmed by a mob. His death was a tragedy of circumstance and political intrigue. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What happened next? Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' body. The reason was that often the Romans would just leave the bodies hanging for weeks. This was part of the purpose of crucifixion, to shock and intimidate any who would defy mighty Rome. Vultures and decay would eventually eliminate the remains. Jesus' followers obviously didn't want Jesus' body to suffer that indignity. The Roman governor, Pilate, gave permission to bury Jesus' body. Nicodemus joins Joseph along with some of the women disciples in preparing the body according to Jewish custom. This meant wrapping the body in cloth and spices. But they didn't have the normal amount of time needed to do this. Passover was about to begin at 6:00 p.m. and that was a hard stop for everything including burying the dead.

So, they laid him in a nearby tomb that Joseph owned. It was unused. This helped silence later talk about his body being confused with another in the crypt. They rolled a large stone in front of the opening and completed this by 6:00 that evening. Friday night passes. The next day (Saturday), the religious leaders get thinking and they remembered that Jesus had said he would rise again (in this they knew Jesus' teaching better than his own disciples). Pilate gives the order to secure the tomb, which they did with a seal and a contingent of soldiers to guard it. As the religious leaders went to bed Saturday night, they thought, *well I guess that is the end of that because that is the end of him.* How wrong they were.

"Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1).

The other gospels describe it as just at the breaking of dawn on Sunday morning, sometime after 6:00 a.m. Matthew mentions Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. These two were there at his burial. We know from other gospels that there were more than just these two women coming to the grave. Their purpose was to anoint Jesus' body fully according to Jewish custom, something time did not allow Friday night. On their way, they ask the famous question, *"Who will roll away the stone for us?"* (Mark 16:3)

"And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. "And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4).

Earthquakes in the Bible often signal something big has happened. Here, an angel of the Lord shows up, goes to the tomb, rolls the large covering stone back. Another gospel says, he threw it aside (*I would like to have seen that!*). And then he sits on the stone. The women are just about to arrive when the earthquake hits, they round the bend and here is the scene. The stone is laying on its side. The door to the tomb crypt is wide open. Roman soldiers are on the ground frozen in shock. And sitting on the stone is what appeared to be a young man. This was an angel. His appearance shone with the glory of God, which they described as like lightning.

We have some powerful storms around here at times, especially at night. Have you noticed that no matter how drawn the shades are or how closed your eyes are, lightning light penetrates? It's so brilliant you can't *not* see it. Looking at the angel was like staring at lightning, something none of us have ever successfully done.

His appearance had a powerful effect. Verse 4 says the Roman soldiers were so afraid they went into shock and laid there like dead men. Among the Roman Legion, who did they pick to guard the grave of the most famous person in the whole land? This wasn't the B team. Likely, they were the toughest guys in the Legion; their Seal Team Six. Yet, even they couldn't handle the appearance of this angel. I wish they would have tried to stop the angel. I would like to know how that went for them.

"But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.'" So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (Matthew 28:5-8).

Can you imagine the bewilderment? What? A powerful earthquake. Then you see your first angel. The angel talks to you and tells you incredible news. *Jesus is now alive? What?*

I think many of us see people in the Bible as always serious and somber like they knew they were Bible characters. *Hmm, you don't say.* What would this moment have been like? What do women do when they are excited about something? (Men, don't say anything right now) They talk! They emote! These women have just heard the most amazing news anyone has ever heard. They didn't turn around and walk very dignified back home. They started running and talking and laughing. It's about to get better.

"And behold, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me'" (Matthew 28:9-10).

There must have been confusion and uncertainty as they ran, but suddenly Jesus is there. His response strikes me as almost humorous. *"Greetings."* It's the Greek word for the normal salutation of the day. It's like he sees them and says, *Hey, How's it going?* Like just another day. *Told ya I would rise again.* The response of the women is the rest of our message this morning. What does it look like when people meet the risen Christ? We may not be running and laughing and talking this Easter morning, but what does need to happen in our hearts *by faith* is what these women experienced *by sight*.

Wonder

Here are the words used to describe their response: *Trembling. Bewildered* (Mark 16). *Astounded. Afraid. Filled with joy. Running.* Running? That one strikes me. How often do we see groups of mature women randomly running through town in normal street clothes? You see a pack of normally dressed women running, it makes you think, *something's going on.* Indeed. When combined with "trembling" and "bewildered," how's this for a summary word, *wonder?* That sense of lostness in the immensity of something.

Imagine today they announced an immediate cure for COVID-19. Back to normal life for everybody! Open up the restaurants! Open up the stores and the schools! MLB is back on

schedule! No need to wash your hands every 5 minutes! It's all over! People would stream out of their homes laughing and celebrating with neighbors. Oh yeah! Cars would be honking their horns and people would just be so relieved and happy. Imagine a sudden coronavirus cure, and that's a taste of what these women experienced. The biggest news of all time has just happened: Christ is risen from the dead! Wonder. Awe. Absolute joy. They had it. Through the Scriptures they give us an example today of what Easter feels like in our souls when we really get it. Do we?

Pastor Steve, that's not fair. They got to be there. They saw the angel. They saw Jesus alive. We just get to hear about it. Isn't that the challenge for many of us? The empty tomb is old news to many. I've heard this before. I've believed this for a long time. Tell me something new. I can't, except to point out that you've never heard this before in the midst of a pandemic. You've never heard of Jesus' resurrection when your life is threatened by an unseen enemy. You've never heard this before when we wake up each day with hundreds or thousands more dead around the world. You've never heard of this before when stock markets were plunging and unemployment was skyrocketing. You've never heard of Jesus' resurrection in a time of isolation from loved ones and financial uncertainty and global fear. But you are hearing it today.

This is our pandemic Easter. The resurrection is far greater news than any cure to COVID-19 could ever be. Why? Because viruses threaten our physical lives, but eventually, we all die from this or some other thing. What does Jesus walking out of that grave mean for us all these years later? It means God has overcome our inevitable death and provided a way for eternal life for all who trust and believe in Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Did those women realize all this when they saw Jesus alive? No. But we do. Sin is our virus, the cross is our cure, and the resurrection is our vaccination against death forever. If we believe this, our wonder should be equal to if not greater than the wonder of that first Easter morning. It is the greatest possible news.

Any resurrection wonder in your heart this morning? Ask God to increase it today. *God, give me Easter morning wonder. I want to tremble. I want to be bewildered. I want astonished, amazed, women-running kind of wonder. Christ is risen! Wow!*

Worship

"And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him" (Matthew 28:9).

I'll bet they did because that's what wonder does; it leads us to worship. Now we can't physically see Jesus, and for some people today, this makes this all very suspect. Yet we can see him through the eyes of others. In a way, like I see Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill, I see them through the accounts of their lives. I've never met them, but that doesn't mean that the Gettysburg Address or London Blitz didn't happen.

We see through the eyewitness accounts. We see through their objective re-telling with the eyes of faith. Like Mary Magdalene and Peter and even the Centurion, we believe Jesus was who he claimed to be, the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

We would never worship a dead Savior. Anyone could make that claim. But a risen-from-the-dead Savior, I'll bow at his feet.

How do we worship him? It begins with acknowledging that we are morally bankrupt. *When I see myself as a sinner, I see my need for a Savior. That's not a hard step for most people.*

If you're like me, I don't need someone to tell me I'm a sinner; I'm just tired of being one. Where do I turn for help?

The religions of the world all encourage you to do something to earn it. All of them but one. Christianity says, *stop trying to earn it; you can't*. Jesus did what you could never do with his death on the cross. Receive his salvation by faith.

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

What is there to receive by faith? The person and work of Jesus. His love for you. Trusting in who he was as the Son of God and what he did dying on the cross for our sins. *To those who believe in His name*. When we believe, God meets our moral and spiritual need by forgiving our sins and declaring us righteous before God forever for life without end.

If you have not received this salvation through Christ, what better day than pandemic Easter to put your faith and trust in Christ for salvation?

Joy

"So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (Matthew 28:8).

The women had *"great joy."* The adjective for joy in the original is our *mega*. They had mega-joy! I'll bet they did. When wonder leads us to worship, worship leads to mega-joy! Isn't that one reason we are worshipping on this pandemic Easter? A world filled with fear. Half of the world's population is in some form of lockdown. Thousands are dead and we have worries about our own future. What do we need in the darkest of hours?

How about mega-joy? *Yes, I'll take that. Yes, I'd like that very much*. This joy comes from an empty tomb and a resurrected Savior. A promise from God of eternal life for all who trust in Jesus for salvation. Nothing puts joy in our hearts like a resurrected Savior.

Don't get that? Stand by the grave of a loved one who died in the faith and you will know this joy. Get news of cancer in your body and you'll know why this is joy. Find out you have COVID-19 and suddenly the resurrection of Jesus is a source of serious joy. Consider the inevitability of death and an eternity somewhere and Jesus' words will sing in your heart, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (John 11:25).

That's what we celebrate today. Wonder at the empty tomb. Worship of the Risen Christ. Wonder that leads to worship, worship that leads to joy. Easter's joy. Trembling, women running, Jesus-is-risen kind of joy. Wonder. Worship. And joy on this our pandemic Easter.

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