

Matthew 28:1-10
This is My Message for You
 April 12, 2020 ~ Easter/Resurrection of the Lord
 Communion Meditation
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Dais

Introduction:

It started quietly enough. Two women meeting up to take a walk to the graveyard. They hadn't slept well. With Jesus dead, everything seemed wrong. Nothing made sense. "Let's just go." They had to do something, anything to move themselves through the next day, or even just the next hour. How would they ever get through this? So off they went to the tomb, walking wordlessly, side by side, hearts heavy with a grief that seemed bottomless.

Without this story that started in the quiet, predawn darkness, we would never have known about Jesus. As author Marcus Borg puts it, "If his story had ended with his crucifixion, he most likely would have been forgotten—another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions."ⁱ But here we are today in Marshfield, Wisconsin, because that's not how Jesus' story ended.

I'm pretty sure you've heard this Easter story before, in one form or another. No two stories about it are exactly the same. Even in the four gospels. This year we get to hear Matthew's version. Let's try to peel back what we expect to hear or what we have been taught to listen for. Let's resist the urge to skim or skip through any of its twists and turns. And when it is ended, let's try not to throw it on the floor (*throw book*) —a favorite habit of our two-year old granddaughter, Isabel, when she gets to the last page of a story. Toddler Izzy loves stories, (especially when it's time for bed), and pleads eagerly, "more, more stories." Instead of throwing this one on the floor, let's take a breath, and try to enter the quiet space of the two Mary's as they head for the tomb. And let's listen for the "more, more" meaning, the "more, more" message God has for us this coronavirus-inflected Easter day.

Meditation:

"You're still here?" That's what every pet is apparently thinking, as their humans are now at home, day in and day out, keeping up their all-important and necessary "social distancing." One tiger-striped house cat put it this way, "This quarantine stuff is not cute. Y'all being here during the day is messing with my routine." And a Maine Coon cat at the end of her rope was heard saying to her human, "You've been home for twenty days straight. Go to work for the love of God."

So--twenty days into "social distancing" with no clear end in sight--how are we doing? If we and our loved-ones are lucky enough to have remained virus-free, we may have noticed that our hair—is looking, well, different. And *some of us* may be learning how to cook again...Every night. *All of us* are finding new ways of getting by with less and getting through our radically re-structured days. Couples who are both able to continue their jobs from home, may be discovering what the other one actually does for a living. Many of us have been laid off and laid low. Whether we are trying to navigate applying for unemployment, or forced to wrestle down

new technologies that we may have managed to avoid thus far: I'm quite sure we (and our pets) *are all* in a different state of mind and heart than we were last Easter. Or any Easter in our lifetimes.

Yet just maybe, in the context of this *strange* time we are sharing, almost three weeks into this COVID-19 pandemic “stress test” on so many levels: our spirits, relationships, health care system, government: our politics and economy, just maybe we are *more, more ready* to hear the Easter message Jesus has for us. Just maybe with the church pews empty, and without the lilies, the tulips and the hyacinths adorning the chancel, we are more ready than ever for the core message of this story, which begins with a profound and glorious emptiness. The tomb was empty. Jesus was not there. The victory of Divine Love over death, did not involve trumpets that first Easter morning.

Nor did it start in a major key. I take heart in the way that the minor characters, the women, were chosen by Jesus to become major players in the messaging of this cosmic-sized text, without Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, or even a telephone. Their message that the Crucified One has been raised from the dead, has made its way across the world from the two grieving Mary's to Galilee to us. It is the message about the Love that meets us in the dark and awakens us and invites us to take part in the cosmic shift afoot. Like the earthquake, the ground of power had shifted. We can see it in this brief interplay between the Mary's, the angel, and the guards. The vulnerable, the marginal, powerless women are given the message that Love is stronger than death. And the Roman guards charged with securing the grave by force, the agents of the Roman Empire, fall to the ground like dead men. Rome's military rendered lifeless.ⁱⁱ

“He is not here, he has been raised, and is going ahead of you to Galilee.” This quiet story whispered a message of Love unknown. As the angel said to the Mary's, “This is my message for you.” This message was great news for them, but bad news for the Roman Imperial guards: Jesus is on the Loose and Love Divine has overpowered evil—without losing a single soldier. A whole new kind of Divine Justice was on the loose. This kind of justice is probably slower and more subtle than we might choose. It can also make us uncomfortable. This Love wins quietly, patiently. This Love lifts up the other and finds common ground. This Love calls us to dare to live in the knowledge that we share one beautiful, delicate earth. And yes, today we are hyper aware of how we also share germs around the world. As the wounded one becomes the healer: Jesus' message of universal Love Divine can heal and mend our brokenness. Yes, this is a message for the hurting Mary *and* the imperial soldier in each of us.

Our fictional hero, Harry Potter, also understood this message. And Harry gave it to Voldemort In JK Rowling's fifth Harry Potter book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, where Harry is in a bodily struggle with Voldemort, just after Voldemort's lackey has killed Harry's godfather. It is a low, low moment as Harry is under the grip of Voldemort's terrible power, but even in that moment Harry says to Voldemort, “You're the weak one. And you will never know friendship, or love. And I feel sorry for you.’ Love has already won.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to deliver a similar message to the apartheid government in South Africa, ‘You may have the guns, you may have all this power, but you have already lost. Come, join the winning side.’ⁱⁱⁱ

On Easter morning, Love wins. Yet, we look around and see all the hurt and hate and we wonder, how Long? We lament our stubbornly persistent ways of sin and death, division and disparity, violence and vitriol. How do we get there, from here? “More, more story!” We all need “more, more Jesus.” Deeper, fuller, in the trenches with us, Jesus. That’s what Jesus wants, too! A living relationship with each of us and this whole world that he came to save. Jesus has a message for you if you are 2, or 12, 32, or 72. It’s different for each of us. In that message is the key that will overcome the death all around us. We all have work to do. His message of abiding presence, and evolving call can change for each of us, every year, if not every hour. Are we ready to hear it? Or is your spiritual “voice mail” full. Let the empty tomb inspire you to clear out some of those old messages from your spiritual voice mail. Some of them may be flat wrong about you. Others may have been true, but no longer are. Some may be wrong about other people. This is our Easter to make room, make space. We need “more, more Jesus” so there can be “less, less” hate in our hearts, our communities and our nation.

In our Easter service today, we will celebrate both of the Sacraments (virtually) that Jesus gave us to birth and to nurture this message: that we are deeply loved, unconditionally; and that Divine Love wins. As Christians, we proclaim this message, every time we baptize an infant. Today, we will baptize Dottie Krohn. We will get to bathe her in God’s mercy, and whisper that message into her ear. Let those words reconfirm how much you are loved by God, as well. Jesus will also be here at the Table with us, strengthening, nurturing us with his body and blood. Perhaps you are hungry for the bread of forgiveness and the wine of grace, poured out for all of us. This is the food that will feed our souls and lead us forward. Let us pray:

Easter us,

Salve wounds,

Break injustice,

Bring peace,

Guarantee neighbor

Easter us in joy and strength.

Be our God, be your true self, lord of life,

Massively turn our life toward your life

And away from our anti-neighbor, anti-self deathliness.

Hear our thankful, grateful, unashamed Hallelujah! Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*, (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA, 2006), 190.

ⁱⁱ Warren Carter, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2*, Ed. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, Sharp, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2019), Matthew 28:1-10, 204-206.

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted in: Meg Peery McLaughlin, “The Great Plot Twist,” (*Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2020), 50.

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2003) 166.