



## Empty Promises?

Matthew 28:1-10

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Today is the highest of holy days. It is the day of our best miracle — Christ is alive. Death is defeated. Resurrection is real. There is no miracle bigger than this.

I will confess, though, it does feel like something of a smaller miracle that I am standing before you right now. You're actually watching the second recording of this sermon. The first one was just fine — except that after I was done, I realized I was wearing a purple stole, which, today of all days, simply would not do. On Easter, we wear white. So there was that. But not just that. Ten days ago I ran into Molly Spangler's office, panicked. "The lilies aren't here," I said, "and we haven't recorded the liturgy and the ribbons aren't up..." and she smiled kindly and reminded me that we were headed in to Palm Sunday, not Easter Sunday, not yet. The real fun for my colleagues, though, came when I walked into our staff meeting just this past week, and told everyone that I had just finished recording my Ash Wednesday sermon. John Cook said, carefully, Ash Wednesday? "Yes," I said. It was not until I watched them all exchange looks that said, "Who's going to tell her?" that I realized my mistake. "When I said *Ash Wednesday*," I told them, "obviously, I meant *Maundy Thursday*."

You see why it feels like something of a small miracle that I am in front of you, properly attired, with the right sermon for the right day. Time is an elusive thing these days. That is one

of the ongoing realities of this pandemic season, even as it draws, hopefully, to a close. That's why Matthew's telling of the resurrection is such a gift.

Matthew alone, among the four evangelists, Matthew alone narrates the the stone being rolled back. He begins like all the others — it was as the sabbath was ending, on the first day of the week, just as dawn was creeping in. Mary and the other Mary, he tells us, went to see the tomb. To visit the grave. Now in all the other gospels, when the women arrive, they discover the stone has already been moved. The tomb is wide open. And if those women, lost in their grief, were even half as confused as I am about the chronology of these days, some reasonable questions might include: When, exactly did the stone move? And who moved it? Was it left unsupervised at any point? Could it have been grave robbers? Or a messiah-sympathizing soldier? What, or who, was found inside? At what point did all this happen?

Mark, Luke, and John leave lots of room for ambiguity when they tell the story. But Matthew is clear. The women arrive just in time. Just in time for the earth to shake, for an angel to descend. for the stone to roll back. They are eye-witnesses to all of it. Matthew wants to make sure we understand beyond a shadow of a doubt: The stone isn't rolled back to let Jesus out. The stone is rolled back to show the

women, and the world, that he's already gone. The tomb is empty.

I know "empty" has been a painful word these days. Our sanctuary has been empty. I have been preaching to empty pews. Hospital rooms have been empty of family and friends, as the sick and injured have been left in isolation. Kitchens and dining rooms and living rooms, the places we so often gather, have been empty as social gatherings have been put on hold. Some bank accounts have been empty as jobs were furloughed and workforces reduced. Maybe even hearts feel empty, the sum total of ... everything ... just too much to hold onto. The long slog of grief, both for us and for the women who made their way to the tomb, has been enough to make everyone wonder, are God's promises empty, too?

That's why Matthew is so careful with his timeline. So that he can assure us: there was a day when "empty" was the best news the world had ever heard.

When the angel says to the women, "Come and see," he doesn't say, "Come and see Jesus!" He says, "Come and see where he lay." In other words, "Come and see what isn't here." The first good word of Easter isn't "alleluia." It's "empty."

My friend and colleague Rebecca knows this all too well. She and I worked together in New York. Shortly after I moved to Columbia, she moved to Charlotte. She had been dating a man named Douglas. She and Douglas had been in a long term, long distance relationship. They had talked about marriage, enough that Rebecca was just waiting for him to propose. Except it didn't happen. Over and over again, visit after visit, move after move, milestone after milestone, no proposal. About a month ago, Rebecca went to visit Douglas. They were at the park with their dogs when Douglas ran back to the car for something. The dogs went with him, but a few minutes later, one of them wandered back, a little bag fastened to his collar. She opened the bag and found a ring

box. Giddy with excitement, certain she knew what was happening, she opened the box with her heart pounding and her hands shaking only to discover it was ... empty.

It was then that something in my friend snapped. She says, "I got so mad. I couldn't help but feel he was mocking me, teasing me. And then I wasn't just mad, I was scared, too — scared that the future I'd envisioned was never going to happen." She ran back to the car, tears in her eyes, holding the empty ring box up in front of her face, shaking it at him. "I'm tired of the games," she told him. "It's all or nothing. Are you in or out?" Douglas looked at her for a moment and then looked down at the ground and frowned. "I'm sorry," he said, and he shook his head. He took the empty ring box out of her hand. "I'm sorry," he repeated, "but you didn't think I'd let the dog run off with a diamond, did you?" and he pulled a ring out of his pocket. Sometimes "empty" really is how we get to "alleluia."

Mary and the other Mary, on that first Easter morning, scripture tells us that after seeing nothing, they run from the tomb "with fear and great joy." Experiencing "empty" is how they end up overjoyed. There are no details offered about how that comes to be, but that is not the biggest mystery of Easter morning. Just like we come here invited to trust that somehow, God raises Jesus from the dead, so too do we come here invited to trust that somehow, where emptiness leads, alleluia follows.

What if the best way we could be Easter people this year is to let ourselves be overcome by joy? I don't know how we do that, not exactly, at least, not with step by step instruction, but I believe Matthew gives us a guide. Remember again how careful Matthew is with his timeline. And after the earthquake, after the stone is rolled away, after the angel speaks, after the women encounter "empty," then they run, with fear and great joy. Fear and great joy.

If I understand the text, Matthew is saying, fear isn't necessarily going away. There is still a lot to be afraid of. But what if fear doesn't get to carry the day all on its own? I think that's what emboldens the women to run and tell disciples. When they realize what has happened that Jesus is not there, yes, fear still exists, of course fear still exists, but now it is accompanied by joy. Great joy.

Maybe that is the true promise of resurrection, at least for us today: that joy can always accompany us. Alongside grief. Alongside sorrow. Alongside anger. Alongside fear. We do not have to be free of these things in order to experience joy. Joy is strong enough to come alongside anything. Joy comes in the morning, the psalmist tells us. Every morning. Without fail.

The invitation "Come, see" — that isn't what makes resurrection real. Resurrection was already afoot. "Come, see," isn't what brings Jesus back to life. But it might be what brings the **women** back to life — because it gives them a newfound ability to look at the world differently and let joy be a companion in all things.

"Come, see where he lay, but where he is not now..." If Easter carries any authority in our lives, your experiences of emptiness, whatever they may be, are a chance for resurrection to take hold of you. And scripture is insistent: Jesus will always show up to make it so. Not even the cross could contain him. Not even death could defeat him. Not even a stone could hold him.

There is a funny little tradition among my friends. It is a tradition older than any of us are. At some point on Easter morning, my phone will ring and my text messages will buzz and every announcement will be exactly one line: "Jesus is on the loose!" That's it. No "Happy easter!" No statement of love or promise to talk later, not even a hello or goodbye. There is always a bit of laughter, though, and a playful tone of voice, exactly the way you'd imagine

adults would sound when they are playing a beloved, silly game. It is a game, but it's full of truth: "Jesus is on the loose!"

Now, once I've gotten the first phone call or text message, I pass it along. I leave messages that say exactly that, nothing more, nothing less. That's the only rule — once you receive the message, you have to send it along. I mean it very sincerely when I tell you I have no idea who started this way back when or who starts it anew each year. By now, it's probably way more than one person, more than a few people. That's how good news travels, isn't it? With joy that cannot be contained? In ways we do not fully comprehend?

Of course, there's only one way Jesus can possibly be on the loose. The tomb has to be empty. Empty really is how the best story the world has ever heard begins. Empty really is the world's most famous moment. Empty really is the reason we are here today. Don't ever let anyone tell you "empty" is the end. It is because the tomb is empty that we are filled with great joy. It is because the tomb is empty that we can say: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!