

April 9, 2023  
Matthew 28:1-10

Easter  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Resurrection and Reconciliation”**

“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Easter Sunday was always a special occasion in the Parker family. For years, the family gathered together at their grandparents' home for a sumptuous Easter feast that featured all of the delicious foods they enjoyed every year. Family members would travel from across the country to be together, and the children looked forward to their Easter egg hunt and sharing treats they found in their Easter baskets. As wonderful as the food they shared would be, what made the day most special was the opportunity to gather together to share this day of resurrection with the people they loved the most.

But at every Easter gathering, there was also an aspect of sadness, because it would be another year when Robert would be absent. From early childhood, Robert was a child who always seemed to be in trouble, first in school, then with the local police, and even with employers at jobs he could never seem to keep for more than a few weeks. Robert fell in with the “wrong crowd,” and soon found himself in and out of jail and/or rehab clinics. His relationship with his family had grown troublesome; some people in the community began referring to Robert as the “prodigal brother.” Finally, one day Robert disappeared, leaving no forwarding address nor any way to contact him. While the family had endured many years of conflict and disappointment, one thing that never changed was their love for Robert. They always held out hope that this would be the year when he returned to take his place at the Easter dinner table, and every year their hopes would end in disappointment. One year, as the family was preparing Easter dinner it was discovered that they did not have enough butter for the meal. Since the only store open on Easter Sunday was the local 7-11, Jessie volunteered to drive to the store for the butter. The 7-11 was located across from the train station, a usually busy location that was quiet on this holiday. But as Jessie came out of the store with the butter, she noticed a person sitting on a bench outside of the train station. As she looked more closely, she recognized to her great surprise that it was Robert. He was looking thin and dishevelled, and his clothes looked like they had not been washed in weeks. As Jessie got closer to her long-lost brother, his eyes were cast to the ground so that he did not see her approaching; but when he finally looked up and saw his sister, at first he was speechless. Jessie made the first move, saying “Robert, it’s great to see you!

Are you coming home for Easter dinner?" But Robert still did not speak; instead, his eyes filled with tears. Finally, in a raspy voice he answered Jessie: "Sis, I don't deserve to come home. I've done so many bad things in my life. I got on the train, and before I knew it I was back in town; but I don't think anyone in the family wants anything to do with me any more."

It was at this point that Jessie's natural stubbornness came out. She sat next to her brother, looked him in the eye, and said emphatically, "Robert, that's nonsense! You are our brother, and we all love you. Nothing you have done has changed that. Now get up and get in my car; we're going home!"

On this Easter Sunday, as we gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are reminded of another group of "prodigal brothers" who, like Robert, may believe that they no longer deserve to be at the table in the family into which they had been called. They had responded to Jesus' invitation to become his followers, and had been eyewitnesses to his teachings and miracles. They had been with him when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and had sat at the table with him at the Passover Seder when he instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion and commanded them to "*do this in remembrance of me.*" But in his hour of greatest need, when he is arrested by the authorities, brought before Pontius Pilate, condemned to death, and crucified at Golgotha, they had failed their Lord. One of their number was his betrayer; another denied even knowing him three times; and all of them abandoned him in his final hours. They had all failed to be faithful to their Lord, and may have been tormented with the same shame and guilt that kept Robert glued to that bench outside the train station. But when Easter day draws to a close, the disciple will discover that while they had been faithless to their Lord, our Saviour was still faithful to them.

Matthew's account of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ begins with his report that "*after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.*" (28:1). Unlike the eleven disciples who had fled in fear, the two Marys watched Jesus die in agony and witnessed his interment in the tomb:

- "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." – 27:55-56.
- "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb." – 27:61.

The presence of the two Marys at the crucifixion and the tomb fulfills the requirements of the Torah that *“only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained”* (Deuteronomy 19:15). Since they would have been unable to travel to the tomb on the Sabbath, they came to the place where Jesus was buried early on Sunday morning merely to *“see the tomb,”* to continue their vigil; while other Gospels report that the intention of the women was to anoint his body (Mark 16:1), in Matthew this would have been impossible because Pilate had ordered a guard to seal the tomb and stand watch over it (27:65-66). Matthew also notes that the woman who anoints Jesus in Bethany has accomplished this task: *“By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial.”* (26:12). The women do not wonder who will roll away the stone that seals the tomb, since they are not intending to reopen the tomb and anoint Jesus’ body.

As the women approach the tomb, a cataclysmic event takes place: *“And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.”* (28:2). This earthquake parallels the one that occurred when Jesus died on the cross (*“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.”* – 27:51). The appearance of the angel in the midst of this event makes it clear that what is happening is God’s action. The appearance of the angel (*“His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow”* – 28:3) reflects depictions of divine beings in the Old Testament (*“As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair on his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.”* – Daniel 7:9). The guards at the tomb respond to these events with terror: *“For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men”* (28:4). While Pilate and the authorities made every effort to ensure that Jesus will stay dead, going as far as sealing the stone at the tomb entrance and placing a guard there, these events make it clear that *“God is acting in this event, and nothing can hinder God’s uncontainable life.”* (Ruthanna B. Hooke).

While the Roman guards collapse at the sight of this cataclysmic event, the angel turns to the women and offers a word of comfort and hope: *“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.”* (28:5-6a). Jesus’ passion predictions, which included reference to his rising from the dead, have come true:

- “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they

will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.” – 20:19.

In his announcement to the women, the angel identifies Jesus as “*the crucified one.*” In the original language of the New Testament, this phrase indicates a completed act with ongoing consequences; Jesus’ crucifixion was not a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God; “*even as the Risen One he bears the mark of his suffering on the cross as his permanent character and call to discipleship.*” (M. Eugene Boring).

The angels invite the women to be witnesses to the empty tomb: “*Come, see the place where he lay.*” (28:6b); the angel then commands the women to carry the message to the disciples, making them not only the initial witnesses of the empty tomb, but the first bearers of the good news that “*he has been raised*”: “*Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.*” (28:7). The women are called to be “apostles to the apostles,” the first to bear the message of resurrection to others. They are to tell the eleven disciples that Jesus has been raised and that they are to meet him in Galilee. The women obey the command of the angel; “*they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*” (28:9). They are en route on their mission when “*suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’*” (28:9). The report that Jesus “meets” the women may also be understood as his joining and accompanying them, a paradigm for Matthew’s understanding of the reassuring presence of the risen Christ in the missionary activity of the church (“*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” – 28:20). Matthew uses no christological titles in the resurrection story; the risen Lord is simply “Jesus,” like the “crucified one,” “*binding the exalted Lord of the church’s faith and experience to the crucified man of Nazareth.*” (Boring). While the women instinctively bow in worship (“*And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*” – 28:9), Jesus repeats the angel’s commission to carry the message of his resurrection to the disciples. There is an added dimension to his commission: “*go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*” (28:10). Surprisingly, Jesus refers to his disciples as “brothers.” Jesus has forgiven his closest friends, even though they had all abandoned him at Gethsemane. The alienation has now been healed from the divine side; “*the disciples may know that they again/still belong to the family of believers*” (Boring). The reference to “my brothers” may be an allusion to Psalm 22, the beginning of which Jesus quoted when he cried out from the cross, “*my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”: “*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.*” (Psalm 22:1, 22). In commissioning the women to go and tell Jesus’

“brothers” to go to Galilee, the women become not only missionaries, but also agents of reconciliation: *“Jesus, now delivered from agony and death, is ready to praise the Lord and proclaim his salvation to his ‘brothers.’ He never ceases to do this in the assembly of the Church.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

The good news of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of our Christian faith and signals a radical transformation in our relationship with God and in the way we look to our future. In his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ destroyed the power of death; he took the Roman cross, the instrument of imperial torture and death, and transformed it into the means through which our Saviour was destroyed to the power of death to separate us from the love of God. Our faith is rooted in the proclamation that as Christ was *“crucified, died, and was buried,”* death was not the end of his story, and therefore neither is death the end for us. As Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, *“if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”* (1 Corinthians 15:19). But the good news that we celebrate at Easter is that *“in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”* (15:20). As Christ rose from the dead so that death no longer had dominion over him, so too do we believe that when we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are baptized into both his death and resurrection; Christ has freed us from *“sin, death, and the power of the devil”* so that we might live in the sure and certain hope that our Lord will one day *“come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also”* (John 14:3). Because Christ rose again to destroy the power of death, we live in the blessed assurance that nothing *“will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39). The message of the resurrection is also a message of reconciliation, that the message of the Cross is a message of reconciliation. In the letter to the Ephesians, we hear the good news that in his death and resurrection Christ broke down dividing walls of hostility and accomplished reconciliation and restoration of relationships that had once been broken:

- “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” – Ephesians 2:13-16.

As we have been reconciled to God and born anew to a living hope through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, so also are we no longer strangers and

aliens, but sisters and brothers in Christ, beloved children of God. As siblings possess common goods, as sisters and brothers in Christ *“they have one father, one inheritance, which does not decrease by sharing, as other inheritances do. Rather it grows more and more because it is a spiritual inheritance.”* (Martin Luther). In Christ’s resurrection, we have the assurance that no matter what we may have done in the past, no matter how far we may have strayed – even if we have become “prodigal brothers and sisters” – we are Christ’s brothers and sisters, born anew to a living hope and called to share this message of resurrection and reconciliation with others.

- “For Matthew, the resurrection is not merely a symbol of faith reborn or hope revived in the face of death. It is nothing less than the fulcrum of world history, the one event that changes everything. For this reason, news of the dying and rising of Jesus could not be contained to a small Roman province in the eastern Mediterranean. It was a saving message intended for all nations to hear and embrace.” – Mitch and Sri.

When they arrived back at the family home, Robert was at first reluctant to go inside, fearing how his family might react at the sight of their “prodigal brothers.” But his worries were unfounded, because as soon as they saw him every member of the family ran to embrace him. Tears filled the eyes of everyone as Robert was taken upstairs to have a shower, change into a clean set of clothes, and welcomed back to the family table. No matter how long he was absent or what he had done in the past, it was the best Easter the Parkers could remember because their brother had been restored to them. The message of Easter is a message of reconciliation rooted in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; as the disciples were still Jesus’ “brothers” in spite of what they had done in the past, we are children of the heavenly Father who God loved so much that God gave his only Son; because we are God’s children through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that God will never forsake God’s beloved children, and that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”*

**Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

May we, like the two Marys, be ambassadors of this message of resurrection and reconciliation; may we share with others the good news that because Christ has destroyed the power of death, we are all reborn to newness of life as sisters and brothers in Christ, children of God who have been *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”*

Amen.