

## **“A TREMBLING JOY”**

Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-4

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Easter is the new pink dress with shiny shoes and ribbons tied in the hair. Easter is eggs in pastel colors and the search to find a better way to dye them. Easter is the family gathered together in church, the return of hymns in a major key, accompanied by brass, and the repeated refrain of Alleluia! Easter is the conversation around tables while indulging in brunch type food. Easter is the egg hunt accompanied by screams of delight from children we love. Easter is unmitigated joy, a reprieve from the anxieties and seriousness of our daily activities and responsibilities. And Easter is chocolate in the form of bunnies and eggs.

I don't mean to contradict Paul who urges us, as a people raised with Christ, to think on “things from above... and not on things that are on the earth.” These Easter celebration traditions can certainly become trappings that distract us from the core meaning of “Resurrection Day.” But I mention these things to correct a common misunderstanding of Paul's message: that earth and heaven have little to do with each other.

Throughout Lent, we have been talking about “living as children of light.” Following Jesus is not preparation for membership in the “heavenly choir,” but is instead a path on which this life becomes more “abundant.” The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a transaction which satisfies the requirements for union with God, but an invitation to transformed living. Easter affirms that we are never alone, that God is always present to us, and that a life lived in the awareness of God's love is very different from a life reliant only on the resources of the individual.

So our Easter traditions need not be superficial distractions. They are ways in which we include children in the celebrations of the community as Jesus welcomed the children, saying, “let the children come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God.” They are ways in which we offer thanks and praise to God as the Psalm encourages us “to praise God with trumpet sound... with lute and harp... with tambourine and dance... with strings and pipe... with loud clashing cymbals....” They are ways in which the faith community nurtures itself and grounds itself in the love of God. They are expressions of transformed living.

What they are not, or should not be, is a denial of the realities of life. Matthew's version of the story is particularly good at emphasizing this. The women are on their way to the tomb. They were at the crucifixion. They believed that Jesus was dead. The Easter story is bracketed by a reminder that there were people who not only wanted Jesus to be dead, but wanted to forestall any rumor of resurrection by posting guards at the tomb. In addition to this unique feature in Matthew's story is the mention of an earthquake caused by an angel rolling away the stone. The presence of the angel is quite ominous, appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow. I'm assuming like freshly fallen snow in the bright

sunlight. And finally, fear figures prominently. The guards are paralyzed with fear, becoming “like dead men,” The women have to be reassured not to be afraid by the angel, and nevertheless leave the tomb “with fear and great joy.”

Easter is, of course, about the great joy, but the fear tells us that the joy is not a cover for denial. Let’s start with the earthquake. There is some evidence that an earthquake did happen around the time of the crucifixion, though Matthew is the only gospel writer to mention it. He also claims that a quake happened as Jesus “breathed his last.” There are other mentions of earthquakes in the Hebrew Scriptures, always at critical times in Israel’s history. Matthew likely talks about it for its symbolic value. No deaths or destruction is reported. Only a few would remember the loss of 30,000 lives from the one 60 years prior.

But I can’t help remembering images from more recent earthquakes: highway bridges and ramps sandwiched together from the San Francisco one, piles of rubble that used to be homes from Turkey. Even if Matthew only intends it as a marker for an important event, one can’t help wondering how people cope in areas where quakes, floods, and hurricanes are common. What do people do with the fear that surely arises in these places?

What do we do with the fear, as Cole Arthur Riley says, that “stalks so much of our words and actions and even loves” (p. 83)? The language of fear dominates our world today. We are afraid of the changing weather patterns. Politicians generally play on our fears should their opponents be elected. World leaders threaten their enemies with economic sanctions, military exercises, and the use of nuclear weapons. We fear for the future of our children, subjecting them to active shooter drills, monitoring closely their activities, or sending them to private schools. We fear differences of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnic, religious, and class distinctions. Fear stands in the way of reconciliation, restoration, and reparation. It undermines healthy community, ministries of compassion, and efforts at making peace. Fear destroys relationships, weakens marriage, and divides communities.

Before joy, comes “Do not be afraid.” This is not a call to deny reality. It is an invitation to life, to give up the paralysis that looks like death, and to embrace the mystery. Riley writes: “God is not criticizing us for being afraid in a world haunted by so many terrors and traumas. I hear *Don’t be afraid* and hope it is not a command not to fear but rather the nurturing voice of a God drawing near to our trembling. I hear those words and imagine God in all tenderness cradling her creation against her breast” (pp. 83-84).

We do not so much conquer fear as face our fears. Fear is natural to people and warns us when danger is present. If we allow it to speak to us instead of paralyzing us, it can move us to respond in ways that not only mitigate the danger, but imagine new possibilities. The guards never hear the message. They are caught up in their fear, and when they do move, they return to the world governed by fear, to the leaders who want to stifle the rumors of resurrection. The women hear the message that Christ is alive and their fear gets caught up in the “great joy,” becoming something more like awe.

This is the mystery that is Easter. Not only is Christ alive, but enters the world again in the midst of the women's grief. Christ is alive in the midst of a world that refuses to acknowledge the presence and love of God, a world that prefers its systems of domination and oppression over the wisdom of God.

On Easter, we do not forget the trials of life, but we rejoice in a God who cradles us, helping us to see the new possibilities for life. Easter is the faith community comforting those who have experienced deep losses. Easter is not only the nurturing of joy in children hunting eggs, but the dancing of children in a refugee camp. Easter is not only the welcome of the LGBTQAI+ community in the church, but also the persistence, patience, forgiveness, and love of those who refused to walk away for forty years, hoping to see the day when love would win out over hate and distrust. Easter is nations coming together to defend the people of Ukraine from its oppressor and Russians courageously protesting injustice. Christ is alive in people restoring rainforests, minding their carbon footprint, and practicing sustainable agriculture. Christ is alive in those refusing to give up on feeding the world's hungry. Easter is not only the praises we bring in worship, but the prayers we offer up for the wholeness of others. Easter is not only the fellowship of believers, but also the community of the compassionate seeing the world as it is and believing in the love of God that makes all things new. Easter is the hope behind the church's affirmation: Christ is risen. [Christ is risen indeed!].

It is not the absence of fear, but the transformation of fear. It is neither denial nor despair in the face of a hurting world; but hope that recognizes God's love for the world, God's refusal to abandon the world, indeed, God's persistence in returning to the world again and again, "tenderly cradling the world against her breast." Easter cannot be understood. It is a mystery to be embraced with a great trembling joy. Amen.