

SERMON: He is not Here...

TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10

Imagine yourself with the two Mary's. It is dawn. As you reach the tomb, an earthquake rumbles over the ground, nearly knocking you off your feet. An angel appears like lightening, coming down from heaven and rolling away the stone covering the entrance to the tomb. The guards become paralyzed with fear. Then the angel speaks, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here."

I don't know about you, but as I picture myself there, those words, "Do not be afraid," are too little, too late. That ship has already sailed. I'm already afraid. I've been in a constant state of fear since the day he was arrested. In the dim light of early dawn, I can't see clearly. And that earthquake has thrown me off balance. I feel as though I'm in a fog. I can't trust anything I see or hear. The words that follow don't help much.

HE IS NOT HERE. Those words always feel like a punch to my gut. Whether I'm imagining myself there at the tomb, or whether I'm holding my Bible and reading the passage for the umpteenth time, the statement, **HE IS NOT HERE**

never sounds like good news. I suppose it's because of the negative, the "not." It feels pessimistic. HE IS NOT HERE feels like the glass is half empty.

I prefer to greet Easter morning with a fully positive, optimistic, glass is full to overflowing, victorious exclamation: *Christ is Risen! Alleluia!*

I know by now, of course, that "He is not here" is followed by a semi-colon, not a period. It's not the end of the sentence. There's more to be said. "He is not here; **for he has been raised, as he said.**" The news is just as good as "Christ is Risen," but HE IS NOT HERE always tricks me – just for a second – into thinking it's not good news.

This year, we have all been tricked into thinking that Easter is cancelled because we can't worship with our family of faith in our beautiful church. We don't get to dress in our Easter best; we don't get to smell the lilies adorning the chancel; we don't get to hear the triumphant chorus of "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia." Because of the coronavirus pandemic that has kept us at home for nearly a month now, we have been tricked into thinking of this Easter day in the negative sense. HE IS NOT HERE. And it feels like a punch in the gut.

This sanctuary is empty as I speak. Nobody is here. Except for my faithful technology expert, Jonathan, I am utterly alone. And you are alone, wherever you are. Maybe not completely alone. Maybe you have your family at home with you. But it's true for most of us that we will not be seeing those who would normally be with us to celebrate this holy day. They are not here.

But let us not be tricked into thinking that Jesus is not here – or that Christ is not risen – because the church building is not open for worship today. Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

In fact, the emptiness of the sanctuary is a much more accurate demonstration of the Biblical story, as one of my seminary professors wrote recently: “Christ’s Resurrection did not begin (or end) with large gatherings of Christians accompanied by choirs and organ blasts. It began with an *empty tomb* and three fearful women—a tomb emptied of death. This is the Easter to ponder such emptiness, to linger over it, indeed, to revel in it. This is the Easter to let our sanctuaries and chancels, our narthexes and choir lofts, remain utterly empty, not in despair but in testimony that lives are being saved in doing so. Emptiness, in this case, is life-giving. By abandoning our sacred gathering places, we are not abandoning the gospel. Far from it. We are testifying to what the white-robed

messenger announced at the tomb, *He is not here*. Perhaps these are the words we should proudly display on our church marquee signs during Holy Week: *He is not here*. Where, then, is he? According to John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus made his first public appearance with his disciples in their social isolation, huddled in fear—a locked room. To be sure, their social isolation was for a different reason than ours. But no matter. Christ will surely find us this Easter, wherever we have isolated ourselves. He's done it before. *Peace be with you.*"

(Dr. William Brown is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary)

Jesus. Is. Here. With me. And there. With you. Close your eyes. Put both hands over your heart and say it out loud with me: Jesus is here. Jesus is here. Risen from the dead. Alive in your heart.

And because we are separated from one another by this worldwide pandemic, the words of the apostle Paul to the church at Rome are as relevant and important as they have ever been: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

One of my favorite Resurrection Day hymns is the one that we will end the service with today, *He Lives!* It may not be the most sophisticated of all the Easter tunes. You might say it's a bit cheesy or schmaltzy. It's definitely old-fashioned, and it doesn't use inclusive language. But it dances and soars, proclaiming with immutable confidence and joy a message that cannot be silenced. A message we most need to hear and reclaim as our own.

*I serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today;
I know that he is living, whatever men may say;
I see his hand of mercy, I hear his voice of cheer,
And just the time I need him, he's always near.
He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know his lives?
He lives within my heart.*

He IS here. He is risen from the dead. “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

(1 Corinthians 15:54b-55)

Death did not have the victory over Jesus. And death will not have the victory over us. This pandemic will not have the victory over us. Resurrection happens. The stone will be rolled away, and we will be released from our tombs. And what a day of rejoicing that will be!

“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.”

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

AMEN.