***HE’S NOT HERE!***

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Texts: Matthew 28:1-15 and Isaiah 25:6-9

Well, it is finally here! A lot of us have been waiting for Easter more anxiously and expectantly than in years past. The forty days of Lent can seem like a long time under the best of circumstances, but even more so under the cloud and close quarters of a COVID-19 pandemic. Lent is a time for self-examination, reflection, and prayer; many of us have had about as much of that holy time sheltered in our homes as we can stand. It is only Easter’s dawn that brings an end to our Lenten journey, even if it brings no end to our COVID-19 journey.

Today we celebrate that the Lord is risen and our Lenten journey is over! But I wonder: is this Easter day a bit anticlimactic for you? In part that may be because it is being celebrated in the comfort of your home in your pajamas with a virtual service instead of crowded into a pew in person with friends and family. In part that may be because we are accustomed to hearing soaring alleluias echo from these walls on Easter, but today most of you will hear most clearly your own soaring alleluias – or that of your spouse or child or dog. And in part it may be because the Easter that many of you are most anxiously awaiting, along with a host of folks around the world and across our nation, is not the day when we celebrate Jesus rising from the tomb, but that day when we can rise from our homes to go out and about and back to life as we knew it before the pandemic began.

In these odd COVID-19 days in which we are living, a silver lining in the viral storm clouds seemed to be the opportunity to stay at home a little more than usual – or a lot more than usual! But that silver lining seems a bit tarnished after four weeks, perhaps more like a silver plated lining – one that wears thin over time and can’t stand the test of too much time together or apart or alone. Can you celebrate with joy this Easter day without the rosy promise that you too can rise and go out from your home just yet?

The irony is that in some ways this Easter is more like that first Easter morning than are most of our Easters. Usually we gather here in this sacred space with great crowds and joyful voices and beautiful music to proclaim that the tomb is empty and Jesus is risen! But the story of Jesus’ resurrection begins without all that fanfare, at dawn’s early light with two women making their lonely way to the tomb to perform a solemn duty – anoint the dead body of Jesus. They were dressed, not in their Easter best, but in the plain clothes appropriate for their job. There were no alleluias being sung that morning, just the songs of birds heralding the new day. Any words spoken between the women were uttered in hushed tones reflective of the place they were going, the grim duty that lay ahead, and the grief that still weighed heavily on their hearts. Jesus told the disciples they all would desert him; on the path to the tomb that Easter dawn, it seemed to have come to pass as he said, for the two Marys walked alone.

Where were the rest of the disciples that morning? Matthew does not tell us, but from what other gospel writers say, they were pretty much where many of you are now, shuttered behind closed doors. They were quarantined by the fear of being the next candidates to be nailed to the cross as followers of the crucified Jesus. Their hopes had been buried with Jesus’ body, and they did not know to whom to turn or where to go or what to do. Death was on their minds, not resurrection. Fear was on their minds, not joy. Despair was on their minds, not hope. The cross was on their minds, not the tomb. So while the women made their way to anoint Jesus’ dead body, all the other disciples sat at home and waited, without knowing what they were waiting for. None of them – not the disciples, not the women – were waiting for a resurrection.

Some years ago I was driving with my dad by Augusta Stone Church when I saw Grif Bonham sitting on the tailgate of his pickup truck in the church cemetery. I pulled in to see what he was up to and found him eating his lunch there. He told us that he was working for the census bureau, going door to door to visit folks who had not returned their forms in order to gather information and assure an accurate count. But that morning he found that no one was home at any of his stops. “So, I thought I would come up here to the cemetery,” he said. “Everyone stays at home here.”

That is what the disciples and the women expected – that Jesus’ body would be found at home in that tomb where it had been laid to rest on Good Friday. But Easter morning shattered those expectations. As Matthew describes it, as the women approached the tomb they felt the earth shake and watched an angel dressed in dazzling white light roll away a stone from the door of the tomb. Then they heard the angel say:

*Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here!*

*He’s not here.* What were they to make of those words? The open tomb was an invitation to see for themselves that his body was gone, but it would not necessarily have implied a resurrection. A missing body does not mean a risen Lord! But the angel’s next words confirmed the good news that has been passed on from generation to generation: “*He’s not here,* ***for he has been raised****!*” The empty tomb **does** mean a risen Lord for us because we know those Easter words that the angel said: *he has been raised!* We know who the women then saw and heard that same morning – the risen Lord. We sing *Jesus Christ is risen today* and *Christ the Lord is risen today* and *Thine is the Glory*, *Risen Conquering Son* and a host of *Alleluias* because Easter’s empty tomb is for us a sign of Jesus’ resurrection! The empty tomb is not a surprise to us anymore, but perhaps it should be.

We still expect those who die, especially those who died not three minutes ago but three days ago, to stay dead. That is how the world works. The parade of bodies carried out to makeshift morgues in New York, Italy, and other parts of the world bear witness to that grim reality. Yet here we are with that reality smacking us in the face with every new news report, and still we proclaim that resurrection is real, that Jesus is not there in the tomb but has been raised from the dead! It is a great mystery of faith, something that should still surprise us today!

But even if we are surprised at resurrection, we should not really be surprised that the risen Jesus was not there in the tomb where the women expected to find him, because again and again Jesus defies expectations. The wise men journey from far away in the east expecting to find him in holy Jerusalem, only to learn that he is born in the little town of Bethlehem. Jesus’ parents expect to find the 12 year-old Jesus among those journeying back from Jerusalem at Passover, only to find him perched among the teachers in the temple. The religious leaders expect to find the messiah among the pious and powerful, but find Jesus among the poor and outcast. The women expect to find the crucified Jesus in the tomb but meet him along the way home, for he is risen! Jesus never seems to be found where we expect to find him, but perhaps that is because our expectations are wrong. Perhaps we might find him more easily if we really listen to him, really believe him, and remember what he said.

He told the disciples that he would be raised on the third day, but they did not remember did not understand, and so they did not expect the resurrection. He said he would be raised on the third day, yet the women who went to the tomb did not expect the tomb to be empty. He tells us, “***I am the resurrection and the life.***” He tells us, “***Those who live and believe in me will never die***.” He tells us, “***Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me***.” He tells us, “***Unless you become like children you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven***.” He tells us, “***As you do to the least of these, so you do to me***.” He tells us, “***I am with you always to the end of the age***.” He tells us, “***Do not be afraid***.” He tells us all those things and more, but do you believe them? Do you remember them? Do you trust them and live by them? What do you expect of him – the risen Lord – on this Easter morning amid a COVID-19 pandemic?

In reflecting on this Easter day amid all our efforts to combat this virus by sheltering in place and leaving our churches empty this week, one of my seminary professors, Bill Brown, writes:

*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 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*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

He has indeed, for Jesus is rarely where we expect to find him. He is in your home with you. He is in those hospitals and nursing homes where patients are battling the virus, there beside the men and women working so hard to save lives and bring healing, even at risk to themselves. He is there in the refugee camps, detention facilities, and prisons where the fear of COVID-19 is as real as the threat that their enforced close-quarters poses. He is with all those who suffer, all those who serve, all those who mourn, all those who despair, all those who lament that this Easter is not like the others. He is there bearing the good news of this Easter day: He has been raised!

Do not lament the fact that you are not here to celebrate this day, for he is not here; he has been raised and he is with you wherever you are, with all of us wherever we are. That is the good news we celebrate this day. That is the good news of Easter, even in the middle of a pandemic – especially in the middle of a pandemic! Jesus Christ is risen – and he is here – with us, with you! Alleluia! Amen

1. William P. Brown, “The Life-Giving Emptiness of Easter”, 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)