

The First Easter Today

Matthew 28

By Fr. Zac for St. Mark's-In-Quarantine, Austin, TX; April 12, 2020

Well this is not a normal Easter. This day of typically unambiguous and overabundant joy and celebration is shaded with some sadness because we can't be together in the same place. Every year, one of my favorite parts of Easter is something that I usually forget until I arrive early to the church that morning—that you can smell it. As soon as you cross the threshold on Easter morning your senses are arrested by the smell of Easter lilies brightening the air, a poignant reminder that this is a day where we celebrate the resurrection of a body—one that senses and smells and touches and tastes. I am sad that you can't smell the lilies with me.

Of course I am sad about more than just your olfactory deprivation. It feels like this coronavirus has robbed us of something precious. Bad stuff happening is not exactly unusual. We're quite accustomed to it. And every year during Holy Week—or any other week for that matter—there are any number painful things happening in our world and in our community. And yet amidst those varieties of pain we gather together in church—for comfort, yes, but also to make transcendent sense, to make meaning, of that pain. To hear good news. This what we do every Sunday but this is especially put on display in Holy Week, when on Good Friday we see summed up in one image all that is bad, and on Easter morning we see summed up all that is good—and best of all that indeed God and His goodness win. This coronavirus is a bad and devastating thing in its own right, but it seems peculiarly cruel that in addition to doing bad it is also depriving us of one of this source of consolation. Because of it, we are denied the tactile togetherness of our bodies that helps the meaning of all our tragedies and the beauty all of God's victories over them land deeply in our souls. That's what I've been thinking.

But then I spent some more time with Matthew's telling of that first Easter morning. And as I did, I began to realize that many of the things that make Easter tragically different this year are actually things that make it eerily more similar to that very first Easter morning. In other words, when you look at how we're required to celebrate Easter today in this unusual season of social distancing, and then you look at how that first Easter morning really went 2,000 years ago, one can't help but wonder if actually it's all the other, "regular" Easters in between that are the unusual ones. I can't help but wonder if before us today is an opportunity like never before to experience that first early Easter morning. Look again at the story with me.

The first thing to notice is **the numbers**: there's only a couple characters present on the first Easter morning. One has to ask: Why are these two women not with the other disciples? Have they already divided themselves into separate groups and households? Which is to say, the first Easter is not a day where three times the normal Sunday crowd shows up; where the plate offering is double in one day what we typically get in a month; there's no lilies, no trumpets, no pastels, no pearls, and no Easter egg hunt. The first Easter morning begins with just two people, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary—isolated from others, isolated from the world, just like us.

Second, notice **the emotion**: that first Easter morning begins not with joy but with grief about the present and fear about the future. Mary and Mary Magdalene are not traveling to the tomb expecting any kind of great miracle. Despite the crazy things Jesus sometimes said, death is death, and they're simply here to pay their

respects, to say one last goodbye to their beloved rabbi before they walk into a completely unknown and terrifying future. They are afraid of what is coming. Does this mean the end of their movement? Will coming after Jesus be enough? Will they now come after us, his followers? The first Easter starts with grief and fear—the parallels to us on this point are too plain to even need mentioning.

Third, notice **the chaos** of the scene: Mary and Mary Magdalen don't enjoy a nice leisurely garden walk to the tomb. On their way, the text tells us there is a great earthquake. This detail almost always gets skipped over but seems especially prescient now. There is a horrible natural disaster. Not a pandemic, ok, but an earthquake is a community-wide crisis for sure; at the very least, it is something newsworthy enough to relegate the crucifixion of yet three more common criminals by the Roman Empire to back page news. The scene at the tomb is not peaceful. There's also an angel whose "appearance is like lightning?!" the text says, for fear of which the guards standing watch "shook and became like dead men." This chaos is precisely what I was talking about at the beginning. This Easter doesn't feel like unambiguous joy. It feels a bit like chaos. We're exclaiming joy in here, but it feels like the world is kind of ending out there. It feels like the ground of our reality is shaking underneath our feet.

The final thing that is the same today as it was on that first Easter morning is the most important. It is this: **We are still, in the end, confronted with an empty tomb.** And here, in this final confrontation, we have arrived at the full scene for your imagination to contemplate on this day of Easter in the year 33 A.D. and 2020 A.D. alike.

It is you, alone, chaos all around, staring into an empty tomb. And you hear a voice saying to you, "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." This is the central moment of the first Easter, today. This is the moment at the center of all time. And just like Mary Magdalene and Mary, you must decide what to do next.

~

One thing this coronavirus has done is to remind us pretty starkly and quickly of all the ultimate existential questions that we get to live most of our lives ignoring. We thought we had graduated beyond plagues. To ignore such questions at this moment would be to freeze up like the soldiers. To stamp down whatever wonderings have wandered into your heart and head and wait for this all to pass so things can "return to normal." That is one option before you today.

Your other option is to be like the Mary's. Maybe one of the gifts inside this tragic moment is that it has reintroduced us to those questions. Maybe now is a moment to stick with them and see what happens. Notice, Jesus does not just pop around the corner. Mary Magdalene and Mary still have to go look for him. The text says, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples." Did you notice that? They left quickly with *fear and great joy*. Just because they now believe—or are at least open to believing—that Jesus has risen from the dead does not mean that fear is forever behind them and all their problems are forever solved. Chasing after Jesus can be a frightening thing indeed. Choosing to change your life is always a scary thing. But choosing to chase after Jesus inevitably brings great joy too.

You still have a choice to make.

Today, gazing at the empty tomb, alone, and surrounded by chaos, I hope you choose to chase after Jesus—whether that’s a decision you’ve never made before or a decision you’ve made a thousand times. Go. Run. Because if what the angel says is true, and Jesus really is alive, there’s nothing in the world that matters more.

And don’t worry too much about finding Jesus. In all the resurrection stories, it’s Jesus who finds you. “Suddenly Jesus met them,” is all it says in this story. Jesus shows up in many forms today. Jesus is present in the Church. Jesus is present in the faces of the poor. Jesus is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In the water of Baptism. But Jesus can also be present in the still small quiet spaces that will not be extinguished for all the chaos in the world. Jesus can be present in the bright scent of a flower. In the curiosity of a child. In the majesty of a blade of grass. Jesus can be present with you right now, wherever you are, even in your isolation, even surrounded by chaos. When you start looking, you won’t be able to help but find Jesus in all kinds of places.

There’s one last thing you should know before you decide. If Jesus really is alive, if the angel is right, and the Bible is true, if Death itself has truly been defeated, there is nothing that can ultimately prevail against that victory—no plague, pestilence, or pandemic; no earthquake, fire, or flood; no violence, deceit, or rebellion; no pride, hatred, or hypocrisy; no evil thought, evil spirit or evil Enemy—if even Death is defeated, every evil is only temporary. God in Christ has already walked through every valley of shadow and death and has come out the other side. And now, today, God in Christ is staring back at you, with arms open and wide, with eyes full of love, and he is waiting for your answer.

Amen.