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Easter A: Matthew 28:1-10

St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

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The Good News of Easter

Annie Lamott writes, “I hate it that you can’t prove the beliefs of my faith. If I were God, I’d have the answers at the end of the workbook, so you could check as you went along, to see if you’re on the right track. But nooooo—Darkness is our context, Easter’s context; without it you couldn’t see the light. Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us.”¹

Well, glory to God who surprises us with unexpected gifts, who is not afraid of the new and unfamiliar, who takes our hand in the darkness and promises this will be “better than light and safer than a known way.”² Glory to God who has even given the key at the end of the story, so we can see that with God, we are on the right track. Glory to God who has pronounced a new truth: because of the resurrection, “the worst thing that happens is not the last thing.”³

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who saw Jesus crucified, who looked on from a distance and watched Jesus’ awful execution, go early on the first day of the week to see the tomb of Jesus. What they expect to see is

¹ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (Riverhead Hardcover, 2005), 274.

² Minnie Haskins in *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day*, by Macrina Wiederkehr (Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2008), 42.

³ Versions of this statement are attributed to Frederick Buechner, including by John Claypool, in a sermon entitled, “The Worse Things are Never the Last Things,” from the Chicago Sunday Evening Club’s 30 Good Minutes. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_4523.html, accessed 4/20/2011. I cannot find a place where Buechner has written the statement. The closest I can find is this statement by Buechner, “The worst thing isn’t the last thing about the world. It’s the next to last thing.” The is quoted by W. Dale Brown in *Of Fiction and Faith: Twelve American Writers Talk about Their Vision and Work* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

Jesus' grave, confirming the cruel truth that in this world wise, faithful, and good is, in the end, no match for strong, cruel, and self-preserving.

Somewhere along the path to the cemetery, however, they cross an unmarked border into another country. Without even knowing, they leave one country and enter another.

No – that's not quite right. They don't cross over – the whole map has been shifted – like a tablecloth beneath the familiar place settings, swiftly and decisively yanked so that the foundation of everything has been irrevocably changed. So, here in the early morning, as a new day is just dawning, as the first faint light of a fresh beginning is starting to break, the two women enter a whole new world. Without being aware of anything more than the dew on the grass, the morning mist rising, the slap of their sandals on the hard-packed dirt as they walk, the slightly numb feeling of waking early after too little sleep, throats still raw from crying, eyes still red, they walk towards the tomb of Jesus unaware that the whole landscape has shifted right under their feet. They carry the assumptions and expectations of the old country with them: hope is a fragile thing, its flame in constant danger of going out; the weak “eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another;”⁴ death is the last thing; the dead stay dead. Though they carry these burdens of the old world, they have entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection life. Jesus of Nazareth, dead, dead, dead on Friday afternoon, is not in the tomb this morning, and the world – theirs and ours has been different ever since.

Now, in John Claypool's words, “The [worst] things are never the last things.” God took the worst thing – the torturous death of an innocent and beloved man -- and made it the prelude to redemption and hope.

The opening acclamation of worship that first Easter morning was not a cheerful, “Alleluia. The Lord is risen,” but as Tom Long says, “a shattering earthquake that rippled a seismic shock through history and signaled that the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope.”⁵ The rumbling of the earthquake is the sound of God interrupting the way things have always been done, God's dramatic intervention, disrupting the ways the dots have always connected – life,

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 322.

⁵ *Ibid.*

death, grief, end. An angel appears, rolling back the stone, and sits on it like he's sitting on a park bench, enjoying the early morning light as the sun rises.

Soldiers are there -- guards who had signed up for what they thought would be the easiest detail ever: make sure a dead man stays in a tomb. Turns out they got the unluckiest assignment in security operations history. To say they were underequipped for their job is a huge understatement. The earthquake, the appearance of the angel, the rolling back of the stone all are too much for them. These big strong strapping soldiers become a quivering mass of scaredy-cat. They've got cemetery duty and they're the ones looking like the dead. I imagine them being grateful their names aren't recorded for posterity. It must have been tough back at the base -- "did you hear what happened to Brutus and Gaius?" "The dead man got away!" "Couldn't keep a dead man in a tomb!" "Came back talking about angels."

The women arrive and the angel speaks to them, "Do not be afraid." Angels always have to say that -- that's always the first thing out of their mouths when they talk to humans. But now, the angel's "Do not be afraid" is not just about this moment, is not just about seeing a dazzling and unexpected angel, it's about living in this new world: Do not be afraid. Of anything. Not of death. Not of life. Do not be afraid. Jesus has been raised.

The angel offers them a look into the tomb -- it's been opened for that reason -- come and see. But there's no need to stay here, gawking at the empty tomb, like a big granite husk, a discarded limestone cocoon, when all the life has actually pressed forward, flown free. The angel quickly sends the women on with a mission and a message, they are to tell the others Jesus has already gone on ahead of them to Galilee. They will see him there.

The women run with fear and great joy. They run with joy -- Jesus is alive! They run with fear -- Jesus is alive! All of those amazing things Jesus said, about the poor in spirit being blessed, about truth setting us free, about the possibility of forgiveness and healing and reconciliation and hope, now cannot simply be dismissed. They are for us. There is no giving up, no easy way out, no resolutely hanging our heads, shrugging our shoulders, and going away. Christ is alive and is going on ahead of us. Will we follow?

Philip Yancy writes, "In many respects I would find an un-resurrected Jesus easier to accept. Easter makes him dangerous and frightening."

Because of Easter I have to listen to his extravagant claims and can no longer pick and choose from his sayings. . . Easter means he must be loose out there somewhere. Like the disciples, I never know where Jesus might turn up, how he might speak to me, what he might ask of me. Easter means we can never nail him down. . . ”⁶

The women hurry off on their mission, and while on their way, they are met by the risen Christ. This is no accident; it is a theological point, a truth of discipleship. When we do what Jesus tells us, while we carry out the work Jesus Christ gives us to do, that is when we meet him. The women weren't supposed to wait around, hoping he might show up. They were supposed to be about the business he had given them to do. And when they do it, they meet him. In the midst of work, in the midst of going off to share good news, in the midst of mixed emotions of fear and great joy, they meet Jesus.

They worship. He again tells them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” The disciples, who in fear and anxiety had denied and abandoned Jesus, are not enemies, turncoats, weaklings. In the power of the resurrection, they are forgiven and called brothers. “Go tell,” says Jesus. Forgiveness is real. I will make brothers and sisters of you all.

This is our Easter story, our Easter reality. With God nothing is impossible. But God can start with the impossible and work from there. God can start with the hopeless and go from there. And only the truly dead can be resurrected. As Annie Lamott writes, “When God is going to do something wonderful, [God] always starts with a hardship. When God is going to do something amazing, [God] starts with an impossibility.”⁷

The worst thing that happens is not the last thing. The last thing is life. The last thing is love. This is not naïve optimism. This is truth that has faced the cross, stared at it, gazed on all its cruelty, all the hard wood of its reality, and sees that finally, in the end, the last thing, is, in the words of Frederick Buechner, that “God's will, not ours is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives, through him, in

⁶ Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 2002), 225.

⁷ LaMott, 33-34.

him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary ever dared to dream.”⁸

We live in this foundation-shifted resurrection world. We can carry the assumptions of the old world with us – death is the end, goodness -- too fragile, love -- for the weak. But these are so many burdens, too much baggage for what is meant to be a joyful adventure, an expedition for which we want to pack lightly because our leader, the Risen Christ has already gone on ahead and when we follow, we will see him, in all his resplendent glory.

Glory to God, today and forever. Alleluia. Amen.

⁸ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (HarperOne, 1985), 81.