

**April 12, 2020**  
**“With Fear and Great Joy“**  
**Jeremiah 31:1-6 & Matthew 28:1-10**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

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Resurrection reads like a fairy tale when what you're seeing and feeling is wilderness and dry bones. You may recall—if you were with us, and paying attention (amen!)—that I preached those exact words two weeks ago in what was essentially a resurrection preview.

Still in the midst of the Lenten journey, we heard Ezekiel's dramatic vision of a valley of dry bones and God's spirit putting flesh on those bones and filling lungs with the breath of life. We read of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead after four days. We considered the faith that first believes in the possibility of life, the hope that leans into that possibility, and the love that realizes it. That makes life real, new, where life is interrupted. Stifled. Diminished. Hanging on by a thread. That is what I preached two weeks ago.

From Palm and Passion Sunday last week, following Jesus through this harrowing, hard-as-hell holy week, we have held onto that possibility, that promise of life, new life, resurrected life, where life is betrayed, denied, rejected, crucified, buried. Buried.

And so here we are, friends, still in the midst of a crippling and overwhelming global pandemic, at the main event. No more previews, this is Easter Sunday! It may not feel like it, but this is still Easter Sunday! Christ is risen! Love is risen! Life is risen! Indeed! The central story of the Christian narrative. Jesus raised from the dead after three days. The celebration of resurrection. The more distant cross. The now empty tomb.

I grew up in a Methodist church that did not mess around with Easter Sunday. Like so many churches, it was all-out pageantry and production. Regular worship on steroids. The decorations were more elaborate. The sermons were longer and louder, or at least it felt that way. There was more music, and the music was more dramatic. The choir was somehow bigger, people showed up with instruments you never saw play instruments otherwise. We had a member who was a recording artist, a bit of a celebrity in my small town, who every year played Don Francisco's "He's Alive" – a five-minute crescendo through Jesus' final days, sung from the perspective of Peter. It reaches full musical climax

with the resurrection, of course, and Peter's embrace of it, and ends with a rousing chorus: *He's alive and I'm forgiven, heaven's gates are open wide. I believe it, He's alive.*

Now I no longer ascribe to the underlying theology (I'm not sure I ever truly did), but I still get chills when I think about those Easter services. They were memorable. They were joyful. They made you feel a certain kind of way, but looking back, they were . . . well, fairy tales. Feel-good fairy tales. Death conquered once and for all. Thanks to Jesus, the risen Christ, the pain of the cross and the despair of the tomb fully behind us.

But this is not how the story actually goes.

Of course, we get some variations of the story from the different gospels. In the account from Matthew's gospel, there is plenty of drama with an earthquake and an angel whose appearance was like lightning, with clothing white as snow. In other accounts there are multiple angels announcing that Jesus has been raised and that he's going ahead of them to Galilee.

In Matthew it is the women who first receive the news, and what strikes me in the whole exchange is what is really the more consistent and appropriate theme throughout the gospel accounts of the resurrection. Fear.

Upon appearing to the women, the angel's first words are "Do not be afraid." After Jesus appears to them, he says, "Greetings!" and then, "Do not be afraid . . ."

In Mark's original account, the entire resurrection narrative ends in fear, literally with the word "afraid." Chapter 16, verse 8: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's how it ends!

And in Matthew, the women—instructed by the angel to go and share the good news with the other disciples—leave the tomb with "fear and great joy." Fear AND great joy. I love that! With fear AND great joy. This is more like it, this is how the story goes. And this rings true with our own complicated experiences of resurrection, of new life. Amen!

Frederick Buechner writes of the resurrection accounts this way: "It is not a major production at all, and the minor attractions we have created around it—the bunnies and

baskets and bonnets, the dyed eggs—have so little to do with what it's all about that they neither add much nor subtract much. It's not really even much of a story when you come right down to it, and that is of course the power of it. If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They seem to be telling it the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself."

My first years in Philadelphia, beginning almost 25 years ago now, were probably the most difficult of my life. I moved to the city after living and working in community in Baltimore. I knew only my aunt and uncle, who lived in Mt. Airy at the time. That was it. I had no idea how hard that would be. Those were years of serious struggle for me, years of deepening depression, years of feeling alone and afraid much of the time. Feeling stuck.

As it happened, my mom was going through her own struggle in those same years – recently separated and eventually divorced from my dad, living alone for the first time, finding her way in Virginia and then North Carolina where she knew no one—after living my whole life in a small town in Ohio where she knew everyone! And everyone knew her.

We were on similar journeys, at very different stages of our lives. We talked a lot, and I can remember eventually arriving together at a metaphor of being stuck in quicksand—and saying to each other again and again and again that we just needed to keep moving. We couldn't, either of us, fully imagine how we were gonna get out of the quicksand, but we had to keep moving.

Resurrection for me, for me or my mom, did not swoop in like the angels. It didn't swoop in at all. More like trickled in. Resurrection, new life, looked and felt more like baby steps. It showed up initially as the will to simply keep moving through the quicksand, trusting that new life, renewed life, would eventually—albeit gradually—find its way, would rise within us, if we remained open to the possibility.

This is more like what the text from Jeremiah calls "grace in the wilderness." I love that, too! Resurrection, new life, does not necessarily, and certainly not magically, take us out of the wilderness. But at the very least, it offers us grace in the wilderness. Light in the darkness.

Even when the cross looms large, and all we see or feel is crucifixion. Even when the tomb is sealed and we either feel buried INSIDE it or find ourselves waiting anxiously OUTSIDE it.

This is the theme of liberation echoing through the Passover story. Amy and I were blessed to be part of a virtual seder that Alisha hosted last night—and grateful for the reminder from Jewish tradition that liberation, new life, is not only possible, it's inevitable. Grace in the wilderness, in the darkness, is just the beginning.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*: “Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way.” Reflecting on her own, actual experience with the feltness of a cave, she continues: “If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air. I let this sink in: new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

New life starts in the dark, and so it is in the dark where faith serves AS a springboard and LIKE a mustard seed, believing—even against all seen and felt and imagined evidence to the contrary—in the possibility of new life.

It is in the dark where hope follows faith, leaning into the possibility of new life, setting the stage for it, keeping vigil on its behalf.

And it is in the dark where love—divine love within all of us, each of us—emerges from hope and realizes, or at least begins to realize, the possibility of new life rising up. It is in the dark, on the cross, in the tomb, where love and life must and will find their way.

This is what Howard Thurman calls “the growing edge”: “Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge!”

The good news of resurrection is good news, make not mistake. But it's not a showy, otherworldly, production kind of good news marked by pageantry and trumpets. It's

earthy good news, new life, renewed life, rising from the ashes, borne out in the brokenness of our lives and of the world. The Easter story doesn't replace the cross, it profoundly reminds us that the cross and the tomb are not—are never—the final word. Love and life are the divine order, and life and life will rise up.

And so on Easter Sunday, the main event, we are called back to a gritty faith that believes in the possibility of life rising up even where life, in the dark, has been betrayed, denied, rejected, crucified, buried. We are called back to a relentless hope that leans—in big and small ways—into the possibility of life rising up where life, in the dark, has been betrayed, denied, rejected, crucified, buried. And we are called, friends, back to a laboring love that realizes—in big and small ways, with big and little steps—the possibility of life, new life, rising up where life, even and especially in the dark, has been betrayed, denied, rejected, crucified, buried.

Walter Brueggemann offers a prayer of perspective, speaking further to the power of resurrection in the midst of life's pain:

*Christ is Risen  
He is risen indeed!  
We are baffled by the very Easter claim we voice.  
Your new life fits none of our categories.  
We wonder and stew and argue,  
and add clarifying adjectives like "spiritual" and "physical."  
But we remain baffled, seeking clarity and explanation,  
we who are prosperous, and full and safe and tenured.  
We are baffled and want explanations.*

*But there are those not baffled, but stunned by the news,  
stunned while at minimum wage jobs;  
stunned while the body wastes in cancer;  
stunned while the fabric of life rots away in fatigue and despair;  
stunned while unprosperous and unfull  
and unsafe and untenured . . .  
Waiting only for you in your Easter outfit,  
waiting for you to say, "Fear not, it is I."  
Deliver us from our bafflement and our many explanations.  
Push us over into stunned need and show yourself to us lively.  
Easter us in honesty,  
Easter us in fear;  
Easter us in joy,  
and let us be Eastered. Amen.*

So let us be Eastered—with fear, perhaps, but also great joy. And may we be less and less afraid, and more and more joyful. May we be the Easter people we are called to be for each and every other, again and again and again. Following the risen Jesus as witnesses to and activists toward the persistent possibility of new life rising. Here. Now. Always.

May it be so.