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Interim Pastor  
Easter Sunday

April

“Joining the Dance!”  
“The Story”: Chapter 27

Jeremiah 31:1-6  
Matthew 28:1-10

Jeremiah 31:1-6

“At that time,” declares the LORD, “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people.”

<sup>2</sup> This is what the LORD says:

“The people who survive the sword  
will find favor in the wilderness;  
I will come to give rest to Israel.”

<sup>3</sup> The LORD appeared to us in the past,<sup>[a]</sup> saying:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.

<sup>4</sup> I will build you up again,  
and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt.

Again you will take up your timbrels  
and go out to dance with the joyful.

<sup>5</sup> Again you will plant vineyards  
on the hills of Samaria;  
the farmers will plant them  
and enjoy their fruit.

<sup>6</sup> There will be a day when watchmen cry out  
on the hills of Ephraim,  
‘Come, let us go up to Zion,  
to the LORD our God.’”

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

<sup>2</sup> There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

<sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

<sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, would be acceptable to you—for you remain our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Good Morning and Happy Easter to you all! It is wonderful to see so many of you, here today!

I’m going to start off today with a confession, and here it is: I am a poor dancer.

I am. I am a poor dancer. I think I have a good sense of rhythm—I mean, I think I can shake in time--but pair me up with a lady on the dance floor and, well, she had better be wearing Army boots. Do I hear an “ahhhh” out there, by the way? It’s OK to say it: You’re in a Presbyterian church—go ahead. Thank you. I feel much better...

But—and in all seriousness—I haven’t felt much like dancing lately. I haven’t. And here’s why: We are living in uncertain times--in fact, I think you can say that we are living in often fearful—anxious—times. Look at our politics. Look at our economy. Consider the world scene. There are a host of challenges—threats, even--to our health, to our survival.

We’ve been here before. We have. Other periods in our past have threatened to overwhelm us. Many of you, for example, will remember World War II—you’ll remember the shock and fear that followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in particular. For others, it will be the turbulence—the protests and

the riots—of the 1960's. For me, it was the 1980's '—and not just because it was the age of disco. It was the time when the Soviet Union and our country tried—and failed—several times to limit the number of nuclear weapons we were pointing at each-other, and tensions were high. As teenager, I well remember a book called “The Third World War” by Sir John Hackett. It detailed—in gruesome detail—what a Soviet-led attack upon Western Europe would look like, and—worse yet—how it would end. It was a work of fiction, but it still kept me up at night...

But as I think of our world today, friends, the worries of my teen years seems almost quaint. Back then we believed that human reason would prevail—that the Soviet Union, for instance, had as many reasons as we did to prevent a nuclear war. Back then, we also knew who our enemies were--what they looked like. Today, it's different. Our world is filled with bitter, disenfranchised extremists, with people who have no nation—and with people who have no qualms about killing other human beings using the stuff of everyday life--like a moving truck—or an airliner. Yes, here is a reality—in truth--that existed long before September 11<sup>th</sup>, but it's a reality that can't be addressed in the ways of the past, however—you and I can't reason with these individuals—we can't. And so, we do what we can think of doing: We drop bombs on their caves—we step up security in our airports—our shopping malls—our schools....

Terrorism—the acts of ISIS overseas—of lone wolves, in our neighborhood. Just one of our fears today—and there are many others, of course...

Why bring it up, today?

Yes, why on this glorious Easter morning--with the sound of “Alleluias” still ringing in our ears, with the sights and smells of springtime all around us—why—on earth--have I started this message, in this way?

Because the world we live in today, friends, is gripped by fear and you and I cannot ignore this fact—plain and simple. But I've also starting this message because today is the day—of all days!--to celebrate the answer to this fear: God's eternal victory over death on this day, on this Easter Day! Yes, why have I started this message today in this way? *Because if you and I don't take this opportunity to openly name our fears, we are robbing Easter of its power to meet these fears--to confront them--and to overcome them!*

Now, I could have taken a different approach. I could have. I could have tried to simply lift our mood with telling you more about my poor dancing skills, for instance. But if all we did today, friends, was to try to lift the mood—if all we did today was to try to get our minds off our fears with upbeat songs and with

the over-used words of Easter cheer—if this is only what we did, we would not be worshipping God as we should! We wouldn't! What we would be doing—hear me now—would not be the worship of God as we should: It would be a psycho-spiritual pep rally. You and I would be not be worshipping the God who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead—and that is what we are doing, this morning!

For what is Easter?

Easter is the day—of all days!--when we name the open confrontation that exists between the power of a loving, life-giving, Creator God—on the one hand--and the powers of sin and death that are still active in our world—on the other! Yes, Easter is the day—of all days--when we remind ourselves that this confrontation exists—but this is not all: Easter is the day—of all days—when we worship the God who has won this confrontation by raising His Son, Jesus Christ, from the grave, years ago—but this still not all, friends: Today is the day —of all days—when you and I can be sure that God still wins this confrontation! *Easter is not just a day for us to sing beautiful roof, raising music to make ourselves feel good: It's also the day to remind ourselves **why** we sing this beautiful, roof raising music—it's the day that we sing them because death and destruction does not have the last word!*

Now, do I hear a “Hallelujah!” out there?

It's OK: You're in a Presbyterian church—go ahead! In fact, let's shout it all together, right now: “Hallelujah!” Right on!

But there's more I need to say today. I need to say something more about fear.

...

Fear comes in several varieties. There is the kind of fear that can paralyze us—and there is the kind of fear that can motivate us. *There is the kind of fear that can make us feel helpless and hopeless, on the one hand—and the kind of fear that can push us to do something, on the other.* And I want to return us to Matthew's account of Easter for a moment.....

*What do we see here?*

We see that an earthquake shakes the site of Jesus' tomb. We are told that the great stone sealing the tomb is rolled by an angel from heaven. And we are told that the women who have come to the tomb—both named Mary—discover that the tomb is empty. Here is what we are told that happens—but—more to the point: What happens next?

What happens next? Well, the soldiers guarding the tomb are terrified -so terrified, in fact, that they become—in Matthew’s words—“like dead men.”

Here’s this first kind of fear. It’s the kind of fear that stops us dead in our tracks. When I was much younger—and had more hair--I remember being “spooked” by a friend. He jumped out when I wasn’t looking and, well, I just about died of a heart-attack. And this is how the guards act on this day—they are “spooked”, by what they see....

Are we spooked people?

You know, in the face of today’s fears--in the face of war, terrorism, poverty, climate change, and so on—we can become “like dead people.” We can become overwhelmed—immobilized—we can feel powerless--even hopeless. We can “go through the motions”, if you like—lead our lives without purpose, without joy, without hope—or—just as easily—you and I can live our lives as if nothing is wrong--we keep things “on the sunny side” as they say. We can try to take our minds off difficult things by avoiding them—by not talking about them, or thinking about them. We wear shallow smiles. We laugh nervously.

And I think all of us—including myself—can act at like this sometimes.....

When we try to forget about the U.S. serviceman—and people of Middle East--who continue to die in the War on Terror.

When we turn away from the continued suffering in the Sudan, Somalia, or the Gaza Strip.

When we meet friends with a smile, but never tell them we’re wrestling with depression, or a serious illness

When someone asks us what’s happening in our lives, and we say “Oh, not much”, all after a week of enough stress at home--or the office—to send our blood pressure through the roof.

Yes, when these “shadows of life” overwhelm us, I think there is a very basic fear response that come with it, and it is a response we that tend to go to by default—even involuntarily. *But it’s a response, nevertheless, that leaves us unable—or unwilling--to honestly engage the source of our crises—and our fears...*

Is there any hope?

*Yes, there is—for there are other people in today’s Gospel story. Matthew lists Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”. Two women*

What can we know about them?

Matthew tells us that they see and that they experience the very same things as the guards do—that they experience the earthquake--that they see the angel descend from Heaven--that they see the stone rolled away—that they also hear the words of the angel: “Do not be afraid...” Here is what we read about them.

Now, are these women afraid?

You bet your life, they are!  
Wouldn't you be, too?

Yes, here are two people just as afraid as the guards, *but now, here is the blessed difference: They don't become paralyzed by them--no, they get moving in response to them: “With fear—and with great joy,” Matthew tells us—they run from the tomb and where do they run? They run straight-- to Jesus! In fact, I think you can say that they almost run over Him! “Suddenly, Jesus met them...” we are told. They run into Him.*

But there's more: **In their fear—and in their great joy!—they worship Him.** They cling to him! They hold him close! They worship him! And why do they do this—why do they do this? They do this, friends, not because they know what is going to happen tomorrow--because they don't—no, they worship Jesus **because they know that Jesus can be trusted!**

Do I hear another Hallelujah out there!

**Well, we should say this—for the two Mary's—these two women are filled with joy, friends, because Jesus has kept HIS WORD to THEM. Jesus IS alive again—just as he said he would be—and just as the angel has also told them...**

You know, I think one of the greatest challenges facing us, today is a simple—and very profound one: We don't know who to trust anymore. We don't. We don't trust our politicians very much, for example: During elections they promise us the world—but what do they give to us once they get into office? Well, it often falls far short. There is skepticism, I feel, toward just about any promises made anymore and for good reason: People let us down. Institutions let us down.

Why should we have faith in something—or in someone--that disappoints—that fails to deliver? Am I barking up the wrong tree, this morning? Am I off base?

Am I? I don't think so—I don't think so because we are living in times made more unsettled because we are often let down—

***But Easter is not about a let-down—it is about a promise kept: Jesus has been raised from the grave, just as He said He would—just as the angel now tells these two, fearful, women. God can be trusted! God can be trusted! And why can these two women trust God? Because before them--on this morning--stands Jesus—once dead—but now alive and well, just as He promised!***

“ Now,” you may ask, “that’s all well and good, Todd. I mean, didn’t these women have an advantage we do not have—I mean, they see Jesus, don’t they? I haven’t seen Jesus....”

Well, did you hear about the American couple that took a trip recently?

It said that this couple—very deeply religious--had realized their dream to travel to the Holy Land—that they were in Jerusalem, in fact—when the husband suddenly became ill, and died—a real tragedy—the end of over 50 years of marriage. The wife began to make plans—and so, she contacted a funeral director.

“I know your faith means so much to you,” he told her, “and so, I’ve made arrangements for you to bury him, here in the Holy Land for a modest fee.” The wife, however, decided against it. “But why do you want to do this? It will cost you so much more money, and he can be laid to rest right here, on the Mount of Olives.”

“Sir” she replied, “over two thousand years ago a man died here and—three days later—he came back alive. I just can’t take that chance!”

I know....!

But at least she believed it could happen! That this story, friends, is true.

Easter is about a choice we have, friends—a choice whether to believe—or not to believe. We are not privileged as these two women were, in Matthew’s account today—we cannot see Jesus, before us, with our eyes—we cannot touch his wounds. But we can hold onto him in our hearts--we can—we can place our trust in His resurrection

Now, does this mean that you and I have nothing to fear—that grave threats to our security—even our life—fail to exist? Friends, we would be foolish to deny them! NO, there are plenty of reasons to believe that evil is real and very powerful—that those who love death and destruction will target our lives—but

here's the difference: ***You and I can be sure that they will NOT have the last word because Jesus is Risen—because God can be trusted!***

Yes, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, you and I can know that we will be comforted when we mourn—and why? Because—with Jesus—we will see those we have loved and lost to sight once more...

Why be simple—meek—and why be merciful to others, as Jesus tells us to be? Because this is how Jesus was, and because Jesus has been raised from the dead—saved from the hands of those who were un-merciful...

Why hunger for righteousness—why be peacemakers--why, for instance, be involved in efforts to relieve the suffering and misery—all the injustice and oppression—that still choke our world? Because Jesus stood up to this, and—by his resurrection--emerged victorious over all that was thrown against Him, and He has thrown it off like a blanket—emerging victorious—

**Yes, why should we cling to Jesus—is it simply to survive? No, we hold Jesus close so that we will emerge victorious-- with Him** Oh, to be like these two women—to let our fears drive us into the arms of Jesus!

Times are tough.

We are living in a time of great fear.

How are you responding to it?

Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah made the following prediction: “Again you will take up your tambourines,” he wrote, “you will go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.”

Who was he speaking to?

He was speaking to the people of his time, of course. And he speaks to us because merry-makers are not without fears. They have them—just like you and I do—and they especially have them if they see me on the dance floor!

***But here's the difference: They choose to run with their fears—they do! They are the kind of people who run toward the God who saves them, like the two Mary's in our story did, long ago. Yes, who are the merry-makers? They are people who combine their fear and their joy into a great dance with God! This is how they live life! And they live this kind of life, because they know that their dancing partner knows all the steps!***

Yes, why dance with Jesus? Because—my dear friends--He has experienced life in all its beauty and all its tragedy—He knows it all, and because He knows it all, He will lead us through all things—He will hold us close—He will comfort us —challenge us—even raise us from the dead, friends, and bring us to a the place where the sun never sets...

Are you a merry-maker?

In tough times, we can pull back.

We can become defensive, and embittered.

We can feel overwhelmed

Worse yet, we can feel that we cannot make a difference to anyone.

Today is Easter.

Today is a day to own up to our fears—but let us not be paralyzed by them

Yes, today is day to join the merry-makers, friends because the Son has risen for us—and because the Sun shines upon us:

For Christ is raised.

He is raised indeed!

Alleluia!

Amen!