

Easter Sunday 2020, St. David's Episcopal Church, Matthew 28:1-10 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

For me as a priest, there's nothing quite like the first Alleluia I get to say after Lent is over, but this year is different. Normally the first Alleluia comes at Great Vigil of Easter service, which we did not attempt to do online. Then I get to say it at the beginning of each of our Easter Sunday services. This year we have one service in a mostly empty church with a camera. But that first Easter wasn't stuffed with flowers and bunnies and eggs, either. Jesus resurrected in a cold, dark tomb, removed his wrappings, and rolled away the stone.

Every year our Sunday readings focus on a different Gospel, and this year the Gospel is Matthew. Our Matthew Easter reading opens with "After the Sabbath...Mary Magdalene and the other Mary *went to see the tomb.*" They had to see it. He had been buried hurriedly while they went home for the Sabbath, and they needed to see his grave.

It's hard to absorb something new. A week before, Jesus had been hailed as a king. Now, he was dead. He had died as the Sabbath approached and they had to hurry home, heartbroken, after the crucifixion. Now, they got up early to see the tomb.

This line resonated with me this year. My friend Sean Cox, the priest-in-charge at St. Luke's in Powhatan, died suddenly while out running on March 10. When I got the news from another friend, I did not believe it, and picked up my phone to text Sean and tell him that our friend James thought he was dead. But then I saw that Jeunée, the rector of St. Michael's, was calling, and realized it must be true. But I still could not fully grasp it until Sean's wife Katie invited me to go with her and their children to Bliley's funeral home to *see* him. While I was and remain crushed by his death, something about *seeing* him made a difference. I could finally accept that it was true.

Seeing the grave was important to those two Marys. The past two Sundays, like all of you, I have watched the livestream from my home. Today, I am physically here. But I wonder what it is like for you watching at home, who can't see in the same way. And even though a few of us are here—but fewer than ten—I can't see most of you. It makes Easter a little harder to believe.

I have not yet figured out how to gauge how many people watch our stream, but I'm willing to bet that more people watched our Holy Week services—that is, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—than would have seen and participated in them physically had we been able to meet in person this year. But with Easter, I don't know. Easter is generally our largest attendance of the year. How many people will actually tune in from home for an Easter service?

Then again, that seems to make Easter this year particularly authentic, because on that first Easter, Jesus didn't show up to a church packed with people. In fact, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary showed up to see his grave, they didn't see Jesus at all at first. There were guards, and there was an angel who told them "He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said." And the angel told them to *go*: "Go quickly and tell his disciples he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And the two Marys left the tomb with fear and great joy.

Fear and great joy. Those emotions are similar to my own today. The resurrection is central to our faith as Christians, and on Easter Sunday, even to a mostly empty church, I can't quite contain my great joy; but I have some fear as well. Fear of the coronavirus. Fear that Easter will never be the same. That this pandemic will affect the way we gather as people. The way we relate to each other. Will I still impose ashes on your heads? What about washing feet and breaking up real bread and putting it directly in your hands?

I had some fear this morning. I had not been in this building for three weeks. A priest does not take the week of Holy Week away from worship. What if I just stood up here and said "um" and flipped my hair around, as I tend to do when I'm nervous or haven't practiced? What if I was unable to preach resurrection effectively when it still feels like Lent, because we aren't together, and I have inexplicably have lung cancer and am scheduled to have surgery in the middle of a respiratory virus pandemic?

I miss this space being filled with bodies on Easter Sunday. I can talk to you on the phone and I love to read your emails, and I love seeing people on Zoom, and your cards make me cry; but when we see someone physically, we get a different perspective.

Like my friend Sean. When I was in that parlor at Bliley's with Sean's wife, son, and daughter, I mostly stood at the head of the casket, behind his head, while they stood at his side, and they held his hands and stroked his face and spoke to him. From where I stood I could see one corner of Sean's mouth, and from that angle, it looked like he was smiling. That's not how he looked from the side—from the side he looked solemn. I loved standing at that angle and seeing him smile as his family stroked him and spoke to him. They had come from Indiana, where they were finishing up the school year while Sean started his new job in Powhatan, and they planned to join him this summer. I was grateful, in the midst of enormous sorrow, to witness their laughter as they told stories about him and I told them stories he had told me about them. I was grateful to pray words from the prayer book that I knew Sean had prayed many times as a priest. Looking at his family, I could almost hear him saying to me, Aren't they beautiful. I told you.

This time of year, when the holiest day for Christians takes place, is also the most beautiful time of year here in Virginia. It depends on whether Easter falls in late March or when in April what's blooming but it's always something gorgeous: forsythia, daffodils, phlox, azaleas, dogwoods, wisteria, hydrangeas. Those signs are still here, even though we don't have a sanctuary packed with people ringing bells, so many people that we run out of bells and tell them to shake their keys.

The two Marys did not see what they expected to see. They went to see the occupied tomb, but instead saw angels. Notice that they did not see Jesus right away. The angels told them to go, and they went. *Then* they saw Jesus.

We may not fully feel like this is resurrection Sunday, but resurrection will happen, even if some of us feel like we don't see Jesus yet.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

But one more thing. As Christians, we know that resurrection will happen sometime. But everything was changed. Jesus didn't say, hey y'all! I'm back. Let's go back to doing the good stuff we were doing before. In Matthew's account, the women saw him. Then the disciples saw him. Then they went up on a mountain, and he ascended, after telling them that he would be with them always, to the end of the age. Physically, *he left them again*. Resurrection didn't mean that Jesus was with them in the same way.

When all this is over—our church's and country's pandemic journey, my lung cancer journey—things won't be the same. But resurrection will happen, and the story does not end with resurrection. The story goes on.

During this time of virtual church, we have been worshipping via spiritual communion or Morning Prayer. Today, however, Easter Sunday, I will celebrate Eucharist, even though I distribute it or partake because I am fasting from the sacrament until we all can come back together. On Maundy Thursday, as the altar was stripped as we watched from home, and that red light over the ambry was extinguished on Maundy Thursday, when the sacrament was removed. This morning we have wafers and wine to bless as reserve sacrament, so that we will again have the body and blood of Christ here in our sanctuary, even when we cannot all be together. We will see that light turned back on, and it will remind us that even though we can't be together right now, Christ is risen and is with us always, to the end of the age.