

**“Wandering to the Tomb and Beyond” Rev. Jessie Colwell Easter Sunday April 4, 2021**

This past week we experienced some high winds. As I was reflecting on the power of creation, I was reminded of an Easter miracle that happened last year. Heavy storms and tornadoes ripped through many parts of Alabama last Easter: “Two crosses standing outside Lawler Missionary Baptist Church in Dora, Alabama were knocked down...but the middle cross remained standing...”<sup>1</sup> As we think about the Scripture from Luke 23 the middle cross represents the spot where Jesus Christ was crucified between the two thieves. This holy instance reminds us that nothing can defeat Jesus Christ.

Easter is the moment that we decide if we are ready to fully put our trust in Jesus Christ: in his life, his death, and his resurrection. Easter is the moment we choose hope over fear, life over death, and love and grace over hatred and despair.

This Easter is unlike any Easter we have ever experienced. In the wake of over 550,000 deaths due to COVID, more than any other season of Lent we have faced our own mortality. This past year has felt surreal, and in this moment, we are relearning and redefining what it means to be the church. We spent a lot of time in darkness this past year. The darkness of grief, isolation, despair, political unrest, devastation due to gun violence and racism, and darkness because the pandemic seemed to be going on and on. We come to Easter today from the darkness of Good Friday where it seemed all hope was lost.

But today we are reminded that Christ, the light of the world continues to break through any darkness happening in the world. On this Easter Sunday, we celebrate that we serve a risen Savior who continues to defeat darkness and even death. So, are you ready to believe or is there something getting in the way of your ability to fully surrender your life to Christ?

We all have our reasons why it is hard to fully give our lives to God. It is scary to place our lives in God’s hands, not knowing where God is going to take us or what God is going to ask of us. I am sure that the disciples shared many of these same fears when they first decided to follow Christ.

This season of Lent we have been wandering after Jesus Christ, that we might see his ministry and be convinced that he was the Messiah and Savior of the world. We wandered with Christ from the wilderness, to the water, through the fire to the valley, to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, to the cross, and now finally to the tomb. In this moment of approaching the tomb, we, like the women who came to anoint Jesus, find that we are also feeling terror and amazement.

Terror that it is possible for someone to be raised from the dead, and amazement for the same reason. That morning the women went to the tomb not expecting

anything to be different. They were still grieving Jesus and wanted to offer him something. They went to the tomb so that they could anoint Jesus’ body. This would also be their final goodbye to him as the tomb would be resealed for them never to enter it again.

Jesus’ mother Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome, another disciple of Christ, went to the tomb early that morning. Like these women, we may come to worship not expecting God to show up, but Scripture reminds us that Christ said: “Where two or three are gathered in my name I am with them.”<sup>2</sup> These women experienced the miracle of the resurrection in community.

We gather today in community ready to experience the risen Christ. We look for signs of Christ’s resurrection in our lives today. The first sign that the women experienced was the rock that sealed the tomb had been moved to the side. They knew that no one person could move this rock, so this was a supernatural event.

This is the God we serve. One that can move mountains. This year we may have all felt like we were walking around with stones in our pockets. Everything seemed a little slower. And now we may feel like we are shedding those stones day by day. These stones can represent for us the things that are keeping us from surrendering.

What are the stones that are holding you back today? Is it fear, pride, obligation, or grief? It is the inability to forgive someone who has wronged you? Is it your desire to understand why bad things happen to good people? Whatever it is that you have been carrying around, Christ invites us to drop it at the communion table of grace.

To experience new life in Christ we must die to our sins. So often, we pick back up the sins that we drop at the cross on Good Friday, not fully surrendering them to God. We try to resuscitate our spiritual lives repeatedly instead of allowing life as we know it, our life that is comfortable to die, so that we can truly live as children of God.

It can be terrifying to allow our lives as we know them to die. We like being comfortable. We long for normalcy and routines, but God reminds us all throughout the Bible that to be the people of God, we must be willing to wander after Christ from the cross to beyond the tomb.

What needs to die in your life so that you can move forward in your relationship with God? Recently, I experienced the courage of one of my clergy friends who was ready to die to the stigma of mental illness.

My brilliant friend and colleague, Rev. Sarah Wastella, Senior Pastor at Crozet United Methodist Church shared publicly about her struggle with depression during the pandemic. She had never experienced a depressive episode before, but

COVID pushed her extreme extroverted self over the edge. Instead of hiding her struggles as so many of us try to do, Sarah shared hers. She was vulnerable and authentic, and she created a safe place for many other people to share and ultimately receive support. Sarah died to her pride so that she could live an abundant life.

We all have demons. We all have those things in our lives that continue to crop up, whether it is an unresolved issue from our past, or a difficult person in our lives in the present. Life will always continue to present obstacles and stones, but Christ is the cornerstone, who through our faith makes it possible for us to not only survive this life, but thrive.

Because of Christ’s resurrection we have hope no matter what happens. Come storms spiritual or natural, come cancer diagnosis, come the death of our loved ones, come our own struggles. Because of Christ’s resurrection we can live an abundant life, even in moments of darkness.

This is an important moment in the life of the church. God is still calling us to proclaim the promise of the resurrection to a world that has been surviving instead of thriving. We are called to be authentic with each other and brave. When we share our struggles with one another we find that we are not alone, and we are all striving to live out our discipleship each day.

When we proclaim our faith in the risen Savior, in this moment we do not vow to be perfect, we vow to be faithful. Faithfulness is about trying our best for God every day. It is about identifying missed opportunities to share and embody our faith in God and trying even harder the next day. It is about caring for others more than we care for ourselves. It is about creating a safe harbor for people to share about the state of their souls.

On that important day, the women encountered an angel inside of the tomb and became the first witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ. They were filled with both “terror and amazement.”<sup>3</sup> Terror that they experienced the celestial being, the angel, and amazement that Christ had risen from the dead. They had come that morning ready to move forward in their grieving process, yet what they found was God calling them to move forward in a different way. Our wandering does not stop at the tomb. We are called to move beyond the tomb as we wander into the world proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to all who will hear it.

Today God is calling us to go a different way together. We are called to follow the light of Christ that illumines the darkness. We are called to live into our baptismal vows and share this living water of Jesus Christ with others. We are called to be the church to a world desperately in need of good news.

This is the moment to embody the good news of Jesus Christ; it starts with us individually and corporately as the body of Christ. The night before his death in the Upper Room Jesus shared with the disciples a new commandment, that they would be known by their love. This is still the most powerful message we can proclaim to the world today, that love still conquers even death.

**The good news for our lives today is that Christ has defeated even death so that we could live.** So let’s really live. Let’s die to our sin, and not simply resuscitate our spiritual lives. Try something new so that you can grow in your faith. Whether it is the upcoming women’s Bible study or volunteering at the Food Pantry, God is always inviting us to serve.

And like my friend Sarah, don’t be afraid to share your story. Don’t let shame trap you in thinking that your story won’t help someone else. Telling our stories about how God is moving in our lives is what helps others to recognize signs of resurrection in their lives.

**The good news for our lives today is that Christ was not bound in the cold dark tomb.** Christ defeated even death which means that all hope is not lost, and that forever we are promised resurrection and new life through our faith in Jesus Christ. Easter is the culmination of our faith. It is the moment that we experience the power of God and simultaneously God’s abundant love for us.

As you experience again the retelling of the life, death, and resurrection through Holy Communion, open yourself up to receiving God’s grace for your life today. Know that God loves you where you are right now in this moment and that this body of Christ will continue to be there for you come what may.

**The joy of Easter is that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our relationship with God will never end.** May we start our resurrection lives today and not simply survive, but thrive. May we commit to share our fears and our joys with one another, especially during this season so that we will continue to find freedom in Christ. And above all, may we fully put our trust in Christ, the one who continues to save us every day. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kiro7.com/news/trending/middle-cross-remains-standing-alabama-church-after-storms-hit-area-easter-sunday/ZA4SXLXTMJD4ZHIT5RG2MGI23U/>

<sup>2</sup> NRSV. Matthew 18:20.

<sup>3</sup> NRSV. Mark 16:8.