

As a special Easter treat, I thought we'd start off today with a little game. Let's call it... "spot the pastor." In our livestream comments, our tech team has posted an old photo -- a photo of my sister, seven of my cousins, and me, posing with our grandparents on Easter Sunday morning, circa 1991 (the date was written on the back, but you can tell it's the early nineties just by our hair). To any of those cousins who might be tuning in this morning -- Happy Easter! I love you. Stay safe. Enjoy the photo. Isn't it amazing how Grandpa still looks exactly the same? To the rest of you: let's play "spot the pastor." Check out this photo. You'll see two proud grandparents... eight happy, smiling grandchildren... and one miserable, sullen, scowling grandchild, her arms crossed in front of her in a unmistakable pout.



That's right. You spotted your pastor. The miserable, sullen, scowling child, right in front. Now, in my defense, that's not what I looked like every day of my childhood... but it is what I looked like just about every Easter.

You see, as a child, I hated Easter. *Hated* it. It's probably not the most pastoral thing to say, especially on this day of resurrection... but it's true. Just ask my family, they'll tell you. As a child, I hated Easter. I hated the way we celebrated Easter. On Easter, we had to get up super-early, while it was still dark. We had to put on fancy dresses and itchy, ill-fitting tights and uncomfortable shoes and one of those hats with those awful elastic bands that went under your chin and cut into your neck. And then my parents would hand us big baskets full of candy and toys and say, "Wait, no, you can't play with this yet... we have to go to church... *twice*... the first time at sunrise, before breakfast! Now stand here with all your cousins and smile for the camera." Could there be a more terrible way for a child to "celebrate" a holiday? I hated Easter, and apparently I made no attempt to keep that to myself. That much is clear when you look at my family's Easter photos. I hated Easter.

To clarify, I did not hate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I did not resent the empty tomb. I did not despise that angelic message: *He is risen!* I'm proud to say I'm very pro-Risen-Jesus. Just want to clear that up. As a child, it was the trappings of the day that rendered me miserable, sullen, and scowling. It was the trappings of Easter that kept me from really embracing that Easter joy. Especially those heinous elastic bands on those dreadful Easter bonnets. Clearly, that's the work of Satan.

It's not the actual Easter stuff, right? Sometimes it's just all the other stuff that crowds out the joy of Easter, the joy of the resurrection, the joy of the empty tomb. Sometimes it's the other stuff that crowds out the Easter joy.

We get that this year, perhaps more than any other year. This year, there's a lot of "other stuff" that threatens to crowd out our Easter joy. This year, there's a lot of "other stuff" that complicates our Easter joy. And in that respect... well, it's not all that unlike the first Easter. We read of it in the gospel of Matthew:

[Matthew 28:1-10, NRSV]

¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

It's the story Christians have been telling on Easter Sunday for the better part of two thousand years. Early on Sunday morning, just a couple of days after Jesus was crucified and buried, two women -- here, identified as two women named Mary -- make their way to Jesus' tomb. They expect to see a tomb, just as they had left it... but instead they are greeted with an earthquake, and the appearance of an angel, and some startling news: "you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised" (Matthew 28:5-6, NRSV).

He has been raised. He is risen. From the *dead*. Can you imagine hearing those words for the first time? We've grown used to it. We've grown accustomed to the Easter message. The resurrection doesn't necessarily shock us anymore. But for them? This good news is also baffling, unbelievable, shocking, overwhelming news. And so, the

scripture tells us, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (Matthew 28:8, NRSV).

Now, each of the gospels tells the story differently. The basic gist is the same. Jesus is risen in every one of them. But the details differ. Here, in the gospel of Matthew, we have two women named Mary, an earthquake, and the appearance of an angel who rolls back the stone and shares the good news. In Mark, the “angel” is described as nothing more than a man in a white robe, whose “good news” scares the women into silence. In Luke, several women make their way to the tomb, and hear the news from two men dressed in dazzling white robes. And in John, Jesus himself appears to Mary Magdalene... though she mistakes him for the gardener.

But the differences between these stories aren't all about “who was at the tomb” or “whether there was an earthquake” or “how many angels said what.” There's a detail, here in this version from the gospel of Matthew... a difference that makes all the difference. Out of all of these gospel accounts of the resurrection and the empty tomb, only one -- this one, from the gospel of Matthew -- only one mentions “joy.” In the other gospels, the women at the tomb respond with fear, astonishment, trembling, confusion, or disbelief. In Matthew, we read of fear, too... but also of joy: “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (Matthew 28:8, NRSV).

Fear and great joy. I can certainly understand why all of the gospels talk about fear. The last few days have been horrifying. These women have watched as their Lord was brutally murdered, and they have wept as he was buried in a borrowed tomb. They've no doubt spent an excruciatingly long sabbath day dwelling on what happened to Jesus, on what might happen to them. They're grieving and they're scared. All they want to do is go to the tomb, keep vigil, and mourn. But now there are earthquakes and

angels and this unbelievable message that Jesus isn't actually dead anymore? How can they possibly wrap their minds around that? How could they *not* be afraid?

I can understand why all of the gospels talk about fear. But it's striking to me that only one, only Matthew, speaks of joy! This fearful news is also wonderful news, glorious news, joyful news. He is risen. Jesus is *risen*. He's not gone. Their Lord is not gone. Their hope is not gone. Their hope lives. How could they *not* feel joy?

It's strange to me that only one of these gospels mentions joy on that first Easter morning. But then, maybe it's just harder for some of us to find the joy of Easter. That may well have been true for those women at the tomb on that first Easter morning. It was certainly true for me on Easter Sunday 1991. And it may be true for many of us now. This year in particular, it may be harder for us to find the joy on this Easter Sunday, to really *feel* the joy on this Easter Sunday.

This is no ordinary Easter. You know how I know that? Because a couple of years ago -- in a normal Easter season -- I went to the store and picked out a new shirt for Noah to wear to church on Easter Sunday morning. This Easter, I pulled that same (now-outgrown) shirt from his closet, took it apart at the seams, and sewed matching face masks for me and my family. It's hard to joyfully proclaim the angelic message "he is risen!" when you're saying the words from behind a face mask.

This is no ordinary Easter. On an ordinary Easter, I'd be standing up here, and you'd all be here in this sanctuary, too... and I'd say, "He is risen!" and you'd all respond, "He is risen indeed!" But this is no ordinary Easter. This Easter, I'm still standing up here... but you're not here in this sanctuary... and I say "He is risen!" ... and in response, there's silence.

This is no ordinary Easter. On an ordinary Easter, this day would be all about the good news: *The tomb is empty! He is risen! Death couldn't hold him, and it can't hold us.*

But this is no ordinary Easter. This Easter, the good news is still good, and the good news is still true. Death still can't hold him, and it still can't hold us, and that's still good news... but there's other news, too... news that makes it feel like death is gaining ground, whatever that angel might say.

This is no ordinary Easter. This is an Easter touched by coronavirus. This is an Easter marked by fear. There's the fear of exposure, for sure -- fear of catching or spreading the virus. There's the fear for loved ones who are at higher risk, fear for ourselves if we're at higher risk. There's fear for our economy, fear for our jobs, fear for our country, fear for our world. In the midst of all that fear... how do we find Easter joy? How do we really feel it? How do we feel joy when we're surrounded by so much fear?

I think that's why this year, I am so struck by the resurrection story we find in Matthew's gospel. I think that's why this year, I am so fascinated by those words, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (Matthew 28:8, NRSV). I think that's why this year, I am so moved by Matthew's inclusion of joy in the midst of fear.

Turns out, you don't have to move past all your fear in order to experience some resurrection joy. These women at the tomb didn't. They were grappling with a lot of fear that morning. Anxiety about what their lives and their hopes would look like now that Jesus was gone. Fear that his fate would become their own. (Crucifixion was still a very real threat for Jesus' followers, after all.) To say nothing of the all-out terror of encountering earthquakes and angels so early in the morning. That first Easter morning was no ordinary Easter, either. That first Easter morning was an Easter marked by fear.

But right alongside that fear, there is joy. Great joy, as a matter of fact! "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (Matthew

28:8, NRSV). Fear and great joy. These faithful, fearful women didn't have to set their fear aside in order to experience joy. They didn't have to ignore their fear, or pretend it wasn't there, or explain it away. Their fear didn't cancel out their joy.

Their fear didn't cancel out their joy. They didn't have to wait until they no longer felt fearful in order to feel joyful. And neither do we.

At the start of our worship livestream, I shared with you words written some five hundred years ago by Italian Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso: "Joy springs up, even in the midst of fear." *Joy springs up, even in the midst of fear.* I like that image of joy... like a stubborn, scrappy plant that will continue to grow in the most inhospitable of soils. It's a tenacious joy, a resilient joy, an unyielding joy, an... Easter joy.

This is a weird Easter, friends. No point in pretending otherwise. It's an Easter in the midst of coronavirus, an Easter in the midst of fear. But joy springs up, even in the midst of fear. It did for those women, as they "left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy" (Matthew 28:8, NRSV). Joy springs up, even in the midst of fear. Easter joy can still spring up, even in the midst of corona-fueled fear.

Feeling fearful this Easter? That's understandable... and what's more, you're in good company. But joy doesn't require an absence of fear. So this Easter, even as you grapple with fear, may you embrace a stubborn, scrappy, tenacious, resilient, unyielding Easter joy. He's still risen, friends... so rejoice!