

*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." (Matthew 28:1-10)*

### **See the Glory in this Garden**

This was a chilly week, wasn't it? Forties and fifties during the day, twenties and thirties during the night. Snow on Tuesday. It made me want to fast forward another month to the middle of May. But do you remember January when it hit the twenties? After the polar vortex kept the temperature below zero for days on end, twenty felt warm. I was actually walking around with my coat unzipped until I was outside long enough to realize that twenty is still cold. It's all a matter of perspective. Easter is a matter of perspective, too. Easter is about a change in perspective for the women who went to the tomb on the very first Easter morning and it's about the same change in our perspective. It's about seeing Christ and death and even life in a different way now that we know what happened there. It's fitting that this perspective changed in a garden. Most cemeteries today are designed to be peaceful, beautiful gardens where we can reflect on the people we've lost. The garden where Jesus' body was laid probably looked different than ours do. But the idea of a beautiful, peaceful place to remember the dead runs through both. After Easter, the women who went to Jesus' tomb could never have viewed a cemetery in the same way again. In that place of death and grief and loss, God showed them the greatest glory in history. We're here today to catch a glimpse of what they saw. **See the glory in this garden!**

#### **I.**

Now, the women who went out to the tomb really had no idea of the glory they were going to see. Matthew says that they went out at dawn **"to look at the tomb."** We know from the other gospels that they were doing more than just sightseeing. They went to give Jesus the proper burial that he didn't get on Friday. But it's probably also true that they were going to look at the tomb in the same way that we go to a cemetery to look at a gravestone. It's not that we expect to see anything new there. But we go to remember our loved one, to express our grief and the fact that our love continues even though the person we loved is gone. The women who went to the tomb that day all loved Jesus. That didn't stop just because he was dead.

But his death was what drove them to rise before the sun even came up and to head out to the garden tomb that Sunday morning. Before they got there, before they could even begin the sad service of love they had gone out there to render, Jesus rose from the dead. He did that while the tomb was still closed. No gospel writer gives us a description of that event. But all of them tell us what the women discovered when they got there. Matthew tells us that there was a violent earthquake. Now, it wasn't caused by tectonic plates rubbing together below the earth's crust. This earthquake was a miracle of God. It happened because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven in a blaze of glory. He rolled the stone away from the tomb and sat on it.

This is one of the differences between their cemeteries and ours. We dig a hole and drop the casket in. Israel is much less flat than Michigan. This tomb appears to have been a kind of cave with a boulder sealing the entrance. That boulder was there to keep grave robbers from breaking into the tomb. The women had wondered how they were going to move it. Well, they didn't have to worry about it! An angel rolled it away and sat on it.

That actually happened before the women got there. The other three gospels make that absolutely clear. But there were people there when the angel came down. Pilate had posted a guard to keep anyone from stealing Jesus' body. They saw this angel come down. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing as white as

snow. When I was a kid, my father did professional photography. He had these incredibly bright lights that he used for portraits. When you looked at them, and then looked away, it left a shadow on your eyes. I imagine what the guards saw was a little like that. How did they react? They were terrified and they became like dead men. They fainted. By the time the women arrived, they had apparently recovered and run away.

Why did all this happen? To show the glory of the resurrection. For thirty-three years, Jesus had hidden his glory as the Son of God. He showed glimpses of it every time he did miracles. But when you saw him, he looked like any other Jewish man. He was poor. He walked most places he went. He sweat and got dirty and tired and hungry. But with his resurrection, everything changed. God restored to him the glory that was rightfully his as the Son of God. God appointed him to be not only the Savior of the world, but also the Judge of the world. God appointed him to be the ruler of the world right now and gave him the job of protecting his Church from the power of the devil and the attacks of unbelievers. That's who those guards were. They worked for the enemies of Christ – for Pontius Pilate and through him, the Jewish leaders who had asked for a guard in the first place. They worked for the devil. So God showed them no mercy that day. He sent an angel down in glory and struck them with terror. When they fainted, he made no move to help them or even to take notice of them. He left them to recover and slink off the way Christ's enemies always have to do in the end.

But that wasn't the only way the angel showed the glory of Christ that day. When the women did arrive, he spoke to them. Where did this conversation take place? Again, if you compare all the gospel accounts, it seems most likely that it was inside the tomb. Wherever it was, what he said was striking: **“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”** The angel knew why they were there. He knew that they were thinking of Jesus as the one who was crucified. Most of them had watched him die. The angel knew the sadness in their hearts.

And he knew the solution: **“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.”** Death was defeated and their Savior lived. Our Savior lives. That's what today is all about. That message is the antidote to all that troubles us as well. Like those women, we live in a world where death reigns. Every one of us is on the way to the grave. Sooner or later, it will claim us all. If you've never lost someone you love, if you've never felt the grief these women felt, count yourself lucky! But if you live long enough, you will most certainly know that hurt. Death reigns. We die because we are sinners. Because of our sin, we should spend eternity in hell.

But Jesus conquered death by conquering sin. On Good Friday, he paid the penalty we owed for our sin. His life, his blood, his hell and his death covered us all. On Easter morning, he came back from death to show the world that God has accepted that payment. It is true that we all have to die – probably. These women all certainly did die thousands of years ago. Every human being between them and us has died as well. But when a believer dies, only his body dies. His soul lives with Christ in heaven. Just as Jesus' body came back to life in triumph, we too will rise to live with him in a perfect world forever – if we even die before he returns. That changes the way we look at death – at our death and the death of every person we love. Christ gives life. Christ gives victory. **See the glory in this garden, the glory of victory!**

## II.

God opened the tomb that day to show the world that truth. The angel came so that we could see the glory of this garden. Not just the glory of victory, but also the glory of the love of Christ. It was love that drove God the Father to send his Son to the cross for us. It was love that kept the Son of God there, suffering what our sin deserves. It was love that sent that angel and opened that tomb, because for us to benefit from what Christ did on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday, we must know about it. So God opened the tomb to begin the proclamation of the message that Christ has indeed conquered death and sin.

God had the angel speak that message, too. He told the women that Jesus was not there. He is risen, just as he said. The angel left no room for the lies that would be spread. The Jewish leaders would soon hear of what happened at the tomb. The soldiers ran to them, not to Pilate or their officers. How did those religious leaders, those teachers of God's Word respond? They bribed the soldiers to tell a lie: they fell asleep and the disciples came and stole the body. That lie, in one form or another, continues to this day. All people who oppose Christianity deny the fact that Jesus' body rose from the dead.

But the angel left no other explanation for what happened there that day. God countered the lies of the Jewish leaders and the lies of the Roman soldiers and the lies of twenty centuries of unbelievers before they had

a chance to tell even one. He has risen, just as he said. His word and his promise are sure. You can trust them as you lay dying. You too will rise.

Then the angel told the women to take that message to Jesus' disciples. At that moment, they needed to hear that good news as much as anyone on earth ever did. They were in an agony of loss and grief. The good news was the only way they were going to find comfort after that horrible Friday afternoon. It was the only source of hope and strength as they lived and faced the same people who had killed their Lord. In the weeks and months that followed, the power of that message changed their lives and changed the world.

That message is our comfort and hope as well. Every year, we say good-bye to Christians that we loved here in this church. Every year we gather to hear the good news that because Jesus lives they, too, live with him in heaven and they, too, will rise. All of us live in a world that is growing ever more evil. We wring our hands and shake our heads at how hard the devil rages against our faith and how much contempt our society has for people like us. By the time it's all over, we may suffer horribly for our faith. The disciples did. God may even call us to give our lives. But Jesus lives and he will never leave us or forsake us. Jesus lives and we will live with him when all the opposition and grief is over. Jesus lives and loves us today and every day.

Jesus himself showed that. First he sent a messenger, an angel, to announce the good news. Then he sent the people who first heard that message to be messengers. He sent the women to his disciples. But as they fled from the tomb, Matthew says that they were **"afraid yet filled with joy."** They were still trying to wrap their heads around all this. They had seen a holy angel which always strikes sinners with fear. They had heard the news that they most wanted to be true and that gave them joy. But you have to believe their hearts were still confused. So Jesus cleared it all up for them. He appeared to them. They saw him and knew the truth. Then Jesus told them again to tell the disciples the good news. Why? Those eleven surviving disciples needed to know. Jesus was going to use them to found his New Testament Church. You and I believe today because of the work God did through them. Christ sent the gospel out because it is the only way that any of us can have that comfort and that strength, that faith. That is the lesson of Easter. That is the change in perspective. **See the glory in this garden, the glory of love!**

What does spring mean to you? Even though today, Easter is almost as late as it can be, it's kind of chilly day for it. But every year, as the days get longer and the grass gets greener and we start to think about summer and gardening and vacations, this holiday comes. Many people think it's just an excuse to celebrate spring. But that's not really the point. We would celebrate Easter just as much if we lived at the South Pole. This holiday is about the change in perspective that Jesus won. We are no longer sinners, condemned to hell. We are the children of God. We are perfect in his sight and we will live with him in joy forever. Amen.