

Sermon on Matthew 28:1-10

This week, I learned about the Liz Christy Garden in New York City, the very first community garden in the city. In the late 1970s, there was a neighborhood in the South Bronx that people had essentially given up on. Buildings had burned or abandoned. There were many lots that sat empty, full of rubble and trash. It was a pretty depressing stretch of neighborhood. At the time, it was a popular phrase to say that “The Bronx is burning.” There was one particular vacant lot, that was really just a pile of debris. Most people walked by it without a second thought. But a woman named Liz Christy saw something different. Where most saw hopelessness, she saw possibility. She and a small group of neighbors started clearing the lot with their own hands. They hauled out trash and pulled up weeds. Then they brought in soil, bucket by bucket. And they planted seeds.

At first, people thought this work was pointless. They thought, “Why bother? Nothing grows here. This place is too far gone.” But Liz Christy and her friends kept going. They kept tending to this fledgling garden in the midst of a sea of broken concrete. And very slowly, things began to change. Green shoots started pushing up through the soil. Tomatoes, peppers, flowers began to emerge. Color began to appear where there had once only been grey. And neighbors started showing up too, even those who had stopped expecting anything good to be possible in that space. Kids started helping in the garden, people started gathering there. That empty, lifeless lot became a place of food, a place of beauty, a place where people came together; right in the middle of a neighborhood that pretty much everyone had written off as a dead-end.

That first Easter Sunday started off much in the same way. It begins in grief. It begins in a space that feels like, quite literally, a dead-end. It begins in a place of hopelessness. Our story begins today with these words: “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” As they go, they are carrying sorrow and loss. They go expecting to find death still in charge.

I imagine many of us can relate to that sort of experience, and those sorts of feelings. We know what it is like to show up in places of grief, where hope seems elusive and it feels like despair is the only reality. Sometimes those places of despair are personal. It can be the weight of anxiety or the exhaustion of trying to hold everything together. It can be that voice in the back of our minds that says, “Nothing is really going to change, so why bother.” Sometimes the places of despair are communal, when we look at the state of the world, where we see systems that feel immovable, or violence that just keeps repeating, or there are fractures in our community. We all know what it feels like to walk towards a tomb.

But that’s exactly where Easter begins – when we are walking towards hopelessness, that’s where God shows up. Matthew tells us that as the women arrive at the tomb, suddenly there is an earthquake, and an angel descends, rolls back the stone, and sits on it.

It’s dramatic, almost defiant, in a way. The stone that sealed death in place is rolled away. The power that seemed final is undone. As I pictured this scene in my mind, a thought that struck me this time that I hadn’t really thought about before: the angel doesn’t roll away the stone in order to let Jesus out. Jesus has already been raised. He has already left the tomb. The stone is rolled away so that the disciples can see. The stone is rolled away so that we can see!

It has been rolled away so that we can see that the place we thought held death is instead empty. That the thing we thought was the end is not, in fact, the end. Where we thought we'd meet defeat, we actually find the beginning of something new.

The angel says to them: "Do not be afraid." This might be one of the most repeated commands in all of Scripture, and it's a really difficult one to follow. Fear is so common, and really, its pervasiveness makes sense. It makes sense for the Marys, and it makes sense for us, in a world where harm and death seem to reign. When the angel says this though, they aren't dismissing their fear. Rather, the angel is reframing reality. We do not have to be afraid anymore because death does not get the final word! Jesus is not in the tomb, and death has been one-upped.

Now, it would be easy to leave Easter as a remembrance or celebration of something that happened to Jesus. A miracle back then, a story we simply tell one another. Just a truth we believe. And sure, it is all of those things, but it's also more, as Matthew reminds us in his narration of this resurrection event. After the angel tells the Marys not to be afraid, the angel continues on: "He has been raised... just as he said. Go quickly and tell his disciples." Jesus' resurrection isn't just something to witness, it's something to participate in. The women don't just see the empty tomb, they are sent from it with a mission. They are sent to proclaim that the resurrection is now, not just some distant point in the future.

And that's the shift for us. Celebrating Easter is not just about life after death someday (though we can certainly find hope in that truth). Ultimately, Easter is about new life breaking in right here, right now. So how do we experience resurrection here and now? We experience new life in and through Christ in both personal and communal ways. Let's think first about the personal. Many of us carry tombs inside of us: old wounds we haven't named, stories we tell ourselves about not being enough, habits of fear or scarcity that feel impossible to break. Sometimes those tombs, those places of death, are addictions, dysfunctional relationships, or ways of being that are just plain harmful to ourselves and others.

Resurrection doesn't erase those things overnight, but it does do something powerful: as Jesus demonstrates that sin and death do not have the final word, resurrection breaks the lie that the tombs we dwell in do not define us. They do not own us, and they will not have the final say over who or whose we are. The empty tomb says that we are not bound by what has been. We are not trapped by fear. We are not stuck in the stories we thought we were living.

There is another way to live: a life marked not by scarcity, but by abundance; not by fear, but by trust; not by isolation, but by relationship. Resurrection life looks like learning to see hope, learning to practice generosity, letting go of the need to prove our worth, and believing that God is still at work within us, even now. Resurrection life looks like learning to live as if the tomb is actually empty! No more, "it is what it is and nothing will ever change." No, God's transforming grace is at work in you and in me. Right here and right now.

But the implications of Easter are never just personal. The first words after "Do not be afraid" are "Go and tell." Resurrection creates community – a new kind of community where we proclaim again and again to one another that new life is possible. Resurrection creates a community that lives differently because it believes something different about the world. If death is not the final word, then despair is not the only option. If empire, if violence, if domination are not ultimate, then we do not have to organize our lives

around them. If Christ is risen, then we are free to build something else! A community shaped by resurrection is one that sees people the world has ignored, and instead of brushing them off, calls them by name. A community shaped by resurrection is one that practices mutual care instead of competition, that chooses nonviolence instead of vengeance, a sharing of resources so that no one is left behind. A community shaped by resurrection can imagine possibilities beyond the confines of the tomb.

Resurrection is a divine uprising that disrupts sin and death. It disrupts systems that rely on fear. It disrupts the narratives that say “this is just the way things are.” It disrupts our own tendency to settle for less than the life God is offering.

Matthew says the women leave the tomb “with fear and great joy.” Both, at the same time. Perhaps that is the most honest description of resurrection faith that there is, because stepping into new life is not easy. Hope is risky and love is vulnerable. Choosing a different way of living, whether personally or communally, means letting go of what is familiar, and let’s be real, sometimes we find comfort or safety within the tombs we know. So of course, there is fear. But there is also joy, because resurrection means something new is actually possible.

And so the women go from the tomb, and something beautiful happens. As the women run to tell the disciples, Jesus meets them on the road. Not at the tomb, not in the place of death, but on the way. “Greetings,” Jesus says. And they take hold of him, and they worship him. Again we hear the words, “Do not be afraid.” This encounter tells us something important. We don’t encounter the risen Christ by staying where we are, we encounter him as we move: as we step into hope, as we risk love, as we begin to live differently. Resurrection is not just something we believe, it is something that we walk into.

We, like the Marys, are sent forth from the empty tomb to encounter the risen Christ on the way. So here are the questions Easter asks us: Where are the tombs in our lives? What have we assumed is finished, immutable, unchangeable? Where has despair started to feel like a constant companion? And what would it look like, even just one step, to live as if the stone has already been rolled away?

We don’t have to have it all figured out, in fact, all we need is a willingness to ask the risen Christ to help us take the next step. And just enough to begin. Easter doesn’t demand that we have everything figured out, it simply invites us to trust that new life is possible: personally, communally. Right here, right now. Christ is risen, and that means that hope is not foolish, love is never wasted, and despair is not the end of the story.

It has become an Easter sermon tradition for me to share a portion of St. John Chrysostom’s Easter Homily, and so now I leave us with these words that have been proclaimed at Easter celebrations for centuries:

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.

Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."

Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!