

April 12, 2020

Franklin United Methodist Church  
82 W. Central Street, Franklin

# ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

Matthew 28:1-10, *Common English Bible*

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb.<sup>2</sup> Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it.<sup>3</sup> Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow.<sup>4</sup> The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men.<sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.<sup>6</sup> He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him.<sup>7</sup> Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ I’ve given the message to you.”<sup>8</sup> With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples.<sup>9</sup> But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there.”



## A HOPE IN HELL: AN EASTER PROCLAMATION DURING A PANDEMIC

By Rev. Dr. Jacob W. Juncker

It was a hellish scene.

After being betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, and condemned to death, Jesus hung on the cross alone. The whole earth, records Matthew, was dark (Matthew 27:45). At about three o’clock, Jesus cried out in desperation, “My God, my God, why have you left me?” It was a hellish scene. Christ was isolated and alone. Jesus felt like he’d been abandoned by God.

Some commentators have pointed out that Jesus in this moment quotes from Psalm 22 where the Psalmist declares: “My God! My God, why have you left me all alone? Why are you so far from saving me—so far from my anguished groans?” The commentators point out that Psalm 22 ends with God’s deliverance and a hymn a thanks. So, as Jesus stands there and asks the question—my God, my God, why have you left me?—he must have known the outcome. Afterall, these commentators note, God “didn’t despise or detest the suffering of the one who suffered—he didn’t hide his face from me. No, he listened when I cried out to him for help” (Psalm 22:24, *Common English Bible*). What these commentators fail to recognize is the sheer desperation of Jesus in that moment on the cross.

The cross is not a sign of victory, but a symbol of complete alienation. Jesus, in that moment felt completely abandoned by God the Father. And, the God-forsakenness of the Son plunges Jesus to the most solitary and lonely pits of Hell.

Mark Twain is attributed as saying that you “go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company.” But, the truth of the matter is, hell is a solitary place. It is a place of absolute abandonment and isolation.

It was Jesus’ experience on the cross. It was the experience of the disciples as they cowered in fear behind locked doors after Jesus’ crucifixion. And, to some extent it is our experience through this pandemic as we are asked to “social distance.”

Many of us are fearful to leave our homes for fear of passing the coronavirus. While that fear is warranted; and, indeed, we should all be limiting our contact with those outside our immediate day-to-day social circles, it is still a hell of sorts as we sit at home isolated from personal contact with others.

We were not made to live life alone, isolated and secluded from others. Indeed, one of the first observations God makes about humanity is that “it is not good for the human to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Sure, we have things like computers, phones, and mobile devices to keep us connected, but its not the same as personal, in-the-flesh, encounters with one another.

E.M. Forster—in his futuristic short story entitled “The Machine Stops,” writes in 1909: “I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you.” While technology can give us glimpses of

reality, it's not the same as being together in person. It works for now. We need to be physically distant today (and, undoubtedly, for many more days to come in order to protect the most vulnerable around us); but, make no mistake, live-streaming and face-timing are nothing like being together in person.

I don't know about you; but, I find myself on this Easter morning yearning to be gathered together with you and others. I long for the day when we can safely gather again. Those feelings of wanting to be together, but not being able to be together, must have laid heavy over that first Easter morning.

After the Sabbath, around dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb of Jesus. In Matthew's telling of the story, they were not carrying spices. They were not preparing to bury Jesus' body. In Matthew's gospel, the women came simply to look. I tend to think that they came because the hell of isolation was too much. In their grief, they had to see.

Just as we visit the graves of our loved ones in order to find some sort of connection with them, so too these women came looking for a connection that had been lost to death. They were grieving, feeling disconnected from their friend, the one they'd come to believe was the Messiah. All that they had believed in seemed lost. With all they had hoped in buried in a tomb, they found themselves wandering in hell.

As they approached the tomb, the ground began to shake. The guards ordered to protect the

tomb from thieves ran away in fear as the stone sealing the tomb rolled away. As the women approached they saw an angel, he told them not to be afraid, but how could they not. Matthew records that "with great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb."

Jesus intercepted them. He "met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid."

And therein lies the good news for us on the Easter as we sit in isolation, separated from one another, and those we love---Don't be afraid. Jesus meets us behind our closed door. He comes to us in whatever hell we may find ourselves in.

The good news of Easter, the promise we bear witness to in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that when all else seems dark, when we feel alone, when we're isolated and estranged, God comes to us. For "nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created" (Romans 8:38-39, *Common English Bible*). "God's steadfast love lasts forever" (see Psalm 136, *Common English Bible*).

Indeed, it comes to us even when we're socially distant. So do not be afraid. God does not abandon us or leave us as orphans. Indeed, Christ will go to hell and back, he will traverse death and God-forsakenness, to remind us just how much we are loved.

So hear the good news, dear friends, Christ is risen! He is here. We are not alone. Do not be afraid.