

Sunday April 12, 2020, Meditation for an Easter Dawn

Matthew 28:1–10

The Reverend Jay Sanderford

Now we are in the early dawn of Easter morning. I'm here on the beautiful Circle Terrace at First Presbyterian and taking in the sights, the scents and sounds of early spring.

It was the first day of the week: that's what the first line in the Easter story from the Gospels tell us. That's the scene that Matthew describes when he places it all in another place, another time, another religion, another culture. It was the first day of the week. Saturday was Sabbath; Sunday was not yet the Christian Sabbath. Observing Jewish customs, the women who went to the empty tomb were Jewish. They were faithfully following Jewish burial practices. Yet they were experiencing a total and absolute transformation of everything that mattered on these days. Sunday would forever be different once the full weight of what was happening became evident. Calendars would shift as the earth trembled and the stone was rolled away. The very meaning of life and death would be forever altered.

Understanding this story is helped by setting the scene. It all happened at "Dawn." "Right before first light." "Early." "An ordinary day." "Two women." Just two women. No big crowds.

I try and imagine what Easter might look like this year. A single preacher, a soloist and an organist in an otherwise empty sanctuary. No crowds of people gathering to exclaim, "Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!" Or I see singers and musicians and pastors connecting virtually through livestreaming, though I miss seeing your faces in the crowd, filling the congregation with singing, prayer and spiritual verve.

In the time before Easter dawn this year, I have been missing the crowds of people. So I went scrolling through the vast collection of art, video and paintings depicting the resurrection as a form of spiritual preparation for Easter morning. There are probably millions of examples: paintings, frescos, pen-and-ink drawings, video montages, and crayon sketches by kids, cartoons and portraits. Artists have utilized what seems to be every imaginable setting to capture the intensity of what occurred at dawn on Easter morning. I have my favorites but I was captivated by a series of Marc Chagall's paintings titled, "Crucifixion." There, in each painting, scattered around the foot of Jesus' cross is a large, diverse crowd of onlookers, witnesses to this massive act of salvation, all being reminded of "what all flesh shall see together" on the day of resurrection.

I think of Easter and all the people gathering, the crowds queuing up for worship, dressed in their finest, and excited and expectant. And I see the crowds gathering differently today, queuing up for grocery shopping, to get a test for the coronavirus or to see a physician.

And in my mind I imagine the crowd of passengers boarding an airplane. A small girl speaking two, maybe three languages, will sit just ahead of us in this tightly bunched community. A lovely gay couple will share a row with a straight guy. The Jesus of the cross, the Jesus of love will make room for them all, in a way not even the church ladies can imagine. A family of five will occupy an entire row, all from Beirut, all playing cards and singing and laughing. Two teenaged boys behind us are poking each other, and kicking the back of the seats in front of them. One of the women in the exit row just discovered she has a serious cardiac condition and will need surgery when she gets off the plane. All while a strikingly handsome young man in first class is on his way to another land to meet his new bride. And the couple in the back found a joint in their children's backpack, and are wondering what in the world to do next. We ride this airplane, this jet, and we enter into this holy service of the Easter festival at early morning all gathered together beneath the cross of Jesus, our backpacks, purses and briefcases held to our breasts, our desire for self-preservation continuing its endless march, in the air, on the ground, in the car, in the grocery store, wherever. Those who are 'in' will try and keep those who are 'out' out, but fortunately we will all fail because of the size and grace of our salvation created by the one who climbed up on the cross of salvation and hope.

On Easter, the cross makes us new. How? In the way we address the person in the seat next to us. The way we embrace our neighbors warmly in this Covid-19 era, from a safe social distance. The new life will come to us in new relationships, in new communities, just as Jesus warned us eternally, saying again and again that he lived and died so we might love one another. The new will be in relationship to what we do not yet know but do want to know about each other. The new will come in little packages, packed around the cross of Jesus in pressing expectation.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

A Prayer for Easter

In this moment,
will gather no closer than six feet.

The Bible says,
“they were all gathered together in one place.”

And we do not know
when we will be together next.

Triune God, you exist in eternal relationship.

You are One and yet are three.

In a time of isolation,
draw us closer to this mystery.

May it remind us of your truth:

even in physical isolation,
we are never truly alone.

Your love links us together,
making us a people.

For the Bible also says:

We belong to each other.

We belong to you.

Even now. Especially now. Amen

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