

4.12.20 Easter

Faith, Fear, and Following

Matthew 28.1-10

**Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

I want to begin by stating that Easter is not cancelled, and hope is not cancelled. Nothing can stop Easter from coming any more than the Grinch stealing all the Whos' toys, decorations, and food can stop Christmas from coming in Whoville in Dr. Seuss's beloved story. A virus can't stop Easter from coming. However, we're all celebrating Easter in a different way than we ever have before because of the global pandemic that has more than a third of the world's population under movement restrictions.

Like many of you, I'm trying to get the best, most accurate and truthful information from qualified sources. From a medical and science perspective that includes sources with trained scientists and doctors at places like [The Center For Disease Control](#), [The World Health Organization](#), [Johns Hopkins](#) and the [Mayo Clinic](#). There's also a great deal of grief that's impacting everyone with so much death and a lot of other losses as well. **David Kessler** is a good source for grief related issues. He co-wrote with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross ***On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss***. His new book adds another stage to the process, ***Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief***. He's the founder of [www.grief.com](http://www.grief.com) which has over 5 million visits yearly from 167 countries.

In a recent interview, Kessler shared his thoughts on why it's important to acknowledge the grief we may be feeling, how to manage it, and how he believes we will find meaning in it. Part of what he said is: *"We're feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."*

I wanted to acknowledge our collective grief and our feeling the world has changed because that's how the followers of Jesus were feeling in the first days after

his death. We're in a similar place as the earliest disciples – they would've been thinking *things will be different, things have changed*, there's loss and fear and grieving. There's no Easter without the pain and horror of Good Friday. That's why two of his followers were going to where Jesus was buried on Sunday morning

If the story is new to you, the New Testament tells us Jesus came full of grace and truth. For three years he taught how people to live as God's children. He healed the sick and modeled God's kingdom values for all to see. He died on a Friday, and his body was put in a tomb. His disciples, like everyone else thought dead people stayed dead. But early on the Sunday morning, we join two of Jesus' followers on their way to the tomb to grieve. And that's when they had an experience they never expected.

Mathew 28.1-10, "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> And 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. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For **fear** of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, "**Do not be afraid**; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; **for he has been raised**, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.<sup>7</sup> **Then 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." <sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb **quickly with fear and great joy**, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "*Greetings!*" And they came to him, took hold of 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."

The passage begins with the words, "**After the sabbath**" The two Mary's are women of faith, **they observed the sabbath**, even in a time of profound grief and loss, they stay anchored in the routines and rhythms of their faith. We're wise to do the same. **Those rhythms help to ground us and provide stability when our world is being shaken by sudden death or other challenges.** I'm so glad you're continuing the habit and rhythm of sharing in worship with us. Reading the Bible, praying, worshiping,

exercising, getting outside in nature or even just observing it, helping others – maintaining these routines help us. The women observe the Sabbath as always.

***“As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.”*** We see how much Jesus meant to them that they went at the very first opportunity. If you’ve ever seen people stand in line for the next iPhone or for a big event, (remember when that used to happen), you see what’s a priority for people, what they value, what matters to them. Jesus mattered to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. So, they’re first in line to go to the tomb to pay their respects. It was safer for them as women to go together and in the daylight. For what is about to happen, there’s also the testimony of two people and not just one person.

***“And 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.”*** This opened the way into the cave-like tomb. Here’s something I find interesting. **Both the beginning and the end of Jesus’ life involve a Close encounter with an angel, a body being wrapped and laid in a Cave, and a Commissioning.**

The words of the angel in **Luke** (2:10-12; 16-17) are the same as the angel in **Matthew 28**. Proclaiming Jesus’ birth to shepherds, *“the angel said, “**Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.**”* So they **went with haste** and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, **they made known what had been told them about this child.**”

In **Matthew 28:5-6a**, the women who have gone to the tomb also have a **close encounter** with an angel. “The angel said to the women, **“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.”** On the night of Jesus’ birth and on the day of his resurrection, the heavenly message begins, **“Do not be afraid.”** It’s good for us to remember this especially today with the United States in the grip of national health and economic crises due to the Corona virus and with so much uncertainty about the future. God’s message to us today is the same as the one given through the angels at Christ’s birth and on the day of his

resurrection, ***“Do not be afraid.”*** In all these times, we’re told, ***“There is good news; God is with us and is doing a new thing in a difficult situation.”***

The beginning and the end of Jesus’ life involve a **Close encounter with an angel, and a body being wrapped and laid in a Cave**, The night he was born, the baby Jesus was **wrapped in bands of cloth**, and laid in a manger **in a cave** where there was a small measure of privacy and warmth for Mary and Joseph. The day he died, Jesus was also wrapped in cloth and placed **in a cave**, in a new tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. As a baby, Jesus was picked up and held by his mother. On the day of his resurrection, Christ was raised by his heavenly Father. At the beginning and the end of his life, the cave would not be the end of the story. That’s helpful for us when we feel we’re stuck in a dark uncomfortable place in life, as Christians we remember, ***“If I’m in stuck in a cave, it’s not the end of the story.”*** Is anyone feeling stuck or a little stir crazy after almost a month of mostly hanging out at home? Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus were stuck in a small cave because there was no room at an inn and they were away from home on the road, but that wasn’t the end of the story. The crucified Jesus was placed in cave-like tomb, but that wasn’t the end of the story for him either. If you’re feeling wrapped up, confined, restricted, and longing for release; if you feel like you’re stuck in the cave, keep telling yourself, ***“it’s not the end of the story!”***

**After the Close encounter with the angel and the experience at the Cave, at Jesus’ birth and at his resurrection there were witnesses who were Commissioned to share a message.** The shepherds went quickly to tell Mary and Joseph all that the angel had reported about their baby. On the first Easter morning the women heard not only from an angel, they also were met by the risen Lord who (The Gospel of Matthew 28:10), “said to them, ***“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*** Wow. Think about having that experience and being told to share that incredibly good news!

We too have a message to share with others about Jesus. The message we’re to share is of God’s love and grace because our sins are forgiven through Jesus’ death on the cross and the hope we have in his being raised from the dead. It’s good news about life and death and love and eternity.

A couple months ago (January 25) I received a lovely email from Gil Williamson. Gil and his wife Else attended BBC for many years splitting their time between Illinois and Cape Cod. The email was written by Gil's granddaughter Mikal. Gil said, "Please pardon me from being so proud of my dear wife Else **but sharing helps me in my grieving** and Mikal has a wonderful way of expressing her thoughts, emotions, and love. Mikal wrote, *"On December 1st, my daughter met her great-grandmother and namesake. Grandma passed a few days later. When they met, baby Else was 4 days old - tiny and brand new. Her skin was pink and smooth. She was perfectly healthy and already growing stronger.*

*Grandma Else was 84 years old. Her skin was so pale. Her eyes were fading, and she struggled to speak. She lay in a hospice bed, unable to move. She had been in that bed for two months, waiting. **Waiting for Jesus but waiting for baby Else too.***

*Their meeting was a beautiful and strange experience for me. Else lay asleep in the bed while Grandma stroked her face. The differences between these two human beings - one at the beginning of her life and the other at the end - were overwhelming. And yet, all I could think as I watched them lying together, was that they were exactly the same.*

*In my mind, I saw grandma, a perfect little baby so many years ago. I saw my daughter in that bed, a frail old woman at the end of her life. I knew in that moment that it happens in the blink of an eye - that the vapor of this life passes, and we are left with...well, what are we left with? That question suddenly felt almost paralyzing.*

*Grandma was left with nothing and everything. She lived a long and truly incredible life. There was great joy, in the form of her loving, selfless husband, and a family that spanned generations. There was also great pain. She suffered tremendous sickness that lasted half of her life. It was so apparent when you saw how thin she was, how she struggled to eat or walk. And yet it was also very easy to forget, because despite everything, grandma was happy. She baked and hosted family gatherings. She went to church and knit hats for newborn babies. She wrote her grandchildren letters, visited us, and asked us detailed questions about our lives. She had the best sense of humor and was cracking jokes until the end.*

**None of this made her pain go away. She was happy despite the pain. She was in pain and at peace simultaneously.** *I know she chose to focus on the beautiful things in her earthly life, but I think her boundless strength was anchored in something far beyond that. Her hands weren't gripping anything in this world, good or bad, because they were clinging fast to something greater. When I saw her in that bed, waiting for Jesus, I suddenly knew she had been waiting her whole life.*

*I named my daughter after grandma because she is everything I could ever hope my Else will be. A woman who walks through this life truly thankful for the beauty and patient through the pain, with her eyes fixed above. With the constant knowledge that both the pain and beauty of this life are passing things, and she can let them pass and hold on to her Savior, through life and through death, just like grandma did."*

I thought that was a lovely tribute to Else and her faith in her risen Savior that sustained her through good times and bad, through joy and pain. It illustrates why believing in the crucified and risen Christ matters. Faith gives us resilience and courage in this life and hope for what lies on the other side of death. Loving Jesus Christ gives us a greater capacity to love others. The first of the Ten Commandment is about putting God first in your life. Easter morning is a good time to ask ourselves if that's true. St Augustine said, '*Christ is not valued at all unless He be valued **above all**. Christ is not Lord at all unless He is **Lord of all**.*' To some people Jesus is **nothing**. To others He is **something**. Then there are those to whom Jesus is **everything**. Who is Jesus to you? William Booth, Founder of the Salvation Army, was asked the secret of his amazing Christian Life. He answered, "*I told Jesus that He could have all that there is of William Booth.*" Can Jesus have all of you?

**Many a false step is made by standing still; there are times we need to step out and go forward in faith.** The women at the tomb who are told not to be afraid are told to, "**go and tell** my brothers **to go** to Galilee; there they will see me." If we want to see Jesus, **we need to go and take a step of faith**. Like the women and the other disciples – we need to Go and share the Good News.

As we celebrate the joy of Easter, I hope we will remember the words of the angels who heralded Christ's birth and his resurrection as well as the Lord himself, "**Do**

**not be afraid.**” I pray we will allow the hope and good news of Jesus Christ to be the force that shapes our view of life and death and the world in which we live. If you feel like you’re stuck in the cave, keep telling yourself, **“it’s not the end of the story!”** We are the shepherds and women of our time who are commissioned to go and tell others the Good News that Jesus has been born, he has been raised, the tomb is empty, death has been overcome and we need not live in fear of death or anything else.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. - From the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, p. 101

**Blessing:** Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor, a prophet, a spy, and ultimately a martyr. His work and writing have continued to resonate with Christians for decades especially his books *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer championed Christian community and the Church as the physical manifestation of Christ on Earth. He believed that the purpose of theology was to change the world for the better—the antithesis of what was happening under the Nazi regime. Sadly, he was executed at the age of 39 at Flossenbürg concentration camp just three weeks before WWII ended in Europe. This past Thursday was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his martyrdom and it’s fitting to remember a man of such great moral courage, theological wisdom, and spiritual depth. Bonhoeffer—no stranger to difficult days—described Christ’s Passion this way: ***Christ is not gloriously transported from earth into heaven. He must instead go to the cross. And precisely there, where the cross stands, the resurrection is near. Precisely here, where all lose faith in God, where all despair about the power of God, God is fully there, and Christ is alive and near.***

In whatever place you find yourself this Easter weekend, may you know the resurrection is near. Do not be afraid. He has been raised. Christ is alive and near.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. The two Mary's who come to Jesus' tomb are grieving. In what ways are you grieving? What do you think about David Kessler's statement about our current situation: *"Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."*
2. What strikes you the most about Matthew 28:1-10? What do you find hardest to believe? What is most encouraging to you? What is most challenging to you?
3. Put your self in the place of Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, one of the guards, the angel, and Jesus – try to imagine the experience of Matthew 28:1-10 as each one of them. What do you think they were each feeling and thinking?
4. The sermon points out the similarities between Jesus' birth and his resurrection; how each has a close encounter with an angel, a body wrapped in cloths in a cave, and a commissioning. In both situations there is an angel saying, "Don't be afraid." What would you say to an angel who said that to you?
5. *"If you're in a cave, remember it's not the end of the story."* How can that idea help us while we live through health and economic crises or deal with our personal struggles?
6. To some people Jesus is **nothing**. To others He is **something**. Then there are those to whom Jesus is **everything**. Who is Jesus to you?