

**CHRIST IS RISEN!****MATTHEW 28:1 – 10***by Elaine Poproski*

Do you ever wonder what the day after Jesus' crucifixion was like? It was the Sabbath, which meant it was set apart as a day of rest and worship. People traditionally went to the synagogue that day. Often friends and family gathered for a meal and had a leisurely afternoon; there was no work permitted on that day. It was a day set apart by God from the beginning. In Genesis 2 we read that "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it [that means he made it holy – he set it apart], because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

I wonder what that day was like that year for Jesus' disciples – for all those who were most closely connected to Jesus. I wonder what it was like for Peter. The day before, while Jesus was being interrogated, and tried, when false accusations were being thrust at him, while Jesus was being beaten and tortured and eventually crucified, Peter wasn't there. He was denying that he even knew him. I wonder what Saturday was like for Peter.

I wonder what it was like for John and James. Before he'd been arrested, Jesus had been praying in a garden. One of the gospels said that he was so grieved as he prayed that he sweat drops of blood as he prayed. He'd taken three friends, including James and John, to be with him – to stay by his side as he prayed and as he suffered. And they fell asleep because they were tired. I wonder what Saturday was like for them.

I wonder what it was like for Mary, Jesus' mother. I wonder if she spent the day remembering his early years. I wonder if she held his baby blanket or told stories of his toddler years.

The Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest – a holy day blessed by God. I imagine all Jesus' disciples needed the rest. I can't imagine, though, that they felt blessed by God that day. I wonder if they echoed Jesus' cry: My God, My God, why have you forsaken us?

The day before the Sabbath, the world had turned dark for the afternoon. The earth shook and the sun disappeared and then Jesus died. It took him hours to die. It would have been excruciating – not just for Jesus, but for those who loved him – those who were there amid the cheering, jeering crowd.

Jesus was buried with haste. There was likely no elaborate processional to the grave – it may have been just Joseph, in whose tomb they buried Jesus, and Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother. It was rushed because the Sabbath was about to begin. A day set aside for worship and rest – a day blessed by God. I wonder if Jesus' friends felt blessed by God that day.

The day after Jesus was buried, while his friends and family observed the Sabbath, soldiers secured the stone that blocked the tomb. If anyone had thought to finish the hasty burial, perhaps by wrapping Jesus' body properly in linens laden with herbs and spices, they would have found their way barred. There was no way into the tomb. Even if they tried to break the seal, the soldiers standing guard would have stopped them.

As soon as light started to creep over the horizon the day after the Sabbath, Mary and Mary went to the tomb. When they got there, they would have noticed the soldiers immediately. They probably would have felt intimidated by them – frightened by them. It was only two days before

that they had witnessed these same soldiers involved in everything that had led to Jesus' crucifixion. They would have noticed the sealed tomb shortly after arriving. Can you imagine the frustration they must have felt? I imagine them saying something like this: "What more trouble can be done? You've already killed him. Leave us in peace to grieve our dead!" I imagine these women, even with the tomb sealed, just wanted to be in that quiet place to remember Jesus. But they couldn't even do that because of the intimidating force of soldiers there.

And then the earth started to shake. I've never experienced an earthquake, but I imagine it's pretty terrifying. The ground suddenly unstable beneath your feet. Nothing solid to grab onto. I imagine it's loud.

I wonder if this earthquake took the two Mary's back to the cross, because there'd been another earthquake then. We're told in Matthew 27 that at about noon, as Jesus was on the cross, the sky went dark and there was a giant earthquake that shook the earth. I wonder if this earthquake as they approached the tomb, felt the same as then one when Jesus died. I wonder if it felt like the world was ending.

This earthquake was the arrival of an angel. It's only in this gospel that we hear that the angel arrived in front of the two Mary's. This was no gentle cherub or quaint winged creature all soft and sweet. This angel landed with the force of an earthquake. This angel was as bright as lightening – as blinding as lightening. This angel was terrifying – so much so that the soldiers shook and became like dead men.

The two Mary's were also terrified. I picture them clinging to each other, doing their best to keep their feet under them, hiding their eyes from the brilliant light that was the angel. I wonder if there was anything about this angel that reminded Jesus' mother of the one that had visited her so long ago – the one who had invited her to be Jesus' mom.

The angel rolled back the stone. A sealed tomb was nothing for a being this powerful. A whole contingent of soldiers was nothing for an angel like this. The angel rolled back the stone and sat on it. That's such a weird detail. I mean, here we have this supernatural being of extraordinary power and brilliance, a being so terrifying it caused hardened soldiers to faint in its presence. And it hops up to sit on the massive stone by the tomb. It's such a casual position. It's such a human thing to do. I would have expected an angel like this to stand guard beside the tomb's opening. But the angel rolled back the stone and sat on it.

And the angel said to the two Mary's, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." The angel didn't open the tomb so Jesus could get out, as if Jesus were trapped inside. He rolled away the stone so the Mary's could look in – they could go in and see for themselves that Jesus wasn't there anymore – that Jesus had already been raised.

As the soldiers lay, like dead men, not so far from the tomb, the Mary's moved closer. They saw for themselves that the tomb was empty. They knew the truth of the angel's words because they'd been there when Jesus had been placed inside. They'd been there when the stone had been rolled into place.

The angel said to them, “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.’”

The two Mary’s ran from that place, filled with fear and great joy. Do you ever wonder why they were filled with fear? The joy, I get. They’d just learned that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They’d just seen the empty tomb for themselves. But the fear, do you ever wonder what that was about?

I think the fear makes sense. I think anyone who’d experienced what they’d just experienced, would feel some amount of fear. I think anyone would be awed to the point of fear by the power of heaven on display in that angelic arrival and in the empty tomb.

I think the fear makes sense for more earthly reasons as well. Jesus had been crucified. He’d been executed by the government. The chief priests and the leaders of the Temple were out for blood – not just Jesus’ blood, but the blood of any who threatened to upset their power and their position. A risen Jesus was definitely a threat. Anyone who proclaimed a risen Jesus was also definitely a threat.

These women had been commissioned by an angelic messenger from God – a messenger whose arrival carried the strength of an earthquake – to tell people that Jesus had been raised from the dead. To refuse that commission was a terrifying option. But also, to fulfill that commission was a terrifying option.

So the two Mary’s left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell the disciples. This is some great courage in these women. Despite the fear, they went forward. Despite the very real danger their next move posed, they went forward.

And as they went, suddenly Jesus was there. Jesus, who they’d watched die in the most awful way imaginable, Jesus, who they’d seen buried in a tomb, Jesus, who they’d loved and who had loved them, Jesus was suddenly there in front of them.

Can you imagine?

Out of the horror, the blood, the violence of Friday, through the dark and terrible night of loss, through the despair and abandonment of the Sabbath, suddenly Jesus was there. Suddenly Jesus was there and speaking to them.

None of us have experienced what these two Mary’s experienced. But some of us have experienced violence. Some of us have experienced the loss of people we love. Some of us have experienced the darkness of despair and hopelessness. Some of us have experienced fear. Some of us have experienced our own dark night of the soul – an experience of God’s absence – of God’s abandonment. It is into those experiences that the risen Jesus appears. It is in the midst of those experiences that Jesus speaks.

This is what Easter is all about. It’s about hope in our darkest times. It’s about life when all around all we feel is death. It’s about joy even when there is fear.

This is something our world needs now at least as much as it needed it then. There's a lot about our world that is dark and sinister. There's a lot in our world that is violent and evil. There are those in our world who seek to destroy anything that threatens their power. There are those in our world who seek to destroy everything that breathes life and hope. There are those in our world who would crucify Jesus just as easily today as did those so long ago.

But none of those is more powerful than God. None of those is more powerful than our risen Jesus. None of those get the last word. Christ, our Lord, is risen! We say with the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”<sup>ii</sup>

When the women saw Jesus and heard his greeting, they went to him and worshiped him. They knew without a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus was who he'd claimed to be – he was and is the Son of God who, as John's gospel puts it, was in the beginning with God and was, in fact, God.

The women went to Jesus and worshipped him. And then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid...” It's the same thing the angel said. Do not be afraid. No matter what comes. No matter what threatens you. No matter what those with power in this world or the next may do to you, do not be afraid.

Jesus, who was dead, is alive. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, the light that the darkness did not and cannot put out. There's a lot to be afraid of in this world. But we need not fear because Christ, our Lord, is risen. Death has been conquered. Violence has been conquered. Hate has been conquered. Sin has been conquered. As one commentator put it, “In the resurrection we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient – real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.”<sup>iii</sup>

This is why Easter matters. It's not just about hope for life after death. It's hope for this life. It's not just hope for a better world when Jesus returns and God's kingdom has fully come. It's hope for a better world now – a world into which God's kingdom has already broken.

Where are you in the story today? Are you here with Jesus, worshiping the risen Christ alongside the two Mary's? Maybe you're not there yet today. Maybe you're back at the crucifixion, mourning and lamenting the violence and horrors of our world. Maybe you're back in the day between, the day after the crucifixion, the day when God seemed to be dead, the day of darkness and despair.

If you are there, hear me say that place is not the final place. That story is not the final word. Jesus has risen. Death has been swallowed up in victory. The light that came into the world, will never be extinguished by the dark. Christ is risen! Life has conquered. Hope reigns over despair. Joy reigns over fear. Love is the final word.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54 – 57

<sup>ii</sup> David Lose. *Dear Working Preacher: Easter Courage*. [Working Preacher](#). April 16, 2014.