

# *Speaking of Resurrection*

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 28:1-10

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

---

Well, it's Easter Sunday in the middle of a pandemic and I have to confess – I don't know that I can see it.

I want to see resurrection, but I can't at the moment. If you are, like me, a person who believes that the resurrection of Christ has an impact on the here and now more than just the there and later then you might be with me in recognizing that it's hard to see at the moment. Though our usual fanfare and festivity of this day have been, like virtually all other activities, put on hold or canceled, there is more – much more – to my inability to see resurrection. We hope and pray each day as the statistics in each of our localities are released that we will see fewer new cases, fewer deaths than the day before. We overinterpret the tiniest data points hoping that the upward slant of the charts we've been looking at will level off today, tomorrow, the next day, soon. We wait for the day that families will no longer need to be separated during times of celebration or sorrow. We wait for the day that we need not worry about our health or that of our more advanced in age or infirm loved ones. We wait for the day when we might be able to fully mourn and bury our dead.

And still we know that even when that day comes we will be far from through with this heinous disease. The entire world will be in recovery for an unknowable time and those who were already closest to ruin will bear the brunt of all of this.

To believe in resurrection is not to simply believe in a thing that happened a long time ago. It is to believe that the power of God to give life has been unleashed in all the world. And I confess this Easter Morning that I'm having a hard time seeing that at the moment.

I have seen moments of kindness, even on a scale I've grown unfamiliar with. That's true. And I've seen encouragement to try to think positively and I think that is a good idea. Not all goodness has gone out of the world. In fact, the other day on the canal trail (you're going to get lots of stories about the canal trail these days, friends) I saw that someone had taken it upon themselves to scribe in beautiful multi-colored sidewalk chalk the words of that great theologian, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry spoken when that institution was under dire threat, "Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light." He is right. There is good still in the world and there is still joy to be had without question. Even as it is commendable and right to seek out joy wherever you can find it in these days it is equally or more so to keep ourselves from denial, escapism, or the kind of unawareness that can be given only to those with unequal privilege. If resurrection means the redemption of all the created order, I have to be honest, I can't see it at the moment.

I guess for some that might seem like a lack of faith. Maybe I just come off as a negative Nancy. Here we are in a tough spot in this world and we can't have our brass music, and our egg hunts have to be with just our families, the least we could have is a good pick-me-up sermon. Spin a web of words, pastor, and help us see what Easter really is. Help us to see Jesus out of the tomb, that's all we want, help us to see Jesus, help us to see

---

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

resurrection. Oh how I'd like to do that! But the thing is, I just can't see it right now. The good news about the fact that I can't see it right now is that it puts me in good company.

Mary and Mary didn't see resurrection either; not before they headed off to go and tell everyone that Christ is Risen. That's how Matthew tells us anyway.

Mary and Mary return to the place where Jesus's body had been laid – we are fond of saying three days later, but it was really Friday night to Sunday morning early – so they returned just about a day and a half later. They were met there by an unmistakable messenger of God who rolled that giant stone back away from the opening of the tomb not to allow Jesus to come out, but to show Mary and Mary that he was already gone. “Come and see,” he said, but he didn't – and this is a really important part of Matthew's telling – he didn't show them Jesus. Mary and Mary didn't see Jesus – they didn't see his body, but they didn't see him raised up and walking either. They only saw an empty tomb, they hadn't yet seen resurrection when they took off *running* to go and tell their fellow followers of Jesus that he is risen indeed. They ran with joy, yes, but also with fear. Don't skip over that detail. Fear plays an important role in the story. Do you remember the guards at the tomb, those mighty men of the Roman military armed to the teeth, trained for any eventuality, brave, commanding, lethal – yeah, they passed out cold when the fear of that moment set in. Mary and Mary felt it too, but they were not overcome. In the depths of potentially crippling fear, having not yet seen the evidence of resurrection they set off to be the first to proclaim that Christ is risen!

You see, I told you that Matthew has something to say about celebrating Easter in times when you can't quite see resurrection.

I do wonder though, what it was that made Mary and Mary believe. We can't really say that they “knew” Jesus was risen just yet, they hadn't seen him, but it does seem true that they believed it. I kind of wonder what it was that made them believe.

I wonder were they in a kind of sanctified denial about what had happened on Friday and somehow the words of the messenger soothed their sense that it cannot be, so they ran off to convince everyone that it could be, it might be, it probably is true that Jesus lives?

Or were they just simply *that* trusting of the words of a messenger from God? Maybe there was something about that messenger, the way they looked or the way they spoke that made them seem like they really were from God. Or maybe there was something about Mary and Mary that made them particularly receptive to the hard-to-believe truth.

Or does the word “believe” not quite capture it here? Maybe their *belief* was more like an intense form of wishful, hopeful thinking. Were they so invested in their hope that Jesus might be among them again that they willfully suspended their disbelief and risked the possibility of further injury if they discovered that it was just a fairy tale - all for the odd chance that it might be true?

I don't know what the mechanics of their belief were. I don't know on what premises they based their decision to go and tell the others. I don't know if they knew what words they would use to tell the others that somebody dressed in white rolled the stone away to reveal an empty tomb and the only possible conclusion to draw from that is that a dead man got up in the night and is out here among us again somewhere. I don't know how they were going to convince anyone; I don't know if *they* knew how they were going to convince anyone in the depth of despair and fear that Christ had risen.

But it turns out...it didn't matter. The mechanics of their belief didn't matter. The choice of their words didn't matter. Present circumstances didn't matter. Whether it was denial or wishful thinking or stubborn, blind faith that gave them the power to believe, Mary and Mary set off to tell the others that Christ had risen and in so doing Matthew set out to tell you and me that one does not need to *see* resurrection in order to speak of it.

We do not have to wait until a pandemic ends to proclaim that God is at work redeeming the world. We do not have to wait until every question is answered and every problem solved to proclaim that resurrection has found its way into the world. We don't even have to wait until the daily numbers begin to drop to run off and tell the others that where there was death there will be life.

Here's the really amazing part of the experience of Mary and Mary. It's also the part that asks for us to take a bit of a risk. Without having seen resurrection, without having seen Jesus Mary and Mary ran off to tell the others – and – it was on their way to proclaim that very thing that the risen Christ showed up. Their proclamation wasn't a self-fulfilling proclamation. Their intent to tell the world didn't actually raise Christ, but it was a revelatory proclamation. While they were going to bear witness to the resurrection it became all the more real and present to them.

Not only *may* we speak of resurrection in the midst of a pandemic, we *must* speak of resurrection in the midst of a pandemic. That's a risk of course. People might think we've lost connection with reality if we go around now saying that all the cosmos is on its way to health and abundance. If we can find a way to really believe that – I don't mean passively believe – I mean stake our lives and our livelihoods on it kind of believe – I mean some kind of sanctified denial kind of believe, I mean some kind of wishful -no faithful- thinking kind of believe, I mean some kind of faith that comes only from God kind of believe, well then resurrection just might show up before we've even said the words.

Of course if we wanted to hedge our bets a little that couldn't hurt. We could do what we can to ensure that when we say, "we'll get through this because we'll do it together," that we have an expansive definition of "we." We could make sure that when we say, "there is enough for everyone," that we've been working on and advocating for systems that produce sustainably and distribute equitably. If we just aren't entirely sure about this resurrection thing and we want to do some of that work to hedge our bets so we don't look a fool when we start proclaiming that Christ is risen – well if we do all that I think we'll find that resurrection caught up to us on the way.

Amen.