

Where Joy Is Found
Matthew 28:1-10
First Sunday of Easter

Matthew 28:1-10

¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

²And 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.

³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶*He* is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then 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.”

⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!”

And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The Sermon

In the early evening of October 9, 1992, Michelle Knapp, an 18-year-old in Peekskill, New York, was sitting in her home when she heard a terrific crash in the garage.¹ Just that morning, she had paid her grandmother a few hundred bucks for a 12-year-old Chevy Malibu sedan, and she wondered if something had happened to it.

When she went out to the garage to see, she found that something *had* happened to the car: the trunk was bashed in; the right rear tail light was completely obliterated; and so was a very small piece of the roof over the garage.

Moments earlier, fans out watching Friday night football games all over the northeastern United Statesⁱⁱ had seen the bright, shining light of a falling meteorite, which completed its epic, four-and-a-half-billion-year, multi-multi-million-mile journey in outer space by tearing through the trunk of the 1980 Chevy Malibu parked in Michelle Knapp's garage.

One piece of good news was that no one was injured. A second was that Ms. Knapp was able to sell the car, for which she had just paid \$400, to a collector for \$10,000. (There's no word on what Grandma thought about that.)

And I would suggest that another piece of at least equally good news is the amazing fact that a tangible, physical item
from someplace that all but a handful of humans can only try to imagine—
an item whose interplanetary journey staggers the mind,
a tiny piece of primordial rock
from the almost inconceivable beginnings of the solar system—
had come to visit first the outer atmosphere of our vast planet,
then the inner atmosphere (that is, the air and sky),
where it sped downward in a spectacular, bright arc,
and finally made contact with the surface of the earth
by way of a used Chevy Malibu:

an entrance into our regular, mundane, daily world
of an element from the inconceivable vastness of the cosmic reality
of which we humans on earth
spend most of our lives only vaguely aware.

“Matthew is,” as Luke Timothy Johnson has said, “the gospel of the Church.”ⁱⁱⁱ It is the only one of the four gospels to use the word *ekklesia* (church), and if it's probable that Matthew's gospel arose from a church community, it definitely speaks *into* a church community—a community that worshipped Jesus as Lord, and remembered him as their teacher.

Hailed by a light in the sky,
he arrived in the world in something not entirely unlike a garage.

And it became the sacred duty of the Church
to share with the whole world
the message of his life, and what it meant,

and who he was, and what he said,
and what he did, and who he is.

A gift from the heavens
who increases the value
and transforms the meaning
of everything that he comes in contact with,

without the Church's living testimony,
he could have been remembered as just a briefly incandescent light
that came into our familiar world with a loud and destructive crash
and was only here long enough to bust out a taillight or two
before we forgot about it
and moved on to the next item in the daily news.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

And a messenger from heaven, who looked like lightning, descended, came right to where they were, rolled back the stone that had been used to seal the tomb, and sat down on it.

Seasoned, sturdy, well-trained Roman guards who had been stationed there on the direct orders of Governor Pontius Pilate were so terrified they shook and became like dead men.

And the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid"—the same thing an angel had said to Joseph in a dream so that he would go ahead and take Mary as his spouse.

"I know that *you* are looking for 'Jesus who was crucified'. He is not here."

They had come to a tomb, looking for one who had been crucified.

There are a lot of dead places where we go
in our lives and in our minds and spirits:

places where we expect no life or light;
places where our most painful memories try to convince us
that they are the final word;
places where we go to flirt with

our most insidious and unhealthy temptations;
where we bask in our pet hatreds and self-centeredness;
where we rationalize our lack of interest or enthusiasm
for listening to others,
for being the people we know God created us to be.

We go to places where we are ready to surrender
to hopelessness,
to our own sense of inferiority,
to the insistent sense that injustices that we have perpetrated,
or that have been perpetrated on others in our name or on our watch,
or that have been perpetrated on us or our loved ones,
are too deeply entrenched ever to be healed or overcome.

We have these tombs where we go,
to mourn for the life and love and hope that used to be.

And now, suddenly, we can imagine
that even in places we thought were burial grounds,
God insistently reaches out for us with arms of love
through the fear and loss and desolation,
and we know deep in our bones
that hope exists, that joy is available,
and it is not dependent on any other situation or emotion.

The Easter narrative is the crux of the story of Christianity,
which is to say it is the defining event of how we understand
everything in the universe.

The Marys did not suddenly adopt an artificial disposition of fake happiness.

But in the midst of every other emotion in those wrenching days,
they found where God was already at work—they found the joy
that coexists with fear and every other emotion.

Whether we are standing in awe before the gleaming structures of our lives,
or sifting through the rubble of collapsing walls,
or silently attending to the darkest, quietest places we can go,
the Word is out: it is time for us to seek out our joy.

We know it's in there somewhere, because God is in there somewhere.

The truth is we will still keep having our Maundy Thursdays
and our Good Fridays.

The difference is that from now on, in every single one,
in the new creation that God has already made,
it is always, always Easter,

and that overwhelming, awe-inspiring, irresistible goodness,
which was once taken away from us and declared dead,
lives again.

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ⁱ Cody Cassidy and Paul Doherty, *And Then You're Dead* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 27.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/top-five-strangest-meteorites-you-can-buy/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Gospel of Matthew," in Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 172-196.