

Easter 2011  
Matthew 28

Grace to you and peace in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ Amen.  
Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

This story begins in a cemetery. Actually, it begins with Mary and Mary on their way to garden at edge of the city, not far from the place where Jesus was crucified.

It's a good, brave thing they seek to do: Checking again on Jesus' burial, perhaps planning to spend the day to mourn him properly and publicly, and certainly to honor his memory. Here's a chance for them to take some time to say good bye and bring this life-changing relationship to a good, right and proper end.

As they make their way to the tomb, there's an earthquake. While we recognize this as a sign of the resurrection and the speaking of God's good news that Jesus lives. For them, here is yet another sign that fills them with fear and dread, yet another sign that things move and shift, that even the seeming solid rock beneath their feet is unstable. Things change. Things fall apart. Plans and schemes come quickly to ruin.

The women know a little about seismic shifts and sudden change. They watched the crowds cheer Jesus' messianic entrance to the Holy City on Sunday and then call for his blood by crucifixion on Friday. How quickly things change.

These women were the some of the witnesses to brutal and cruel end of Jesus of Nazareth, He was the one who had healed them; the one who had cast out their demons and set them free; the one who had welcomed them into his company and promised new life, gave new hope; the one who had redeemed their lives and given them dignity, humanity, purpose. But these women also knew that death is always near. Things fall apart, especially for a powerless people under occupation. By now, these women have seen it all, and yet they trudge on, dutifully.

If we haven't been in the places these women have traveled, in one way or another we will journey down their road soon enough, making our way through the cemetery to mark an end, to pay our respects and mourn our loss and remember. Maybe even some of us are still mourning this morning.

We are surrounded by death each day. Not just the death of family and loved ones, but of people suffering and dying around the world. War and revolution. Earthquake and tsunami and tornado, violence, murder, hunger, and disease, pollution and on and on. And then there are the less quiet deaths: shifts, changes, movement of place and people, all lost to time.

Some days, I just stop looking, listening and reading news reports. Some days I just try to shut it all out and think of good and simple things – the flowers breaking into bloom, the unmatched beauty of my children playing in the backyard on a sunny day. But then my own body starts to

send me messages, telling me I'm not getting any younger. Nothing makes you feel old than trying to run with a three and four- year old. So, it's true. We wind down. Life wears out. Even for us.

But there's got to be more than this.

More than these fleeting moments of health and happiness and togetherness, right? More than just coming to terms with change and death. More than just trudging on, dutifully tending to our daily business.

When they arrive at the tomb, an angel appears to the women and tells them something amazing, something completely unexpected: Jesus is alive, not dead. Jesus is risen. Just when they thought they'd seen it all. Just when they thought they had it all figured out, God acted, God spoke a new word. Here they were in a cemetery – but there was no body to mourn, the tomb was empty. Everything changed ... just that fast.

Picture it. Just as the first rays of sunlight rises on the first day of a new week, the messengers of God's good news kindle again a spark, a light of hope and the earth shakes and shudders in anticipation of God doing something wonderful. Creating -- A new day. A new dawn. A new week. A new life. A whole, new creation. And once again. For the women and for us, Jesus leads the way. This time he leads us out of the tomb, out of the cemetery and right back into the world and its people that God loves and adores.

So the women run and tell the disciples that they have seen Jesus, alive, and he is on the move.

This Easter story is amazing. Impossible and perplexing. In the middle of this world of shadows and death, we hear astonishing news: Yes! Jesus lives for us. We cannot just keep this kind of earth-changing, life-transforming news to ourselves.

But for now, just let the good news -- as astonishing as it may seem -- hit your ears, once again. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead just as he said, and he goes ahead of you. He was betrayed, condemned, abandoned, crucified, died and buried and on the third day he rose again. The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. God has begun something new, and it is beautiful. That's the faith we have received and the faith we proclaim. Faith and message so simple even a child can tell it: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ Jesus leads the way out of death, into life.

This is a new day, a new week, a new creation for us, right here, for this assembly.

Picture it. Just as the first rays of sunlight rise on the first day of the new week, the messengers of God's good news (and that's you now; you are witness to the resurrection too) assemble to kindle again a spark, a new light of hope that God is doing something wonderful through Jesus.

That's how we began this Easter morning. We gathered in the memorial garden, a place to gather to mourn and remember those who have died, but also a place to assemble to proclaim

Jesus' resurrection and our great hope. Gathered there, we lit again the flame on the candle that is for us a sign of the living Jesus, present in our midst, and from this flame, then all others of the community, gathered around the light of living Jesus, receive light, strength, meaning and courage to burn with hope. It's a new day, a new dawn, for us.

The new thing God is doing begins with the good news that Jesus lives. Good news first spoken in a cemetery, but the crucified and living Jesus leads the way out of death into life. This good news go out from here and into this world God loves. That is why we can follow Jesus into the dark and scary places of this world, and proclaim love and hope to people under occupation, people devastated by storm and fire and flood, people ravaged by hunger and disease. We can walk with them and comfort them and tell them this truth: Jesus lives. Death is done.

This is the good news of Easter: Jesus suffered and died to take away your sin and to break the power of death, and he rose again to give you life and light, and not only you, but this whole creation. Jesus loves you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus lives for you. In him, everything is new. God makes all things new. Jesus lives. Go and tell the world that this morning and every morning hereafter, they can wake up without fear, wake up and live, forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.