

Matthew 28:1-10
April 5, 2026, Easter Day

Rev. Pauline Farrington
Trinity, North Bethesda

Matthew 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. 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. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "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. 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." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary
 have come to see the tomb.

In this gospel according to Matthew,
 they are not bringing spices for a corpse,
 as Mark and Luke tell it.
 And they don't go there to grieve and weep,
 as Mary Magdalene is depicted
 in John's writing.

In the half-light of early dawn,
 on the first day of the week,
these two Marys
 have come to see the tomb.

They have followed Jesus
 from his beginnings in Galilee.
 The gospel writer says they *provided* for him;
 they *resourced* his movement.
 The Greek word Matthew uses
 to describe their ministry with Jesus
 is the word that derives as
deacon in English.
 These two women
 are close partners of Jesus.

It's very likely that they heard him,
 all three times,
 when he told his disciples

that he “must go to Jerusalem”
 where he would “undergo great suffering...
 and be killed,
 and on the third day
 be raised.”

And now, *on the third day*,
 they have come to witness the raising.

They've witnessed everything up to this point.

They never deserted Jesus.

They stood at a distance,
 but close enough to see
 all his suffering.

They saw the moment Jesus died.

They experienced that
 cosmic instant
 when the breath of life
left the body of God on the cross.

With their bodies,
 they felt the earth quake
 that shook tombs open.

Now on the third day
 (which is also the first day of the week),
 at the first light of dawn,
 they have come to see,
 not a dead man
 but a tomb.

Matthew tells us that the tomb
 was sealed shut.

In my imagination
 the big stone is cemented in place.

And because the temple authorities
 are afraid Jesus' disciples
 might steal his body
 and claim a resurrection,
 there are armed Roman soldiers
 posted to guard the grave
 and keep the dead man in there.

There's no way Mary and Mary
 intend to get past the guards
 or unseal the stone.
 They just want to witness whatever it is

that will happen on this third day.
 And it seems they don't have to wait long.
 In the still-long shadows of first light,
 that cosmic force,
 the breath of life,
 shakes the earth again
 and opens the tomb of all tombs.
 An angel flashes like lightning
 to roll the stone away and sit on top of it.
 The most fierce soldiers on earth are terrified!
 The greatest fighting force in the world
 is paralyzed, flat on the ground,
 catatonic.

And the angel leans in and tells the women, "He's not here!"

Of course he's not here!
 They aren't expecting him to be!

///

There's noteworthy irony
 to writing an Easter-Resurrection sermon
 on Good Friday and Holy Saturday.
 Or really on any day that holds
 the long shadows and struggles
 of doubt and fear and grief.
 When we're caught in the
 Good Fridays of our life,
 when suffering pain, fear,
 and betrayal become our
 overshadowing experience,
 it's hard to hold on to
 the promise of the third day.
 And when we're caught in the
 Holy-Saturday seasons of death and grief,
 and hopeless sadness;
 when heavy darkness closes in,
 it's really hard
 to believe in the tender first light of dawn.

What is it that gives Mary Magdalene and the other Mary
 the capacity to hold on to the promise?

To believe in the tender light
 of that first day of resurrection?
 They have to be feeling
 all the feelings!
 They saw him die!
 Why aren't they like
 all the other disciples
 hiding in fear,
 paralyzed by grief,
 mortified by guilt —
 almost as catatonic as
 the Roman soldiers outside the tomb?
 Mary and Mary *must* be
 experiencing some of that too,
 and yet...
 they don't go there to see a corpse.
 They haven't given up on God yet,
 and they come to the tomb
 looking for life.

In last Sunday's sermon, Bishop Hirsch,
 gave us an image to carry
 through our Holy Week.
 He described the dichotomy
 of the cherry blossoms, at their peak,
 exploding into color all around DC
 while bombs are exploding
 all around our neighbors in Iran.
 He reminded us that it's possible to feel
 both fear and hope,
 joy and sadness,
 faith and doubt,
 at the same time.

And this past week,
 while Eric was writing about
 the meaning of Jesus' death,
 I have been struggling with
 the meaning of the resurrection.
 What's the point of any of it?
 I can't claim to know the meaning
 of Jesus' death and resurrection.
 My faith is still in a
 never-ending evolution.

When he was being arrested,
 one of Jesus' disciples
 pulled out a sword —
 ready to *fight!*
 (And who wouldn't,
 if someone we love is threatened?)
 Jesus said, *Put it away!*
Anyone who lives by the sword
will die by the sword!

I think his death is about a lot of things,
 but, right now, what stands out
 is that his death is a mirror
 showing us the results
 of humanity's world in which
 aggression, bullying, and violence
 seem to have center stage.

Leading up to his arrest,
 the temple council determined
 it would be better for one man to die
 than the whole nation to be destroyed.
 Little did they know,
 the scapegoating of Jesus wouldn't stand.
 The peace they bought
 with the price of his life
 didn't last.
 Within 40 years Rome
did demolish Jerusalem
 and their temple.
 A humanity that lives by the sword
 will die by the sword.

And even with the world's fiercest
 military industrial complex,
 Rome couldn't save their empire
 from the treachery that has existed
 within every empire in history.
 A humanity that lives by the sword
 will die by the sword.

Hamas attacks Israel.

Israel obliterates Gaza.
 The U.S. bombs Iran.
 Iran shoots down jets.
 We hold these images up
 next to the image of the cross,
 and we're reminded that holding a sword,
 or gun,
 or bomb
 leads to death,
 and innocent people
 get caught on our swords too.

What gives
 those Marys
 the capacity
 to hold on to the promise?
 To believe
 in the tender light
 of that first day of resurrection?
 While we,
 along with
 Jesus' other disciples,
 are locked away
 in our despair?
 Or we're catatonic with fear
 along with the armed soldiers
 who guard the dead man?

I don't know what all will unfold
 in these next fifty days of Easter.
 Here's what I expect, though:
 I expect that through Trinity's
 Native Plant Give-Away on April 18th,
 we will plant nurturing,
 native plants
 even while invasive honeysuckle
 and ivy make a comeback.
 I expect that natural and
 human disasters,
 all those things that bring
 death and destruction,
 will occur
 around the globe

and close to home.
 I expect it will seem at times
 that death has won.

(I encourage you, during the silence
 that follows the sermon,
 to read Marcello's program notes
 for the Offertory anthem —
 it's on the back cover of today's bulletin.)

Because here's what else I expect:
 I expect that all the while,
 more flowers will bloom,
 more birds will sing,
 the leaves on the trees
 will grow
 and deepen in color.

Blossoms explode even while bombs are exploding.

Armed soldiers can't keep life
 out of a place of death.

Fear and doubt
 can't hold God's promises at bay.
 Those promises hold true
 even those terrified soldiers
 and disciples.

The violence of humanity is neutralized
 by the lightning-flashing force of life
 that shakes the earth
 and opens the tomb of all tombs.

The women come to see an empty tomb,
 and they actually *touch* the living Christ.

Death can't truly, ultimately, stop life.
 All our swords might bring death.
 But death can't stop life.
 That's the meaning
 resurrection holds for me today.

Program notes for *"Rise Again," an original composition by Marcello Silva.*

The piece begins with the hum of the universe, as described by Pastor Pauline, a B flat. With that, we hear the morning air. The morning of Easter. The birds begin to wake up as they chirp in the sky. The morning grows with more life, before a trumpet in the distance is heard. It sends out a call to all. The clock strikes the hour of 8 (a number symbolizing Easter). A great struggle then begins. A struggle between life and death. At first we hear a theme of resurrection, but as the theme continues to search for resolution, we hear the "Dies Irae" motif symbolizing death. The death motif continues to grow until it reaches a cataclysmic earth shattering chord. It seems that death has won, and all grows quiet. However, then we hear a choir of angels saying:

*"Rise, Rise, Rise Again
Born, Born, Born Again
Awake all who sleep
Do you not see the morning sun?
For it is He who calls you to Eternal Life
For Death has been trampled
Fear turned to dust
So Rise, Rise again
Yes, we shall Rise
Rise, Rise, Rise Again
Rise, Rise, Rise Again"*

With that, the theme of Life bursts back in returning as all the instruments and choirs proclaim:

*"The Lord is Risen Today
Hallelujah
Our Christ the Lord of all has come
Hallelujah"*

(You can access a video of the premier of this piece at trinityelca.org under the Worship tab, Livestream History, and find the link to Easter, April 5, 2026. It's at about 50:30 minutes.)