

If we were living in “ordinary” times, our celebrations this past week and most certainly today would have been communal, festive, and well-orchestrated. We’d wear our best clothes, sit in worship with folks we hadn’t seen in a while, and sing our favorite hymns and listen to the choir anthems all the while beaming from ear to ear with joy. We would have gathered before dawn to listen to the great stories of our faith. We would look forward to sharing Easter breakfast together in our Fellowship Hall with our family and friends. Then we would delight in watching children hunt for Easter eggs outside our church. All of this we would have done together to celebrate the best and boldest news ever told: “The tomb is empty! Death is undone! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!” The news has not changed. But the world around us has.

Today we will not gather in person on Easter. Today we will celebrate online, as best we can, or we will read today’s sermon and bulletin in the comfort of our homes, but still with the feeling of FOMO (*fear of missing out*). It seems that is the most appropriate phrase during these perilous times. We are not just in fear, but we are in fear of missing out. Our country is, along with the entire world, not just in fear of catching this novel and mysterious virus, but more than that, we have graduated from that kind of fear to the fear of missing out on living. For some of us, we understand how to fear something new, how to fear something unknown. We cope. We survive. We make do.

For the fear of missing out on going to work to make money we tell ourselves, “It’s okay we have savings.” For the fear of missing out on making money so that we can save and make plans for the future we say, “It’s okay the economy will bounce back.” But then we hear ourselves ask the fearful question, “But, when? For how long will things be this way? Will things ever go back to normal, whatever normal will look like whenever this is all over?”

Some of us have graduated from the FOMO on future planning, that we then begin to fear missing out on being with family, friends, and our neighbors. Never has the world universally come together and fear the same thing: death come too soon for us. That just around the corner, if we aren't too careful with our hygiene, or slip up and not receive the latest news on how to properly deal with this new reality, we may find ourselves in trouble, or putting others in harms way.

Fear. Fear of missing out. Fear of the unknown. Fear of death come too soon.

So then, what are we to do today on this the most celebrated and joyous of Sunday's of our Christian faith? How can we celebrate at a time like this? During a global pandemic. While the world is lamenting over so much loss. While we are at home in fear.

Well, I've found John's story of the resurrection to be especially relevant for these perilous days and it has brought a great deal of comfort to me, especially for today. John announces a world in which, Jesus appears, everything is new and vibrant. The tempo has picked up. And after a long, grueling week of betrayal, judgment, and a bloody crucifixion, in which John deliberately makes us undergo the tragedy with Jesus, Easter bursts in upon us and everyone begins to move frantically, and according to Mark, move in fear.

First, according to John, Mary Magdalene saw the stone had rolled away, the tomb empty, and she started running. Not that she believed in resurrection at this point, for that would come later. For now, in the predawn darkness, she just begins running back to tell the rest of the disciples that Jesus's body is gone. So we can assume that she is running out of fear because on her sprint back to town, she meets Peter and the beloved disciple and says through tears of confusion and worry, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him.” Mary Magdalene, in her grief, ran. Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. Now

someone had taken his body. So she ran. When she tells Peter and the beloved disciple what she saw, or rather didn't see, they also break into a sprint. But unlike Mary, who ran from the tomb, they ran toward it.

These two disciples didn't just run together toward the tomb. John tells us, they ran against one another. They get into some kind of race, rushing in competition – one gaining on the other, then falling behind, then gaining again – but to what? Why run against one another? What did they think they were running toward? Mary saw the empty tomb as further tragedy in an already catastrophic and emotionally draining week's end. For her, not only had they killed Jesus, but also someone had stolen his body and carried it off to only God knows where. Maybe, the two disciples were mutually running toward that awful, terrible, last heavy Roman kick to the gut to top their whole abysmal week's ending too.

“I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but there was a bad accident.”

I pray none of you have to hear those words. I remember coming home from a shift at the Durham VA Hospital when I got the call. I heard my cousin say those words through the phone sobbing as he tried his best to break the terrible news to me that my father passed away in a car accident, and that they did the best they could. Not knowing fully all the details, stunned and speechless, I did the best that I could to let my sister know, and immediately Kendall and I ran toward tragedy in Winston-Salem to get her. And then through the toughness of putting one foot in front of the other, we all ran toward heartbreak and calamity in Dillon to be with my mom. In times of tragedy, we run. We run toward both good news and bad. We have an innate need to know, and quickly, what the news is and all the details of the truth.

As these two disciples ran, surely there was something in them telling them that they were running toward something new, something unknown. That in not knowing all the details

that somehow, they knew deep down, like I did that day that I received the news, that their future was going to be forever changed and different and scary.

Perhaps you come this morning in the same way. Afraid of the unknown. Terrified of tomorrow. Maybe you don't know why you've come to grab a copy of this sermon, or click on this link to listen to a different take on a text preached every year. But maybe you are like those two disciples running towards Jesus's tomb, not knowing what they were going to discover and how it might change their lives. John says that the beloved disciple outran Peter, won the race, got there first. That may seem such a trivial detail, but isn't it interesting John mentions that the beloved disciple got there first? Not only that, but John says that he was the first one to peek into the empty tomb and believe. The beloved disciple was the first to believe in Easter.

Maybe John didn't want to just tell us that the beloved disciple got there first, but also *how* the beloved disciple got there first. Others in this story come to the tomb and see Easter in so many different ways. Mary doesn't believe until she stands face to face with the risen Christ and hears him call her name, “Mary!” Thomas doesn't believe until the risen Christ offers to let him touch his holey and holy hands and wounded side.

But in John's story of Easter, the beloved disciple comes to believe in another way. He believes without seeing. He doesn't hear Jesus. He doesn't see the risen Christ like Thomas or Mary. All he does is come, look into the dark, empty tomb, and John says he believes. In light of Jesus' absence, the beloved disciple becomes a believer. There is nothing there, no evidence, just an empty place. But, “He saw and believed.” I suspect no one here has touched the risen Christ's wounds or hands and come to believe. Therefore, we too like the beloved disciple have come to believe on the basis of the words, “He is not here.” On the basis of faith and trust. Thus, when the beloved disciple saw the empty tomb he didn't think abandonment, defeat, death. He thought

to himself freedom, victory, life! In a moment he sensed that Jesus had taken their relationship to a new, unexpected, yes, scary, but wonderful level. The beloved disciple didn't have proof, as we call something proof. He had no proof of the resurrection. Yet he had his relationship with Jesus, and that was enough. He believed.

In a Facebook post on March 25 Columbia Theological Seminary's Old Testament scholar William P. Brown posted these words in preparation for today: "... I suggest this. Let us make this Easter profoundly memorable by celebrating the "empty tomb," by letting our sacred gathering places remain empty as testimony that lives are being saved in doing so. The empty tomb, after all, marked the beginning of the Resurrection. Let's linger over it this year; let's revel in it. ... Let us follow the science as we follow Christ from the cross to the empty tomb that is emptied of death."

As Dr. William Brown would suggest, we celebrate the empty tomb. When churches across the country, including ours will be empty, we mark the Easter season by remembering the powerful message of the empty tomb. **The empty tomb represents life and our belief in the resurrection**; it is the message that our risen Savior defeats the worse death imaginable, and lives. It is the salvation message that speaks life in our Christian faith. In the same way, our empty church speaks to our care for life as an exercise of the very faith we have come to believe. Our caring for our lives and the lives of others is an act of holy justice. Our church is empty in this season so that we might live! This is the reality in our Easter season, and a reality in our lives in this unprecedented time. Yes, Easter will be different, but there is nothing about this time in the history of our lives that is the same. We are in unique and unfamiliar times in humanity, and our faith practices must reflect these times

Yes, Easter will feel different this year. But even now, angels accompany us in the darkness, faith remains possible, and understanding will come and the God who destroyed death is ever able to turn our tears into joy. All is not lost. Remember: we have seen the Lord.