

“Life Resurrected”  
Matthew 28:1-10

Pastor Liz Miller  
April 9, 2023

Every resurrection story begins with death. It feels weird on this beautiful Easter morning, in this transformed sanctuary full of friends and family, familiar and new faces, fresh flowers in abundance, bellies full of Easter breakfast and kids buzzing from jelly beans -it feels weird to acknowledge that our story this morning begins with death, but it's important to say out loud, to linger alongside death just a bit longer because resurrection is only possible when there is first death. It's easier to leave death behind on Good Friday but it's here with us. Resurrection begins only when something else ends. We have seen this play out in our own lives countless times:

- A relationship ends and someone discovers a new life beyond the roles they previously inhabited, leading them to newly discovered rhythms of life, new relationships unfolding.
- A loved one dies and even though you can't imagine your life without them, you find your way through the grief and with the grief back to life again, transformed by the loss, but still living.
- A doctors visit leads to a new diagnosis. Anticipating the treatments, the side effects, and the fight ahead feels like a kind of death. In fact, death feels easier than what is coming. But despite the odds, you find life after the diagnosis, life renewed through a strong and steady support system and an internal will to fight for your life every single day.

We are made aware of new life, or life renewed, or life transformed only after we have faced death and made a decision about what we were going to do next.

In Jesus' resurrection story, death took many forms. Jesus' death was personal for his loved ones, an agonizing grief that scattered them to their homes, some seeking comfort in solitude and other seeking comfort at his graveside.

Jesus death was political. His was a state sanctioned death, a public execution, condoned and enacted by government officials. His death was the starring role in a political theatre of law and order, a chilling message to his followers or other who dared speak up on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

And Jesus' death was symbolic, the memory of his death taking different shapes in different Christian communities and cultures these past two thousand years, finding its way through the church across generations, often with different meanings or understandings, some even in conflict with each other, different kinds of symbolism for different people but all pointing us back to God's response to death - a response that leads us through death, and beyond death, back to life. Life resurrected. Life renewed. Life triumphing over death again and again and again.

Even in Matthew's account of the first Easter morning, death is present. Or absent, depending on who you ask. According to the Gospel of Matthew, there were two groups of people that were witnesses to what happened on the first morning of the week after Jesus died. The first people were the two Mary's. They are the ones we talk about the most. We love the Mary's. We admire them. We are grateful for their witness that morning. The Mary's were afraid of what they saw and experienced - of course they were afraid - but they trusted God enough to move through their fear, to leave their graveside vigil and go out to tell the others the angel's message of Good News. The Mary's were the witnesses that continued the movement that Jesus

started. Their courage to leave death's tomb and proclaim Christ's resurrection transformed the world.

The other people that were witnesses to what happened that Easter morning were the guards. The guards were mid-level government employees with the assignment to stay near the tomb of the criminal to make sure that no one disturbed his body, ensuring that the state remained in sole possession of their greatest and latest conquest.

These guards were witnesses too. They felt the earth quake beneath their feet. They watched the angel of God descend from heaven down to earth. They observed the stone in front of the tomb rolling away, the angel sitting upon it. The guards were present and aware that morning. They saw everything the same as the Mary's saw it, but their response was different. They felt the same fear that the Mary's felt, but instead of moving through the fear and following God away from death toward resurrection, they shook with fear and became like dead men. They became the death they were told to guard. They did not leave the tomb. They did not meet Jesus on the road. Their story began and ended with death.

I love the presence of guards in Matthew's Easter story. It is a reminder that resurrection will happen - new life emerges - with or without us. Nothing can stop new life the same way we cannot stop the crocuses from peeking through the snow or the daffodils from shining their faces toward the sun even as we crouch down to them and say, "Careful! There is more winter to come! Slow down your new and delicate growth! We're not ready for you yet!" New life comes on its own schedule, with or without us. Resurrection happens with or without us.

What the guards remind us is that we have a choice of how we will respond in those resurrection moments. Will we stay in the place of death? Will we become frozen or deny what we witness? Or, like the Mary's, will we follow the signs of new life to see where it takes us?

Will we move through our fear and surprise in order to be resurrection witnesses, going with joy, running to share Christ's Good News with our friends, spreading the word that death does not have the last word?

As often as we are faced with death, we are also faced with the opportunity to choose resurrection. When the worst happens and we ask ourselves, "What comes next?" There is always an answer that points us toward life, even if it is a different life than we knew before, even if it is life transformed. But sometimes we hesitate. Or we get lost in the "that's too hard" or "that will never work" or "if only's" of it all and we turn back towards death. We stay stuck, even as we say we don't want to be stuck anymore. We hide out, even as we silently hope someone will find us. We become like dead people, refusing to take the risk of letting ourselves grow and stretch even if the ground is still frozen, even if we are unsure if the timing is right.

On Easter morning, as we proclaim resurrection, we do so knowing that there are people who stayed at the tomb, guarding death's door rather than following Christ back to life. When we encounter these people, these guardians of death, the question becomes: who does this death serve? Who benefits from staying at the tomb? Who benefits from witnessing resurrection and still not believing, still insisting that death is all there is?

As a nation, we watched a resurrection story play out in Tennessee this week. I know many of us were greatly affected by the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, the ripples of their horror reminding us of our own, pulling at wounds that may never heal, emotions still close to the surface just two months later. In Nashville, like in East Lansing, after experiencing the senseless death of students and teachers, people said, "Enough. No more." And in Nashville, like in East Lansing, they organized. Prayer vigils turned into protests. Candles became rally signs.

The people of Tennessee left their homes and their schools and said, “We are not going to live in fear anymore. We need change.” They protested at the state capitol, calling for changes to gun laws, calling for safer schools and safer communities. The legislature remained unchanged, aligning themselves with a culture that protects guns over people. Three members of the House listened to the people and found themselves transformed. Together they left the alignment of the others and joined in the protests, leading a chant of “power to the people” from the House floor. Representatives Justin Jones, Justin Pearson, and Gloria Johnson were witnesses to a people transformed, to a people seeking life where there was once death, and they left the comfort of their positions of power to join them.

Those three representatives were not the only witnesses to the protests. All their colleagues watched. They heard the same message. They heard the same cries for change. But they remained unchanged. They were frozen. Their colleagues continued to choose the side of death. And they tried to keep the Nashville Three, the three who were transformed, at the grave with them. They took away committee assignments; they threatened to revoke their power. They held votes to expel them from the legislature, stripping them of their roles. The votes for Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, two black men, passed, while Gloria Johnson, a white woman, remained in office.

With these actions, the legislature thought that death would have the last word. They thought their power play would quiet the protestors, send them on their way defeated, and return to the law and order they prefer. In this way, they are like the guards, who witnessed the stone roll away from the tomb and instead of following the angel they are frozen, like dead men. But in Nashville as in Jerusalem, death will not have the last word. As Representative Jones said, the

legislature's actions of expelling the two representatives "awakened a generation of people who will let you know that your time is up."

In guarding death over life, a movement is rising up - more people are joining the protests, a nation is watching and awakening - people are joining together who are longing for life transformed, for life that can be lived without the fear of gun violence, a life where children are safe at school, a life where the threat of death does not keep us in daily fear. In Tennessee's resurrection story, the people are proclaiming that death no longer serves them. They are following the way back toward life, together, and they are telling others, spreading the news with joy and haste.

The question before us on this Easter morning isn't: is resurrection real? Resurrection happens all around us - in big national news making ways, in tiny ways in our homes and in our lives. New life comes, sometimes without warning. Life is renewed, sometimes when we least expect it. Life is transformed, and nothing can stop it. Resurrection is real. The question is: will we be people of resurrection or will we stay at the tomb, shaking, frozen, and clinging to death? Will we be people of resurrection, transformed and transforming, proclaiming God's love and promise of life for all people? Will we dare to follow the Mary's, through our fear, to leave the place of death and follow the signs of life down the road, wherever it will take us? We have heard the Easter story. We have been witnesses to resurrection in our midst. Tell me: what will we do next? Where will we let Christ's resurrection guide us? Wherever our journey takes, May the Grace and peace of Christ surely follow.