

DELIGHT
Matthew 28:1-10

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

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; 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 worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them,

‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

In the forty-plus years I have been preaching, I have found that for sermons on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday, no matter what advance planning I do, I must wait for inspiration in the last 24 to 48 hours leading up to the service.

The reason is not so much that the congregation will be larger than normal, giving me the pleasure of seeing most of our members in one place at one time. Rather, what leads me to wait for last-day inspiration is my awareness of the expectation people bring to these services.

- People attend worship on Christmas Eve because they want to experience beauty.
- They attend on Easter because they want to experience hope.

These two simple but crucial expectations are such a part of the air that all the advance preparation goes for naught if it doesn’t in some way speak *from* a beauty and hope that leaders of worship experience, or more importantly, to the beauty or hope that lies at the heart of our faith that Christ was “born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontus Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day rose again from the dead.” It is the beauty and hope contained within the events *behind* these words that draw us here.

All week long I have been drawn to an article I read a few weeks ago that has kept making its way into my mind.

The article is entitled “The Missing Delight.” It is by a historian at Catholic University named Michael Kimmage, whom some of you may know.¹ I see connections between the *delight* to which Kimmage points and the *hope* to which *two women named Mary* are driven when they encounter the resurrection of Christ and fall at his feet and worship.

Let us pray. *Lord, speak to me that I may teach the precious things Thou dost impart; and wing my words, that they may reach, the hidden depths of many a heart.*

I.

Kimmage points out that “delight” is a Latinate word whose root means “to lure or entice.” Over time, it came to mean “to please or to charm,” much as ice cream does for a child or a sunset for a couple on a romantic getaway. From delight we get such words as “delicious,” “delicate,” “lace,” “elicit,” and “dilettante.”

Kimmage says that delight is *not* the subject of high art, but more medium- or even low-brow efforts. Delight is found in comedy, satire, parody.

- Delight is in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, with their mixture of characterization and humor, playful exposure of the hypocrisy of priests and nuns as well as sexual banter among pilgrims.
- Delight is Dickens rather than Upton Sinclair, though both expose the heaviness of grinding poverty.
- Delight is jazz rather than classical music.
- It is the Chrysler Building in New York rather than St. Peter’s Basilica or Notre Dame.
- It is Mel Brook’s *Blazing Saddles*, satirizing frontier violence, and Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, satirizing insensitivity on the part of the British government towards poverty in 18th century Ireland.

I would add that we experience “delight in sports – which so often in our nation go back and forth between *exposing* our racial divides, bringing us *together* in the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, *returning* us to our separate corners as soon as the game is over, and then sometimes *bringing us back* and *holding us together* long after we have forgotten the final score. It is much more delightful to watch the back and forth between Angel Reese and Caitlin Clark than the acrimony growing out of the legislature in my home state.

II.

It may be the case that we come to worship on Easter Sunday in search of *delight*. In times not too long ago, we could be delighted by girls in new Easter dresses and boys in jackets and bow ties, by Easter egg hunts on the church lawn, by women’s hats springing up in the Sanctuary like daffodils in spring. Many of us, most of

¹ Michael Kimmage, “The Missing Delight,” *Liberties* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2023): 134-163. <https://libertiesjournal.com/articles/the-missing-delight/>.

the time, would be satisfied by a touch of *delight* in our lives. A good laugh. An ice cream cone. A beautiful sunset. Delight is never to be minimized.

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But when we read the Gospel accounts of the resurrection it is not simply *delight* that those who *hear* the good news or *encounter* the risen Christ experience. Much more is going on than simple delight.

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If we were to read the Gospels without knowing the ending, we might approach the story before us today with different expectations than the Mary's who come to the tomb seem to have. In all four Gospels, we can add up the number of times Jesus *predicts* that he will be *put to death* and after three days be *raised from the dead*:

- Three times in the Gospel of Mark
- Four times in the Gospel of Matthew
- Once in the Gospel of Luke
- And several times, most often implicitly, in the Gospel of John.

A typical example is Matthew 16:21: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be *killed*, and *on the third day be raised*."

It is central to Jesus' teaching that not only will he be put to death, a prediction his followers have a hard enough time believing, but also that he will be "*raised on the third day*." Though he plainly shares with his disciples that this is his *fate* and *purpose*, neither they nor those close to him seem to get it.

Thus, when the women *journey* to the tomb on Easter morning, they seem to be expecting a funeral, not a festival; mourning, not dancing. Yet when they *arrive* at the tomb, they experience something quite different.

- *There is a "sudden earthquake."*
- *An angel of the Lord, descends from heaven, rolls back the stone and sits on it.*
- *Guards shake and become like dead men.*
- *Then the stone-sitting angel says to the women,*

*Do not be afraid
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...*

The women leave the tomb quickly with *fear* and *great joy* and run to tell his disciples. When Jesus suddenly meets them and greets them, they come [up] to him, take hold of his *feet*, and *worship* him.

III.

We can join in with the women in their moment of delight. “*Fall down.*” “*Rejoice.*” “*Worship.*” But there is something *greater than delight* occurring here. This is more than comic reversal. It is more than a beautiful sunset. It is more pleasing music, playful architecture, the thrill of victory.

The resurrection of Christ which the women encounter encompasses all these delights, but it is *something more*. It involves *worship*. In fact, while our translation has Jesus meeting the women by saying “Greetings!”, the word is better translated “*Rejoice!*” Jesus greets the two Mary’s with a call to worship. “Rejoice!”

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In her monumental book *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* – a book which has so impacted my thinking the last few years – Episcopal theologian Fleming Rutledge labels the resurrection as “God’s mighty *transhistorical* yes to the *historically* crucified.”²

By this she means that the death of Christ is an event that occurs *within history*. One way of looking at the death of Christ from the “human side” is to consider that:

- It is carried out by *particular* local officials – appointees of the Roman Empire – at a *particular* time – the first century – in a *particular* place – the outskirts of Jerusalem.
- The crucifixion grows out of a *particular* controversy between a faction of the Jewish minority in Rome that believes Jesus is the Messiah, and a faction that does not.
- Because a claim to be Messiah is blasphemous according to Jewish Law and according to Leviticus subject to the death penalty,³ local Jewish leaders opposed to Jesus desire that end.
- But they do not have the power to impose the death penalty, so they must ask the local officials to do so.
- Because these officials simply want the minority Jewish population to live quietly and not cause trouble, they accede to the request, grant the crucifixion, and hope things will settle down.

An arrest, trial, verdict, sentence, and crucifixion follow. That’s the death of Christ. A *particular* event within a *particular* time and place *within history*. It happens all the time.

But, says Rutledge, the resurrection which follows originates outside *of* history, beyond history, from the side of God, not from the human side. Thus she labels the resurrection *transhistorical*. “It is *transhistorical* event planted *within history*.”

The only real way we can respond to this event from outside history is through *worship*. The two Mary’s “come [up] to [the risen Jesus], take hold of his feet, and *worship* him.”

They respond with more than delight. They respond with *worship*.

² Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 44.

³ Leviticus 24:16.

IV.

In his article, Kimmage senses a difference between *delight* and *worship*. He points to Psalm 37, in the King James Version:

*Fret not thyself because of evildoers,
Neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity...
[But] Delight thyself also in the Lord:
And he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.⁴*

Kimmage says that “Delight thyself in” is a synonym for worship. As such, it is the opposite of the opening verb *fret*.

- Indeed, to *fret* is to inhibit worship.
- Have you ever tried to *worship* when you are *fretting*?
- Furthermore, to *fret* because of evildoers – to fret because of evil, real as it is – is a sure way of losing sight of God and of traveling further and further away from worship.

By contrast, says the psalm, to “delight thyself in God” – to *worship* – is the gate, the path, the goal, to *hope* and to *action*.

We know that the death and resurrection of Christ has not yet fully brought the end of evil within this world. God’s “making all things right” has not yet fully played out. But the promise of resurrection is that the “evildoers” and “workers of iniquity” shall not have the last word. They shall in fact be “cut down” and “wither” – as the second verse of the psalm promises.⁵ This is why we *need not fret*. That is why we *worship*.

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As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we still find delight as we wait for the “making right of all things.”

- As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we “fret not.”
- As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we engage in what Kimmage calls serious moral reflection, especially concerning things that disturb us into numbness.
- As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we cross borders physical and psychological that wars impose on people world, sometimes going to them, sometimes welcoming them to us.
- As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we move to take ourselves out of our tribal uniforms.
- As we respond to the resurrection with worship, we become a society less intoxicated by our particularisms.

⁴ Psalm 37:1, 4.

⁵ Psalm 37:2.

- And as we respond to the resurrection with worship, we develop to its fullest our sheer human capacities for empathy, compromise, patience, and calm; in other words, for living together in the world God has created and come to “make all things right.”

“Fret not because of evildoers,
Neither be thou envious
Against workers of iniquity.”
Come to the risen Christ.
Take hold of his feet.
Worship.
It is even more than delight,
And it stays with us,
Gives us strength,
For the long duration.

Amen.