

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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On the Way to Morning

Matthew 28:1-10

"Good morning everyone. Let's begin with the numbers." That's the way a newsbreak began on a channel I was watching earlier this week. The numbers. The number of coronavirus cases worldwide. The number of deaths worldwide. The number of coronavirus cases in the United States. The number of deaths in the United States. These numbers have become part of our daily rhythm. As the sun rises each day, we get the news. News about the numbers. And behind each number is an individual, a loved one, mourned and missed by family members and friends.

We don't know how many people died in Jerusalem on that day we call Good Friday. Certainly there were many others besides Jesus. Individuals with names and stories. Individuals whose families were grieving. Individuals who had their particular places of burial. But in Matthew's Gospel, we're taken to the grave of the one whose place of rest didn't stay a place of rest. Instead it became the site where God buried death itself, and opened the way to life.

We get to this grave by following two of the women who had watched Jesus die. Having seen Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," probably Jesus' mother, now come to look at the tomb. Remember that they haven't arrived expecting to witness a resurrection. They're not hiding behind a large stone, smartphones in hand, ready to capture the moment as proof of God's faithfulness and his power to save. No, the two Marys have come as mourners. They plan to continue their vigil of being with Jesus and caring for his body. The guard posted at the tomb makes it impossible for them to get access to anoint Jesus' body, but they will at least be there, near him, with him. It's part of their way of saying goodbye.

In Christian congregations, and other communities of faith, we normally have organized and ritualized ways of saying goodbye to our loved ones. This usually takes the form of a funeral service, often including a time of visitation with family and friends. But even that part of the experience of death and grief has been upended by the coronavirus pandemic. You've probably heard the stories of family members who can't physically be at the bedside of their loved one, to hold their hand or speak to them, due to understandable hospital rules and restrictions. They may be able to video chat with one another, or at least speak by phone. But even this is far from the way that we envision being able to say goodbye to those we love and care for.

A week and a half ago, Richard Boone, our brother in Christ and member of our church, died. During the days leading up to his death, Ken Heinbuch and I were unable to be with Richard in his house, where his family and hospice were providing care. We were at least able to use the phone to speak to his son and daughter-in-law, and to read Scripture to Richard, to pray with him, and to tell him how much we and all of you in the congregation loved him. Though we're certainly thankful that the Lord was near to Richard through whatever forms of ministry we could offer electronically, it was still a different kind of experience from the traditions and practices that we're accustomed to in the life of our

church. Sometime in the future, once circumstances are more suitable, we'll gather for a memorial service for Richard. But for now, we'll continue to mourn with and encourage his family, knowing that whether we're living in the midst of a pandemic or operating under more normal circumstances, we're called to be present with the sick, the dying, and the dead.

The two Marys made a trip to the cemetery, so that they could be with Jesus. Perhaps they expected to find some of the things that we hope to find when we visit someone's grave. Some solace. Some comfort. Some connection. One thing is for sure, namely, that the two Marys weren't expecting to witness an apocalyptic display of God's power. But that's exactly what they get. They experience an earthquake, and see an angel descend, roll back the stone covering the tomb entrance, and sit on it. The soldiers fall to the ground in fear, like dead people.

Now is when we might expect Jesus to make his grand exit from the tomb, in all his glory. But according to Matthew, that has already happened. The resurrection itself has already occurred. The angel has rolled away the stone not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in, so they can see what God has done. Then the angel sends the women to deliver the news to the disciples, including the fact that Jesus is already out ahead of them. They'll see him in Galilee. So clearly this is no time to roll out the portable worship equipment and set up shop at the empty tomb, celebrating for days on end. No, there's work to be done, and a mission to continue. Jesus is already out there on the path that his followers will travel.

That's the thing about Easter, and the resurrection it celebrates. It keeps taking us forward, out of death and into greater life. Out of darkness and into greater light. I'm struck by the timing of the women's journey to the tomb. They certainly didn't slack up and sleep in. They had already been resting on the sabbath following the crucifixion. Come Sunday morning, they picked up where they had left off with their vigil of accompanying Jesus. They set out at dawn. I like the way that one commentator puts it when he renders Matthew's description this way: ". . . as [night] was twilighting into the first day of the week."¹ The rising sun was just below the horizon. Its rays were refracting and scattering off the atmosphere. In other words, the two Marys were on their way to morning.

Morning, not only in the sense of the light of another day, but also mourning, in the sense of loss and sorrow. Remember that these women were on their way to pay their respects. One day had ended and a new one was beginning, but their grief was still fresh, deep, and heavy. They were on their way to mourning.

I recently received an email from a staff member of a church renewal organization who spoke about gathering with some neighbors for worship on a front porch, at an appropriate distance of course. They read and reflected on Psalm 130, which includes the affirmation, "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning" (v. 6). The text is referring to morning, as in sunrise and the start of a new day. But a couple of those present heard "morning" and immediately thought of "mourning," as in grief. It wasn't literally what the text said, but it was still fitting under current circumstances. These folks felt as if each day had become a matter of waiting for news about more sorrow and loss. As the staff member pointed out, "In this season, in a sense we are watching for the mourning. Who will we know? Who of us will be taken by this terrible disease? The road ahead to Good Friday and Holy Saturday poignantly poises us for mourning. But after the mourning comes the morning."²

After the mourning comes the morning. This morning. Easter morning. We've journeyed through this Holy Week, remembering the mourning that accompanied Jesus' suffering and death. We've remembered the mourning of thousands more whose loved ones have been

taken by the coronavirus. And now, our journey has brought us here to this great morning that gives us comfort and hope in the midst of fear, distress, and sorrow.

During this past week, we've seen some glimmers of hope about the scale and spread of the coronavirus. We seem to be making some progress in "flattening the curve" as they say. "Light at the end of the tunnel" is another way that some of our public officials have tried to capture the overall trend. That's encouraging to hear, but as some folks have pointed out, even if there is light at the end of the tunnel, we're not sure how long the tunnel is.

While light at the end of the tunnel can be a helpful metaphor under circumstances like this, we who are following Jesus need to keep our focus not primarily on the tunnel but on the tomb. That's where our ultimate hope lies. And the light we see is the illumination shining through the tomb's opening, helping us see that the tomb is empty. "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay" (v. 6).

Come and see. That's what millions of people throughout the world had planned to do this morning. They had planned to come and see in the form of an Easter sunrise service. Like so many others, the sunrise service we normally hold with other congregations in our community had to be canceled. This year we couldn't set out while it was still dark, with musical instruments, bulletins, and boxes of doughnuts in hand. We couldn't gather around the back porch of the Mount Aventine manor house. We couldn't sing, pray, and preach while a new day dawned over the Potomac River. But even though we couldn't be there, the sun still rose, and we're still worshipping. Our services were canceled, but Easter is not. Jesus is alive and has gone ahead of us. We're still following him forward, into the future created by the life-giving power of God. As Bishop Robert Morneau put it, "We must shake off our comas and stupors and lazy sleeping. We must arise and go with the risen Lord toward the fullness of light and peace."³

One pastor tells about sitting next to an elderly lady on a flight to Europe. He noticed that she was very nervous, so he asked her, "Is this your first flight?" She said, "No, I'm always nervous when I fly. But it won't be bad this trip." The pastor said, "Why?" And she said, "We're flying toward the morning. We're flying toward the dawn."⁴

The Christian life is life lived on the way to morning. For those who are in Christ, following him by faith, the path ultimately leads to resurrection, victory over sin and death, and fullness of life in the reign of God, the new creation. The Queen of Gospel Mahalia Jackson sang of it as that "Great Gettin' Up Morning." But we also know that on the way to that great cosmic morning, when the Lord comes to set things right, there will be plenty of the other kind of mourning. The sorrows, trials, and sufferings, including the pandemics, of this present world and this present life.

On this Easter morning, we're like the two Marys, living devotedly during the time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In between those two was Saturday, a time between what has already been accomplished through the cross and the completion of what was launched at the empty tomb. So until Christ comes again to finish what God has started, we'll keep living our lives toward the dawn. By faith we'll stay on the way to morning.

¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) n.p.

² Gannon Sims. Fresh Expressions US email (March 30, 2020).

³ Robert F. Morneau, in *Ashes to Easter*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 40, No. 4) n.p.

⁴ Bruce Thielemann, "Dealing with Disappointment." Preaching Today, Tape No. 48.