

*Arise from Fear*  
Easter Sunday  
April 12, 2020  
Trinity Bixby  
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[Matthew 28:1-10 \(CEB\)](#)  
[Colossians 3:1-4 \(CEB\)](#)

If you are a particularly early riser during this month of April, getting up 3 hours before the sun peaks over the horizon, you may be able to see the rising of a most unusual heavenly body. Unlike the stars, it moves in its own wandering path, and shines red in the night sky above. The ancient Greeks knew of this sky-wanderer, and because of its red color, they named it “Ares” after their god of war. Later, the Romans called it “Mars” in their language. After the invention of telescopes brought it into clearer view, all sorts of fanciful tales focused on Mars – that beings from it would be war-like, fearing Earth as their blue rival, or that a common cold wiped out all life there. When the telescopes allowed it, humans discovered that Mars had two moons, small misshapen things that don’t have enough gravity to hold themselves in a sphere. These two moons were named for the sons of Ares in Greek, Phobos and Deimos – or Fear and Terror, in English. Dreadful Terror, that makes you freeze in place, and Fleeing Fear, that makes you run to safety. War, Fear, and Terror – it is not surprising that these concepts are related in the mind of the ancients.

In the years before spaceflight, many imagined what it would be like to sail the stars as easily as we sail the seas. For C.S. Lewis, it was a chance to imagine sailing through heaven itself. Yes, before writing the much better known Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis wrote a series of theological science fiction about travels to and on Mars, Venus, and other planets. In his mind, space was not filled with darkness, or void. Instead, space was the Ether, the stuff of heaven itself, and was filled with the light of God, shining brightly in all places. You see, he took “the heavens above and the earth below” much more literally than most. Yet, even in his

imagination of spaceflight, he revealed a truth about the world. As he later put it in *The Joyful Christian*, “Aim at heaven, and you’ll get the earth thrown in. Aim at Earth, and you’ll get neither.”

In this statement, C.S. Lewis is echoing Paul’s letter to the Colossians – “Look for the things that are above... think about the things above and not on earth.” If people live on earth, are buried down in the ground, then the only place left for Heaven to be is up in the sky. It makes sense, then, to refer to “looking for things above” when you mean “look for Heaven” or “look for God’s actions in the world.”

But on that first Easter morning, according to Matthew’s account, the two Marys are not “looking for things above” – but “come to look at the tomb.” A tomb. A place of death. Of memory. They have no hope of going inside and seeing Jesus’ body, since the tomb is being watched by guards.<sup>1</sup> We can imagine them, all alone as they head out early to the place of remembering – and then, a ‘suddenly’ happens. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake. An angel appears, “coming down” from heaven and rolling away the stone that covers the tomb’s entrance. Matthew describes the angel, saying, “His face was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow.” This terrifying figure of radiant light, early in the morning, accompanied by an earthquake at his arrival – he hops up on the rock, and sits, waiting for the Marys to arrive. Those set to watch the tomb? They are filled with terror (*deimos*) and shake with fear (*phobos*). Indeed, these guards, with weapons prepared like soldiers for war, they are filled with the “sons of war” – terror and fear. Matthew says they “became like dead men” – I assume this means they fainted, but in any case, they’re never heard from in the Gospel again.

In contrast, the Marys are told, “Don’t be afraid.” Angels almost always seem to arrive with this warning. Don’t be afraid. And we so often gloss over it. But these days, in our time of isolation, maybe we should sit with it for a moment. The angel

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<sup>1</sup> Greek has at least three words for guards – guards who watch a place (*tereo*), guards who keep people in a place (*phulasso*), and guards who defend a place (*koustodia*). These are watching-guards. (<https://somuchbible.com/word-studies/annotated-scripture/matthew-281-10/>)

tells these grief-stricken women, “don’t be afraid.” You need not fear or withdraw. “I know you are looking for Jesus, the Crucified One. He isn’t here, because he has been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him.” Instead of telling the women immediately to go and spread the word, the angel invites them forward, into the tomb, to confirm that it is empty. To know with heart and eyes that Jesus is really, truly, raised from the dead.

The angel is taking seriously that the Marys are indeed scared. And the angel offers them comfort in matching what is said with what they see, and helps to bring joy into their time of fear with good news. This is not at all what the Marys were expecting when they were headed to the tomb! Indeed, I doubt they expected ever to hear that Jesus had risen from the dead. Everything from here on out is different. Unknown. There was no path charted for how to proceed when your friend and teacher arises from death itself.

Maybe this resonates with you. Most of us living today have never experienced a time like this. Like the Marys, we can feel fear – at the uncertainty, of lives uprooted, of an unknown path before us. But, just as the angel comforted them with words of joy, words of hope in the resurrection – perhaps, we, too, can be comforted. Perhaps we, too, can arise from our fear.

After seeing the place where Jesus was expected to be, the Marys saw him alive and in person, unexpectedly. They were already filled “with great fear and excitement” – and suddenly, Jesus is there, saying, just as the angel did, “Don’t be afraid.” Jesus sends them on to tell his “brothers and sisters”<sup>2</sup> that he is going to Galilee, and they will see him there.

This story in Matthew’s Gospel charts a path in the midst of uncertainty. Just as the planets appear to wander in the sky, taking unexpected directions compared to the stars around them, so too does the path of hope and resurrection in the midst of a time of terror and fear. The Marys expected to come to the tomb, see that it was still there, remember Jesus, and return home. Instead, they experience

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<sup>2</sup> *Adelphia* in Greek – “born of the same womb” or “womb-mates.” Can be used of a group of men or of mixed genders – the implication here is clearly the men and women together. (ibid)

an earthquake, the arrival of an angel, the guards fainting in terror – and then the comfort and joy of knowing that Jesus is raised from the dead. They leave, filled not with fear alone but with excitement and hope. Then, another turn – Jesus appears before them, and tells them to meet him in Galilee, along with his disciples.

The Marys move through this story, holding grief, fear, joy, excitement, and wonder all at the same time. Even so, they go tell the disciples what they saw – listening to the path Jesus has set before them. Our challenge is similar. As my colleague in ministry, the Rev. Olivia Lane Berman puts it, “Is our faith strong enough to proclaim resurrection even when we don’t actually feel it? Instead of false hype, can we walk steadily towards the unknown with hope and deep love?”

We must seek the things above – to follow the path set before us in this time. And it is so hard. After all, fear leads to isolation, and so isolation, even for non-fearful reasons, can feel like fear to us. But we follow Jesus, the one who is both crucified and risen. Jesus understands what it is to be in the midst of paradox, in the middle between two terrible extremes. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>3</sup> Our isolation, at this time, can be thought of as a way of laying down our lives. We lay down our normal routine. We lay down visiting friends and loved ones. We lay down worshipping in person together. But we are not laying down our life out of fear for ourselves, but out of love for our neighbor. In laying down our lives, we help to save our loved ones. We are following in the path of Jesus.

It is a weird and wandering path, like the planets trace in the sky. Yet, in following this difficult path, we live into hope without hype, being filled with joy that helps us walk steadily into the unknown. So, let us “aim at heaven,” even while being earthbound. Let us arise from fear, and follow the Risen Christ.

May you look up, knowing that God is always with you. May you seek the risen Christ, serving him by loving your neighbor and yourself. And may the Holy Spirit fill you hope as we continue on the unknown path before us. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John 15:13, NRSV