

“Easter Can’t Be Stolen Either”
Matthew 28:1-10
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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As we have been anticipating this day for several weeks, thinking that for the first time in our lives we would not be able to gather together for worship on Easter because of COVID-19, I have found myself thinking often about *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I have not lost my mind – or if I have, this is not evidence of such a reality - nor have I succumbed to the virus, as far as I know. This is Easter, not Christmas, I know, but it seems to me that our situation today is very much like the one described in Dr. Seuss’ 1957 book and the films based on it.

In the book and the films, the Grinch tries to steal Christmas from the Whos - who live in Whoville, of course - because he simply cannot stand all their happy celebration sounds. He is a Grinch, after all. So, he steals their presents, decorations and food, and then assumes that they will not be able to celebrate Christmas without these things.

But much to his dismay, on Christmas morning, he hears them celebrating anyway. As it turns out, Christmas isn’t really about all the things he has stolen, though they can add to the celebration. It’s about the love of family and friends, and this can’t be stolen. So, the Whos celebrate and the Grinch eventually brings back everything he has stolen and joins the celebration, as they all sing together the Whoville Christmas Carol...

Now, we might want to add from the perspective of our faith that Christmas is *also* about the birth of Jesus, but this can’t be stolen either. And the basic premise is the same. Like the love of family and friends, this just can’t be stolen. Christmas can’t be stolen. Neither can Easter.

It may feel like Easter has been stolen from us this year, not by the Grinch, but by a tiny microorganism that has taken lives and caused upheaval. A virus has kept us from gathering together today and having our usual Easter experience. We cannot wear our finest clothes and hats. We cannot fill the sanctuary and lift our voices together in song. We

cannot smell the lilies (and sneeze) together. We cannot share our usual Easter feast in the usual way. A tiny little grinch has stolen all of these pieces of our experience.

But it hasn't stolen Easter because it can't. Easter isn't really about all of these things, though they help us to celebrate it. Easter is about one very basic, compelling reality – Christ the Lord is Risen today! The same humble Messiah who was put to death on a cross on Good Friday has been resurrected by God to give us hope for eternal life. Nothing can change this reality. Thus, nothing can take away the celebration that goes with it.

Christianity Today carried a story recently about Gregory Mansour, the Maronite Bishop of Brooklyn, who is trying to guide his churches through this critical time as they find themselves in the center of one of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19. The Maronite Church is rooted in ancient Lebanon. Modern-day colleagues there have welcomed ISIS-fleeing Christians from Syria and Iraq in recent years and thus, have known their fair share of struggles.

Mansour ministers now through a pandemic and, as he has sought to prepare his people for an Easter celebration without the ability to gather together, he has turned for inspiration to St. John-Marie Vianney, a priest who grew up in France during the anti-clerical Reign of Terror (1793-1794). Priests risked their lives then when they visited the frightened faithful and served communion in homes, but they did so anyway. “When we cannot go to the church,” Vianney said, “let us turn toward the tabernacle. No wall can shut us out from the good God.”

No wall can shut us out from the good God. Nothing can steal Easter from us. Christ the Lord has risen today, alleluia, and nothing can drown out the celebration of this good news!

This does not mean that things aren't different today or that Jesus' followers do not encounter hardship. God's people have always faced challenges. The reading from Jeremiah comes from a time when Israel is being defeated and taken into exile in Babylon, largely as a result of the people's disloyalty. In the reading from Matthew, Mary Magdalene, a friend and follower of Jesus, and another Mary, perhaps Jesus' mother,

come to the tomb on the first day of the week at dawn in profound grief because Jesus has died. And though Peter preaches about the hope of resurrection in the reading from Acts, and enables many new people to come to faith, including a centurion named Cornelius, he does so in a culture that will eventually put him to death because of his faith.

So, the message is not that Christ has risen and thus life will be a bed of roses forever for us all. The message is that Christ has risen and because he has, we have hope – hope for something more than this life, hope that there is something beyond our suffering, hope that cannot be taken away by anything in this world, even death itself. It is because of this hope that Christians have been able to celebrate the good news of Easter no matter what challenges they have faced.

Some of these challenges, like those we face today, have involved pandemics. In a recent Baptist News Global article, Bill Leonard documents a number of plagues and the church's responses, including Martin Luther's guidance given in the 16th century. As the Black Death exploded in Germany in 1527, 10 years after the Protestant Reformation began, Bill says Catholics and Protestants blamed each other. But in "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" Luther wrote this.

I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.

If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

Luther's counsel sounds incredibly contemporary, as he argues for physical distancing for self-care and the benefit of others, and it offers a

helpful reminder that the church has faced challenges like this before. But Luther also expresses a willingness to help others at his own risk, if needed, and a sense of peace with his own death, should it come. How can he do these latter things? Because Christ has risen from the dead. Because he trusts deep in his heart that this life is not all there is.

Other times the church has faced a different kind of challenge, the challenge of persecution. This was the case for early followers of Jesus like those we read about in the book of Acts. It has continued to be the case for Christians in our time in many parts of the world. Ten years ago, a gunman killed eight Coptic Christians as they left a Christmas Mass in Nag Hammadi. A year later, a car bomb killed twenty-one Coptic Christians in Alexandria on New Year's Eve. Just three years ago, on Palm Sunday, suicide bombers killed forty-seven Coptic Christians in churches in Alexandria and Tanta. Yet Christians in Egypt still gather for worship and devote their lives to a Risen Lord.

We have had people in this church who suffered persecution for their faith in Iran, Pakistan and many other places. Yet none of these believers has given up his/her faith. Some have died for their beliefs. Others have fled for safety but continued to believe, worship and serve. How can they do this? Because Christ has risen from the dead. Because they trust that this life is not all there is.

So, how do we develop a faith like this, the kind of faith that cannot be diminished by anything, even the threat of illness and isolation? Well, how do the women in Matthew's story come to embrace the hope of resurrection? To begin with, they are under no illusions, they face reality. They are present when Jesus dies. So, as they come to his tomb at dawn on the first day of the week, they are consumed by grief.

But when they arrive, there is an earthquake and an angel appears from heaven and moves the stone away from the tomb. The guards the Romans have placed there to make sure nothing happens to breathe life into Jesus' little following jump back in fear, but the angel tells everyone not to fear, Jesus has been raised, and he invites them to come inside the tomb and see. The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out – no

stone or guard could restrain the resurrected Christ – but to let witnesses in. So, in they go, we assume, and are moved to fear and joy.

The angel says Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him. Jesus is always ahead of us. Without delay they head out, again in fear and joy, and tell the disciples Jesus is alive. Then, Jesus comes to them and greets them. That too is often our experience; he comes to us. They fall down in worship and he tells them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The two Marys begin with a firm grip on reality, they know Jesus has died. Then, they find evidence that something has happened to Jesus after his death – an angel appears, the stone is moved, his body is not there. Finally, they encounter the Risen Christ, and this convinces them. This is what transforms fearful disciples, most of whom disappear at the cross, into faithful followers who are willing to die for their belief. Peter says as much in his sermon recorded in Acts 10 and he should know.

This is what enables us to claim the kind of resurrection faith that leads to celebration in all circumstances of life. We may not encounter the Risen Christ in a physical form. We don't know exactly what Jesus looks like to the two Marys. They don't have an iPhone with them to take a selfie! But we do encounter the Spirit of the Risen Christ moving among us, inspiring us, letting us know we are not alone nor are we ever without hope. Such an encounter is the key.

It happens in many different ways. The founding pastor at my previous church, Jack Noffsinger, spoke of his encounter with the Risen Christ at an Easter Sunrise Service in 1945. Jack was a Marine Chaplain at Iwo Jima where a brutal, month-long battle took 7,000 American and 18,000 Japanese lives. Jack told me he nearly lost his faith when he witnessed this suffering, but during an Easter Sunrise Service on Mt. Suribachi, he sensed the presence of the Risen Christ in a way he could not prove to anyone else but didn't need to, and his faith was reborn.

Few of us have an experience this profound, but have we not had some experience with the Risen Christ, some moment when we sensed the presence of Another, some occasion when were about to give up but were somehow reborn, some time when we were drowning in the flood waters of life and the buoyancy of the Spirit enabled us to remain afloat?

I think of a passage in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* when Raskolnikov has spent some of his time in prison in Siberia but has begun to change in the context of a loving friendship with a woman named Sonya. Dostoyevsky says that though he is normally dismissive of her visits and reluctant to be touched, he holds Sonya's hand on a day lit up by an Easter sun and "they resolved to be patient. They had another seven years to wait, and what terrible suffering and what infinite happiness before them! But he had risen again and he knew it and felt it in all his being... (p. 504)"

When we have an experience like this, an experience of rebirth, no matter how it happens, everything within us changes and we are able to celebrate resurrection hope even if we have suffering yet to endure.

In the most recent issue of *The Christian Century* Episcopal vicar Laurel Mathewson describes a woman named Matrida who is the choir director at her church in San Diego. Matrida spent twenty-five years in a refugee camp in Tanzania after her family fled violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She resettled in San Diego in 2016 with her two young children and a voice that moves worshipers to tears. She also leads a band that includes dancers who move about with great joy. Having had Congolese partners in Raleigh through CBF lead us in worship several years ago, we know what this experience is like!

One day after a concert led by Matrida, Mathewson says a white congregant in his 70's marveled at what he had experienced. "What kind of faith gets you through twenty-five years in a refugee camp singing God's praises? What kind of faith has you dancing and writing new songs about Jesus as you pick flowers and paint ships to make rent? What kind of faith is this?" he asked.

An Easter faith, one that cannot be snuffed out by hardship, one that cannot be stolen by anything - even the isolation, fear and economic impact of COVID-19. A faith in the Risen Christ we have met personally and been assured by and placed our trust in - that is the faith that inspired Matrida and Martin Luther, St. John-Marie Vianney and Jack Noffsinger, the two Marys and Peter - and that is the faith that inspires us today.