

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

WITH FEAR AND GREAT JOY  
Matthew 28:1-10; Easter 1A; April 5, 2026

Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Our Matthew 28 Gospel begins where chapter 27 left off: at the tomb of Jesus. The same women who saw Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus' dead body in his tomb went back to see the tomb, wondering how they were going to get to His body since a large stone was rolled in front of the opening. The guards watching the tomb sealed by Pontius Pilate to prevent anyone from taking Jesus' dead body and claim He had risen from the dead, were also there.

Then a great earthquake, a seismic event, happened when an angel came down from heaven and rolled away the stone and opened Jesus' tomb. His appearance, like lightning and his clothing white as snow, scared the willies out of the guards. They trembled (same "seismic" word as "earthquake") and fell down in fear like dead men. A growing number of people were at the private cemetery where Jesus' body had been laid. The One who was supposed to be there dead in the grave, Jesus, was not. Everyone else at the empty tomb was afraid.

The angel told the women, **"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell His disciples.**"

What do you feel when you visit a cemetery? If you are there to visit the grave of a loved one, it very well could be sadness you feel. We mark graves with tombstones or monuments in memory of our loved ones and so we can find their graves later on. (Matthew uses two different words for "tomb" in his account. The first has the general meaning of "grave" (τάφος) as in burial place the women went to. The other (μνημείον) is related to the word for remembrance, like when we visit the cemetery later in memory.)

The angel told the women to go and tell Jesus' disciples that He had risen from the dead as He had told them, and that they would be seeing Him in Galilee. As they **departed quickly**, Matthew tells us that the women did so with conflicting emotions: **with fear and great joy**. Fear and joy are not feelings often associated with each other. We may feel fear, or we may feel joy, but not usually at the same time.

Some people are afraid to visit cemeteries. Cemeteries remind them of death, not only the deaths of those who are buried there, but especially their own coming deaths. They won't go to funerals and burials because they struggle with death. Others are superstitious about cemeteries, or believe that the spirits of the dead, evil spirits or ghosts haunt cemeteries so they are afraid to go there, especially at night.

Why were the women still afraid after being told, **“Do not be afraid”**? Matthew does not tell us, but we have clues that can guide us. The typical response in the Bible to seeing angels is fear. Those holy creatures sent by God look nothing like the cute, little cherubs, often drawn to look like fat babies. Some angels are cherubs, or cherubim in the plural, and are depicted in Scripture as powerful, warrior-like creatures. For example, when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden for sinning and banned from the Tree of Life, God placed cherubim with a flaming sword to prevent access (Gen. 22-24). Maybe the women were still afraid at seeing the angel.

Another possible reason for their fear was the task God had given them: go and tell the disciples what they had seen and heard. How would this news be received? Matthew does not tell us, but Luke does: **“These words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe [the women]”** (24:11). The good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead is not always accepted or welcomed.

When you go back to work or school later this week or visit with family or friends and you are asked how your weekend was, will you be afraid to announce that you were in church celebrating Jesus rising from the dead? What would people think of you if you brought up the topic without you even being asked? Are you afraid of doing that? Are you ashamed of the gospel?

What we are told is that the women departed from the tomb that no longer held the dead body of Jesus to tell the good news, and they did it **with fear and great joy**. Whatever their fears were, they also had great joy at the good news they had received and were about to share with the rest of the disciples.

Easter provides a variety of reasons for joy. Easter is a time of family: meals together, family home from out of town, and shared faith in our God and Savior. The flip side of Easter being a time of family joy is the sadness of family members separated by distance, divided by unresolved conflicts, by different beliefs or a loss of faith, and especially the separation caused by death. The joy of Easter can be bitter-sweet.

The women who were at the tomb to see a dead Jesus went from there with great joy. Why? They believed that their Lord was not dead, but alive. While on their way, Jesus met them and they were able to see Him, hold onto His physical body that, though it bore the marks of His crucifixion, was now clearly alive and glorious, and they worshiped Him as their risen Savior.

We have great joy for the same reasons. We have heard and believed the same good news. Our Lord and Savior Jesus is not dead, but alive. Though we cannot see Him, He comes to us today in His holy Word of forgiveness, life, and salvation. We cannot grab onto His feet as we worship Him, but we worship the One who gives into our mouths His very body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus is not dead, but alive, and promises to all who eat and drink with faith that they too will physically and gloriously rise from the dead.

Yet we are told that the women, when Jesus showed Himself alive to them, had to be told again by Him: **“Do not be afraid.”** Did seeing Jesus alive remind them that they had not believed His Word that He would die and rise from the dead on the third day? They had gone to His tomb to anoint His dead body for a proper burial in the grave. But Jesus’ words to them, **“Do not be afraid,”** wasn’t Him scolding them for their unbelief, but His way of saying, “You are forgiven! You have me back alive, and you will live also.”

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We come to Easter with fear and great joy. Our fears could be death-related or because of our sins. Whatever it is that causes us to fear outside of church, we will still have to face them when we leave here. God knows our fears and sends word to us through His angel messengers and even His own Son: **Do not be afraid!** Why not?

Jesus has overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us through faith in Him. We have been raised from the death of sin through Baptism into Christ to live in God's forgiveness having received God's life-giving Spirit. What we prayed earlier in the Collect of the Day for Easter reminds us of why our fear can become great joy now and forever.

Please rise for prayer.

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with [great] joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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