

The Resurrection Way of Life

A sermon preached on Easter Sunday by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 28:1-10 on April 9, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

Over the past month or so, I've noticed an increase in the number of stories in our news and social media that reflect on the three covid-era years we've come through together. These articles have examined our collective cultural imagination that emerged during these years: the shows, movies, moments, games, trends, and distractions that captured our attention. "What unites them," as one writer says, "is us – the audience – and the way we reacted to them: the surprising way they expanded our lives, assuaged our anxieties, lessened our isolation or just got us briefly out of our own heads."¹

Beyond the obvious inclusions on the list like "Tiger King" and Taylor Swift's "Folklore" and sourdough starters and TikTok dances, a certain game showed up: Wordle. Now I'm not going to ask for a show of hands from you who do your daily Wordle – I see your Facebook feeds! – but I bet that most of you have heard about the five-letter guessing game that appears daily in *The New York Times*. Surely it's no surprise to us why we've loved Wordle so much, for in a season of such disruption and disorientation, where all we could do is wait and worry and wonder about what tomorrow will hold, what better gift to the anxious mind than solving a daily puzzle!

Writer Malcolm Gladwell defines for us the difference between something that's a puzzle and something that is a mystery. A *puzzle*, he says, is something that can be solved with more knowledge or information, like Wordle for example. But *mystery*, oh mystery is fundamentally different from

¹ Opinion editors, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/04/08/opinion/covid-culture-tiktok-bo-burnham.html?searchResultPosition=1>

that. It can't be worked out by getting some more information or by finding some secret key that unlocks it for us. It can't be done with more knowledge or more facts, more resources or more time. "Mystery," writes Gladwell, "requires judgment and assessment of uncertainties."²

On this Easter day, we peer into the uncertainties and yes, the mystery of the resurrection. For the resurrection of Jesus is beyond a puzzle to be solved, or a proof to be proven, or an argument to be won, or a case to be tried. Easter makes for a fool of the preacher who stood up on this holy day with a sermon titled "13 Incontrovertible Proofs that Jesus Rose from the Dead," proofs to which he bragged "could wrestle any unbeliever to the ground," yet after an hour and a half of making his case, no one cared anymore.³ Instead, it's a mystery like that formed in the imagination of the late saint Rachel Held Evans, who said, "I am a Christian because the story of Jesus is still the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about."⁴

The story of Jesus is, finally and fully, the story of resurrection. Of new life. Of the kind of love that refuses to stay dead. And the story of resurrection is to be entered into like the deep dawn of a mystery that stirs every sense in our body, every synapse of our spirits, every corner of our hearts. A mystery whose descriptions we trust in the hands of the artists, the musicians, the poets, the spirit of the gathered community that pulses with hope and new life. A mystery that begins in the dark.

II.

² Malcolm Gladwell, "Enron's Open Secrets," *The New Yorker*, January 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/08/open-secrets-3>

³ Story attributed Eugene Peterson.

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*, p164.

“After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning,” Matthew tells us, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” Last at the cross and first at the tomb, darkness surrounded Mary and Mary on their faithful journey to the tomb to confirm Jesus’ death and anoint his body.

Yet it was Pilate’s guards’ job to make sure the crucified Jesus stayed put. How’s that for the unluckiest military assignment around?⁵ I feel for Pilate – the presiding ruler at the crucifixion of Jesus, the one who probably wished for a day of calm where everything would go back to normal. When the religious leaders came to Pilate, they wrung their hands again. “Sir,” they said, “remember how Jesus claimed that he’d rise again? Perhaps you should put some of your soldiers on death detail, and make sure that the rebel Jesus of Nazareth stays put in the tomb, that no one steals his body and claims a victory.” You know Pilate had to be annoyed when he said, “go and make it as secure as you can.” Of this wrinkle in the story, the great preacher John Buchanan says, “that’s the image I love here: elderly men with station and status and real gravitas, invested in the status quo, frightened, trying for all they are worth to make sure that nothing interrupts or changes the way things are, securing the tomb.”⁶ “Old men trying to keep the sun from rising,” Frederick Buechner says.⁷

But instead, the ground shook, the plates shifted, an angel descended like lightning, and soldiers were so afraid, they were like dead men. In these apocalyptic images, Matthew goes to great lengths to paint the world rending from one way of life into another. A new world seemed to break the ground

⁵ Thanks to Tom Long for this imagery!

⁶ John Buchanan, “The Laughter of the Universe,” <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2005/032705.html>

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*.

beneath their feet and pierce through the darkness that had traveled with them from that hill faraway.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel said, reciting the words that anchor God’s story of love in this world, from birth to life to death to resurrection. “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised!” Last at the cross and first at the tomb, Mary and Mary were sent ‘with fear and great joy’, the first witnesses of the resurrection, the first midwives of the good news, the first preachers of the risen Christ.⁸

III.

Throughout this whole school year, I’ve been preaching with the image of being “on the way” right at the heart of it all. Jesus says he is the way, of course, and the lives we live with Jesus as shepherd are lives on the way of faith. Months ago, I titled today’s sermon “The Resurrection Way of Life” – thinking at the time that the title was rather broad and vague, and thus gave me plenty of room to take it whichever way the Spirit’s wind was blowing. (Sometimes preachers do this, don’t you know!) But you know, the more I read Matthew’s account of the resurrection, the more I see that “resurrection way” begin to unfold. It stops being vague, and its blurry edges come into focus. In the mystery of it all, the resurrection way emerges. And what is this resurrection way of life? Well according to the first to experience it, the resurrection way of life is one of fear and great joy, one with the courage to share good news that changes everything.

Each of the gospels has their take on this mystery. Matthew says that the women were moving “quickly with fear and great joy.” Mark tells us they

⁸ In light of recent movements within the Southern Baptist Convention to expel churches with female leadership, this foundational truth cannot be stated enough!

fled from the tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them.” Of all the disciples, Luke remembers that “while in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.” And John tells of Mary who weeps and rejoices. Each account holds its difference – different sequences of events, different features, different words – but the common themes anchor the Easter story: of running and weeping, of confusion and disbelief, of surprise at its most fundamental level.

Fear and great joy. Terror and amazement. Disbelief and wonder. Weeping and rejoicing. Beautiful and terrible, as Buechner describes the certain happenings of this world. That’s just it, isn’t it? The resurrection way of life is one lived right on that edge – just between darkness and light in deep dawn, between what was and what will be, between the end and the beginning.

Tom Long once said, “the wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and terrible news of Easter is also that Jesus is alive, because nothing is nailed down anymore. The old joke about nothing being sure but death and taxes was at least half right; you could at least count on death.”⁹ Flannery O’Conner said it plainly: “Jesus’s thrown everything off balance!”¹⁰

You could almost imagine what that must’ve felt like, the disorientation of dawn on that first day of the week.¹¹ It was the first day, and life would slide back to normal, as it does when a new week rolls around. The grief over Jesus’ death blanketed his followers, for they lost not only a friend and a guide, but a dream. As they watched him bless the poor in spirit, and summon

⁹ Tom Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, p323.

¹⁰ Flannery O’Conner, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”

¹¹ With gratitude to John Buchanan’s construction of a piece of his 2008 Easter sermon, “Fear and Great Joy,” whose use of “you could almost imagine” pulled me right into the story. I then couldn’t imagine telling this story without it!

the children to him, and heal a hemorrhaging woman, and tell of mustard seeds blossoming into towering trees, and wheat and weeds growing together, and great treasure hidden in a field, and proclaim God's dream for this world – here and not yet – you could almost see them – you could almost see us! – imagining what that new world might be.

What is the resurrection way of life? You could almost imagine it, couldn't you?

You could almost imagine a holy table: groaning with the fruits of this earth, crowded with delighted diners of every race and every nationality, every gender and every sexual orientation, every ability and every kind.

You could almost imagine a basin: full of the shame and the sin now sloughed off each person, soaked with the tears he wiped from their eyes, his water of life now blessing each with belovedness.

You could almost imagine a landscape: one where compassion is the highest currency we trade, where the hungry are fed and the homeless are housed, where children aren't gunned down in their classrooms and cruel leaders aren't given the power to bomb a neighboring country or banish a neighbor's rights, where everyone has access to the kind of things that make for flourishing: cold water, warm meals, birdsong, a kind counselor, deep rest, relationships that matter, dignity and purpose and hope above all else.

So disruptive to the status quo, so upending to the way things are, you could almost imagine why those religious leaders wanted to keep that tomb secure, because their fear of death paled in light of their fear of resurrection.

When Jesus died, so did that dream. So did their hope. So did the mystery of God's new day dawning in their midst.

But in light of an empty tomb and a risen Christ, that dream is no longer dead. That fear is no longer the final word. That mystery is alive! The mystery of resurrection is alive anywhere that people love God, love neighbors, and love self; anywhere that the thirsty are given water and the naked are given clothes; anywhere that the oppressed are liberated and all live within the Lord's favor; anywhere that sons and daughters prophesy, where the young see visions and the elders dream dreams; anywhere that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus; anywhere the barriers and dividing walls of hostility are broken down between us; anywhere that freedom sets us free; anywhere that Love is made flesh, again and again and again.

On Easter hope, the late preacher William Sloane Coffin said this: "Before every birth and after every death there is still God. The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death. If we don't know what is beyond the grave, we do know who is beyond the grave."¹² Oh what mystery! Oh what hope!

IV.

Just this week, I read a story that's an Easter story if I've ever heard one. You see, a visiting schoolteacher who had responsibilities at the local hospital was asked by the homeroom teacher of a little boy to go and visit that young boy in the hospital and help him with his homework. As the classroom teacher said, "we're studying nouns and adverbs this week in the young man's class, and I do hope you'll help him with that."

Well the visiting teacher arrived at the hospital to find the boy, only to discover just how serious his condition was. He was in the hospital's burn unit, wracked with pain, a shell of his vibrant, youthful self. Embarrassed and

¹² William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*.

feeling so very out of place, she walked into the room and saw the boy miserable and suffering. But the teacher was dutiful, and decided to press on through the lesson. She stumbled along in fits and starts, ashamed at her commitment to responsibility that put this suffering boy through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning when the visiting teacher arrived, the nurse on the burn unit said to the teacher, “what did you do to that boy yesterday?” Before the teacher could find words to her apology, the nurse interrupted, “we had given up on him, but ever since you visited him, he seems to be fighting back and responding to treatment.”

Later, the boy himself explained that indeed he had given up hope. But it all changed for him when he came to the simple realization that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?¹³

V.

In a few moments, we'll leave this place. Mystery will probably give way to the ordinary rhythms of life. (Someone's got to put the pot roast in the oven or DoorDash the lunch, right?) So where do we go next with Easter? Go to Galilee, the angels said to Mary. Go to Galilee, for Jesus is going ahead of you, and it is there you will see him. Go to Galilee, not to the mountaintop or the beach vacation. Go to Galilee, the place where you live your lives, and raise your kids, and shop for groceries, and pay your taxes, and cast your ballots, and make the small, minute-by-minute decisions that spend your days, which is, of course, how you spend your lives, as Annie Dillard reminds us.¹⁴ Go to Galilee, for Jesus will meet you there. There, you will live out the resurrection way of life!

¹³ Joyce Hollyday, *Sojourners*, March 1986, p. 19.

¹⁴ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.

Christ the Lord is risen today! Amen!