

## JOY IN THE MORNING

By Andrew Wilson  
April 1, 2018 – Easter

Mark 4:21-23, 30-34  
1 John 1:1-4

As most of you know, we have a unique Holy Week tradition at this church. Some have even called it bizarre. After Good Friday worship we roll that humongous boulder in front of the church doors, and before Easter services, we roll it back.

On Friday night at our campfire vigil I had a lively conversation with an intelligent young teenager. She pointed at the stone and asked, “Is that supposed to be the loaf Jesus broke at the Last Supper?” It was a reasonable question. She attends a Roman Catholic Church. To her the stone looked like one of the wafers dispensed by the priest at the Mass.

“It’s supposed to be the stone that they used to cover Jesus’ tomb,” I explained.

“Was it really that big?” she asked, again quite reasonably.

“No,” I said, “it’s pretty over the top. We’ve got a lot of Hollywood people in our church and we like to do things big.”

The girl’s companion, Josie Bryant from our church, quipped, “Hey – go big or go home.”

In past years the tombstone came with a guard. Last week Michele Fernandez got to wondering where the guard’s costume was and who would be wearing it. Everyone agreed: we had to have a guard. It was an essential part of the tradition. A tombstone without a posted guard is like a nativity crèche without an angel. After a bit of frantic searching, Michele found the costume, but the plastic helmet was missing. So she placed a rush order on Amazon for a brand new one. Then she recruited my nephew, Michael Van Citters, to play the part.

Michael looked handsome and intimidating in the firelight, but his presence created still more confusion. Ashley Pollock’s three-year-old daughter was charmed by Michael’s spear that looked like a scepter and his short frock decorated with gold. She whispered to Ashley, “Let’s go over and meet the queen!”

Other people kept referring to Michael as “the Roman centurion.” They were forgetting the story relayed to us in the book of Matthew. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were the ones who posted the guards, not the Romans. Having conspired with the Romans to have Jesus executed, they were worried that Jesus’ disciples might steal his body and stage a fake resurrection. So they asked the Pontius Pilate to post guards at Jesus’ tomb. Pilate’s reply was deliciously ironic. “Post your own guards,” he told them, “and make it as secure as you know how” (Matthew 27:65). Anyway, the point is that while Michael may

have *looked* like a centurion – or possibly the Queen of Sheba – he was *actually* a guard from the Jewish temple.

Every aspect of the long passion story is fascinating, but today we're zeroing in on Jesus' resurrection. Of course it's the best part, but it's also the most confusing part. That's true for us today, but it was also true for those who actually saw the Risen Lord. Looking at Easter as we do through the rearview mirror, we tend to think that the resurrection was something expected. But a close reading of the story reveals that the resurrection took everyone by surprise. Even Jesus's closest disciples were stunned when the Lord appeared to them. In fact, several of them continued to doubt until Jesus actually touched them, and ate with them, and explained to them what had happened in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures.

I remember as a teenager wondering how people like Mary and Martha, and Peter and John could have been so clueless. They'd seen Jesus perform breathtaking miracles, including raising people from the dead. And Jesus had revealed to them so many amazing things about himself – things that confirmed his identity as God's only Son, the invincible Savior of the world. To top it all off, Jesus had told them more than once, fairly plainly, that he was going to die, and that later he would return to them.

What I was forgetting, as a kid, was the horror and devastation of the crucifixion. All of Jesus' followers watched him die a slow, agonizing death as he hung on the cross. All of them saw his limp body fall to the ground when the nails were removed. That experience traumatized even the most stalwart among them. It shattered their vision of the future and their place in God's kingdom. It filled them with doubts about their master's true identity. In short, Christ's crucifixion and death extinguished their hope. At least for a time.

Even today, many people find Jesus' resurrection perplexing. That includes many of us who know the details of the Easter story, and who want very much to believe in Jesus. We know how the Bible explains it. Jesus' resurrection means that God is alive. It means that God in Christ forgives sins. It means that the tomb was empty and death was conquered by a victorious Savior – a Savior who was sent by God and who *is* God.

But those theological explanations seem kind of hazy. We don't know what we're supposed to do with them. We don't see how they answer the questions that haunt us from day to day. How do I find a way out of the darkness that so often surrounds me? What am I supposed to do with the guilt that I carry with me? Is there a higher meaning and purpose to my life? And let's assume Jesus really did come back to life. What does that have to do with me? How does Jesus' resurrection help me to overcome my failures and weaknesses? How does it enable me to escape death?

One of the reasons Jesus' resurrection is confusing is because it has no visible anchor points in our world. It was a unique event that can't be compared to any other event. We use various images to try to shed light on it, but what we notice about those images, when they're subjected to scrutiny, is that they're not very helpful. They tell us almost nothing about what happened in that tomb in the early morning hours of that third day.

The most obvious example is the Easter Bunny. I've been accused, quite unfairly, of trashing The Rabbit in two previous Easter messages. So I want to be clear: I'm all in favor of celebrating Easter with the eggs and peeps that he delivers. I'm all in favor of kids sharing their See's dark chocolate eggs with their pastor. My point is that the spiritual significance of bunnies, eggs and chicks is negligible. They remind us, as we're gorging ourselves, that new life in Jesus is sweet and abundant. But that's about as deep as it goes.

Easter turns many preachers into poets and romantics. Their message every year is that the true meaning of Christ's resurrection is revealed in the coming of spring, and in the images associated with spring. They describe how the death and resurrection of Jesus is reenacted each year as the cold of winter give way to the warmth of spring. Trees that seemed dead begin to leaf out. Fields that were barren are overtaken with flowers. Birds celebrate with their joyful songs of praise. And the underlying message – the congregation's take-away – is that maybe the world isn't such a bad place after all. Good things come to those who wait. Abundant blessings flow to those who put their trust in the Living God.

You might ask, "Well, what's wrong with that? We all need a reason to hope. And doesn't the Bible say that God blesses those who trust him?"

Yes, we need a reason to hope – one that's rooted in the truth. And yes, our gracious God promises to pour out his blessings on his faithful ones. But there are problems with this romantic vision of Easter.

One problem is that it minimizes and even conceals the predicament that life presents to us. We're all burdened by our sins. We're all struggling with a past that we can't erase, and with character flaws that we can't seem to mend. We all suffer in ways that test us to the limits of our strength. Then there's the looming issue of death. In the words of Dinesh D'Souza, death is the great wrecking ball that destroys everything in our lives. It's lovely to think about the cycle of life flowing through the seasons, but those thoughts only drive home the one great fact of our earthly life – that everything is temporary – that sooner or later, all is lost – and that that our only hope is that God will come down and save us.

Guilt, shame, brokenness, suffering and death: those are the things we're not supposed to talk about at Easter. We're supposed to talk instead about bunnies, chocolates, peeps, sunshine and flowers. But we can't lay hold of the new life that Christ has for us until we face the truth about our life apart from him. Yes, there's joy in the morning for those who love God. But it's the joy of those who have faced the darkness with their eyes wide open.

There's another problem that arises when we romanticize Easter. This problem is more subtle – it's harder to understand – and for that reason I think it's more dangerous. In a word, romantic visionaries see Jesus as a symbol. To them, Jesus is just one more symbol to add to the collection of symbols we use to make sense of the Christian story. Apples symbolize temptation. Mustard seeds symbolize God's word. Lit candles symbolize hope. Crosses symbolize Christ's victory over sin. And the Risen Christ symbolizes the beautiful, endless flow of life.

Let me be more specific. Romantic visionaries don't think of resurrection as a miracle where Jesus literally comes back from the dead and is filled with divine life. They don't see him as the Risen Christ who lives in a body, and will return one day in glory. Instead, they see him as one who lives on in the hearts and minds of those he left behind. They don't lean on him in times of trouble or confide in him as a personal friend. To them he's more of an idea. He's a symbol of God's goodness and beauty.

This understanding of resurrection is widely embraced around the world. It has captivated millions of people. But it twists and even negates what the Bible reveals to us. Jesus didn't "rise up like a spring flower in the hearts of his followers." Rather, his resurrection was a fact. He literally rose from the grave. His resurrection body was changed. It was utterly transformed into one that was fit for heaven. But it was still a body that you could see and touch.

It's so important for us to understand this point. In the Bible, the Risen Lord is not presented as a symbol. Jesus' disciples and friends didn't think of him as a symbol. Our Heavenly Father never spoke of his Son as a symbol. Our Lord Christ doesn't symbolize anything on earth. Rather, he's the living Word who spoke creation into being. Nor does our Lord symbolize anything in heaven. Rather, he's the very source of life. He created every creature in love. Every creature owes its life to him.

If all of this seems overwhelming and confusing to you, rest assured that you're not alone. People throughout history have tried to understand and even control God by giving him a name, and by turning him into a religious symbol. We see that happening in the ancient book of Exodus when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush.

"Go to Pharaoh and tell him to release the people of Israel," God tells him.

Moses reluctantly agrees to go. But he asks God, "When I speak with the Israelites, and they ask me your name, what should I tell them?"

It's a good question. Of course the people are going to want to know the name of their deliverer. They're going to want to know who it is that's calling them out of slavery.

God answers, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I am has sent me to you."

Jesus echoes his Father's words in the eighth chapter of John. Israel's religious leaders are trying to figure out who Jesus is. Some of them think he's a demon-possessed Samaritan. Others wonder if he might actually be Israel's Messiah.

Jesus blows them all away with words that only create more confusion. He tells them that their spiritual father, Abraham, rejoiced at the thought of seeing him.

They object, "You aren't even fifty years old. How can you have seen Abraham?"

And Jesus answers, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"

The message in Exodus and in John is that God won't be boxed in. He won't be defined by us. He won't let us gut him of his power by turning him into a symbol that helps us cope with our daily life. He's our one and only hope for salvation. He's the one who calls us out of darkness, out of slavery, out of our suffering and pain, and into his marvelous light.

In a word, Jesus is life.

If that revelation is confusing to us, the problem lies with us and not with God. We have to face the darkness before we can walk into the light. We have to experience the pain of our sin and suffering before we can embrace the forgiveness God offers us in Christ. We have to comprehend the hopelessness of our life apart from God before we can embrace his new life.

Then, finally, joy comes flooding in – unspeakable joy – the joy of eternal life – the joy of the Risen Lord.

Maybe the Lord has been knocking on the door of your heart this morning. Maybe it's time for you to open the door and receive his Easter gift to you – new life, sweet, abundant life, life that never ends.