

## **“The Good Lord”**

### **Matthew 28: 1-10**

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn  
of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene  
and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

And behold, there was a great earthquake;  
for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven,  
came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.

His appearance was like lightning,  
and his clothing white as snow.

And for fear of him  
the guards trembled and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, "You need not be afraid;  
for I know that you are looking for Jesus  
who was crucified.

He is not here; for he has been raised, 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. For, I have told you so."

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear  
and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

And behold, there coming to meet them was Jesus,  
and he said, Greetings!"

And they came up and took hold of his feet  
and worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid;  
go and tell my sisters and brothers to go to Galilee,  
and there they will see me."

## **The Good Lord**

Matthew 28:1-10

April 9, 2023

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

### **I.**

Well, this certainly is a tremendous occasion for celebration, with this remarkable story set before us on such a lovely spring day. What more could we ask for on Easter Sunday morning!?!

I am always shocked how the eternity that is winter seems to give way to full-blown spring in such a snap and at one fell swoop. Sometimes, it seems to happen as if overnight; which was literally the case this past week. Following the Maundy Thursday Service, I drove out to the cottage so I could wake up early on Friday, Good Friday, and write this sermon. I arrived at 9 p.m. and, after unloading the truck, walked down toward the lake only to find that it was still ice-covered. Not a big surprise, but disappointing nonetheless as I'm itching to get my boat in the water and go out fishing for Lake Trout while the lake is still ice-cold and such fish are up high in the water column and more easily caught.

### **II.**

Imagine my surprise, then, to awaken Friday morning at dawn and look out my bedroom window to discover gentle waves rippling open water. I can only imagine the feeling was similar, in some lesser measure, to what Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (probably the mother of James and Joseph) experienced upon arriving at the tomb of their recently crucified friend, Jesus, only to find the stone rolled back from the entrance, the tomb empty, and the body of Jesus nowhere to be found. Poof! Gone! Like ice off the lake.

Of course, I *expect* the ice to go out every year, usually the week on either side of April 1st, which is the opening day of Trout season. The two Marys, however, had no such expectation *whatsoever*, reasonable or otherwise; dead is *dead*. As they, themselves, had witnessed first hand, there was no question about it: Jesus had died up on that cross just three days before and had been laid to rest in this very place.

### III.

If that was not enough to make heavy their hearts, let alone blow their minds, an angel appears to them and says: *You need not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.* While I am sure such news did much to ease their troubled hearts, my guess is they became completely untethered from whatever semblance of reality they had been clinging.

Then, in this state of full-blown disconnection from the laws that govern the universe, they ran to tell the other disciples only to happen upon Jesus, himself, there on the road coming to meet them, in the flesh, and he said, "Greetings!" At that point, reason must have failed them. Rather than taking a moment to *think* about it, however, to process what was happening, they just simply *reacted*. Joy overcame them and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid."

### IV.

I don't know about you, but at that point fear would have been pretty far down the list of the things about which I needed assuaging. My first reaction would have been stunned disbelief, followed by a profound puzzlement, and finished off with a hint of incredulity. I mean, let's be honest with ourselves, the story of Easter strains the limits of human imagination and calls into question every assumption and understanding upon which we base our lives. In short, Easter is simply too big of an idea to fit within the confines of the human mind and our bodily experience of the world.

First, there is the notion of being raised from the dead. How does *that* happen!?! Second, what are the ramifications of such a thing *actually* occurring; both in the grand scheme of the universe, but also with respect to our individual lives? Good questions to be sure. I'm not convinced, though, if I can answer them here this morning. Which is at least one part of what we are here to do this day.

### V.

This past Tuesday, my alarm roused me from slumber at 3 a.m. By 4:15 a.m. I was in my car and headed south toward Watertown and Syracuse, then west to Buffalo. Just before 10 a.m. I arrived at Nativity of the Lord R.C.

Church in the suburb of Orchard Park to attend the funeral mass for 97 year old Joseph H. Foyle; my high school football coach. Coach Foyle, more often referred to simply as “The Coach” by the 1000s of men whose lives he so positively impacted, was a Veteran and member of our nation’s Greatest Generation, and a person of immense integrity, devotion and character. The Coach literally changed the direction of my life, and the lives of my two brothers as well. More succinctly, Coach Foyle *gave* me a life. So much so, that at the occasion of my ordination as a minister, on the back of the bulletin I thanked my parents, my grandmother and Coach Foyle; all of whom were present at the service that day.

## **VI.**

To say Joe Foyle coached football would be incorrect. Rather, he used football to coach life. This, and a great many other related things, are what occupied my mind as I made the 10 hour round trip drive down and back to Buffalo last Tuesday. The week before, upon hearing of his death, I immediately decided I would try to attend the service. That said, it was now Holy Week and there is always too much to do so the timing was not great. Moreover, I did not need 30 years of ministry to tell me that it was not going to matter to Coach Foyle if I was there at his funeral or not. It would matter to *me*, however, and so I went.

Just the same, though, it made me wonder *why* it mattered so much to me to be in attendance; and, of course, I had a great deal of time to ponder this. However, the answer came rather quickly, immediately in fact: respect and gratitude. Respect for what he had done with *his* life, and gratitude for what he had done for *my* life.

## **VII.**

My sense is, all of us here today share a similar sense of respect for Jesus and what he did with his life; and, this is the reason we have all gathered together here this Easter morning. We understand the magnitude of the moment, and so we’ve donned our Sunday best, our Easter bonnets, and got ourselves out the door and down to church. Respect, though, is the easier part of the equation; the pass/fail option, if you will. The notion of gratitude is where the more nuanced, letter grading comes into play; with it’s pluses and minuses. So, for these last few minutes, I would invite us to explore the notion gratitude.

We began today's sermon acknowledging this remarkable story being retold on such lovely spring day on this tremendous occasion for celebration. I then asked the rhetorical question, what *more* could we ask for on Easter Sunday morning? Instead of asking more of Easter, though, I would now suggest that we ask *less*.

## VIII.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that the story of Easter is all together mind blowing. Like the two Marys, our hearts are made heavy in remembering Christ's suffering and death on the cross as he atoned for the sin of the world. We marvel at the mystery of the empty tomb and the miracle of Christ being raised from the dead only to be found, later, walking on the road to greet us in our lives; just as he greeted the two Marys.

Though the story of Easter is one which tells of God's profound love for this world, for all practical purposes it is a story which is just too big for our brains. The notion of someone, even the son of God, being resurrected defies rational thought, violates the laws that govern the universe, and contradicts our bodily experience of the world in which we live. As such, the story of Easter invites us to suspend our disbelief and enter the realm of faith; which exists beyond the bounds of reason and science.

## IX.

While we may never know the mechanics of *how* someone is raised from the dead, let alone fully grasp the ramifications of the resurrection in the grand scheme of the universe or with respect to our individual lives, I would, nevertheless, challenge us to consider that fully *understanding* the gift is not a prerequisite to *receiving* the gift or simply *appreciating* that a gift was given. As I explained to the kids this morning sometimes we get too focused on the specifics of the gift, and lose sight of the fact that a gift was given and by whom.

This is my 30th Easter sermon. For the past 29 years I've struggled mightily to encapsulate this story so that, together, we might wrap our minds around the suffering of the cross, the empty tomb, and a person raised from the dead to be the Savior of the world. This year, though, I thought I would try a different approach: to ask *less* of Easter; and, by extension, to ask less of you. This morning, I ask not for understanding, but, rather, for gratitude.

## **X.**

Though we may have come here today out of an appropriate sense of respect for the day, I'm quite sure each one of us also has much for which we might harbor a deep and profound sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the beauty and bounty of this earth, and for the coming of Spring (at last). Gratitude for the privilege of living in a nation where freedom still rings, self-determination is possible, and opportunity nevertheless abounds. Gratitude for the right to believe and to worship not only in sanctuaries all across this land, but in mosques, synagogues, and temples as well. Gratitude for the blessings of family, hearth, home, and health. Gratitude for the wonder of children, the wiliness of youth, and the wisdom of our elders. Gratitude for those people in our lives who, with integrity, devotion and character, have guided, nurtured and coached us. Gratitude for a God who so loved the world that he gave his Son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Gratitude that even though we may not necessarily understand the *full* scope or measure of God's gift at Easter, we may receive it just the same. Gratitude that while we may not necessarily *expect* it, Jesus does, indeed, meet us even now on the road of our lives.

If we want to share in the mystery of Easter, *thinking* about it will only take us so far. Instead, let us begin with that sense of gratitude which already abides within our very own hearts and simply *react* to it. A gratitude so wild, so unbridled, so vast that it strains the limits of our imagination, calls into question all reasonable assumptions and alters the very understanding upon which we shall forevermore base our lives.

## **XI.**

I would like to end today with a Coach Foyle story. Turns out, The Coach was a devout Catholic; like a Daily Mass kind of Catholic. Which is something I learned only later in life. In fact, when I was in high school I remember only three circumstances where any form of religiosity whatsoever was evoked. The first circumstance was in the end zone prior to the start of every game, when we would all take a knee and we'd pray for safety, sportsmanship and that each player might do their best. The second was when I, or another, failed to make a block or a tackle. In this circumstance, the word "God" was used as part of a rather emphatic expression of exasperation; usually coupled with a water retention structure.

The third circumstance, though, was the one I will ever remember. The Coach would always use the same phrase whenever he was thanked for what he did, feted for all he accomplished, or asked about whatever the future might hold. The Good Lord allowed me, the Good Lord made it possible, the Good Lord willing. This day, on Easter, if you find you cannot quite wrap your mind around the "Lord" part of it, that's fine. All we really need to do is hold the "Good" part in our heart and the rest will surely follow. Amen.