

The Zone Of Totality

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,
Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw
that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple,
the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them,
“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,
and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Then Peter and the other disciple
set out and went toward the tomb.

The two were running together, but the other disciple
outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings
lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him,
and went into the tomb.

He saw the linen wrappings lying there,
and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head,
not lying with the linen wrappings
but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first,
also went in, and he saw and believed;
for as yet they did not understand the scripture,
that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;
and she saw two angels in white,
sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying,
one at the head and the other at the feet.

They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord,
and I do not know where they have laid him."

When she had said this, she turned around
and saw Jesus standing there,
but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you looking for?"

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him,
"Sir, if you have carried him away,
tell me where you have laid him,
and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him
in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me,
because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my brothers and say to them,
'I am ascending to my Father and your Father,
to my God and your God.' "

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,
"I have seen the Lord";
and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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John 20:1-18

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Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

(Theme from the Twilight Zone playing.)

Consider if you will, a woman; she stands weeping and in mourning before the tomb of a beloved, crucified, dead and buried. Then, in that moment, he appears to her alive but unascended; a traveler on the way to his God and to hers. She enters another dimension; a dimension not only of sight and sound but of flesh and spirit. Together, they embark upon a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of faith. There's a signpost up ahead: you've just crossed over into the *Zone of Totality*!

II.

I *know*, pretty dramatic, right? Nowhere near as dramatic, though, as this past week: first the triumphant ride into Jerusalem, then the final supper and the washing of the feet of his friends, the testing in the garden, the trial, the trudge, the tribulation and agony of the cross and, in a surprising twist of plot, the climax and resolve arrives with an empty tomb and the appearance of the Risen Lord. How can we understand Easter as anything less than the pilot episode of the *Zone of Totality*?

Sorry, but with the impending arrival of a total solar eclipse a week from tomorrow, I simply could not pass up my once in a life time opportunity to entitle a sermon, "The Zone of Totality"; and it comes at Easter, no less. Actually, according to Dr. Eileen O'Donoghue's very wonderful eclipse [video](#) (SLU website) the last total solar eclipse in Canton occurred Sept. 19, 1569, while the next is Aug. 2, 2399; making this is a once in 10 life times event.

III.

Make no mistake about it, our soon to be experienced total solar eclipse is projected to be a *very* big deal. I saw an article on the North Country Now website that St. Lawrence County is expected to receive an influx of anywhere from 50k to 150k "astrophiles" keen to observe the celestial phenomenon. I

also saw that the New York State Troopers are encouraging we who are “locals” to fill up our gas tanks beforehand ahead of a possible shortage, and to avoid the roads that day. While I can hardly envision Route 11 being choked with traffic reminiscent of the Thruway during Woodstock, I think we can all agree that *any* kind of traffic jam here in St. Lawrence County would be a very rare and unusual sight indeed. Suffice to say, these will be strange days for the North Country. Regardless of what *might* happen, whatever actually *does* happen is going to be fun at the very least, if not outright remarkable; very exciting!

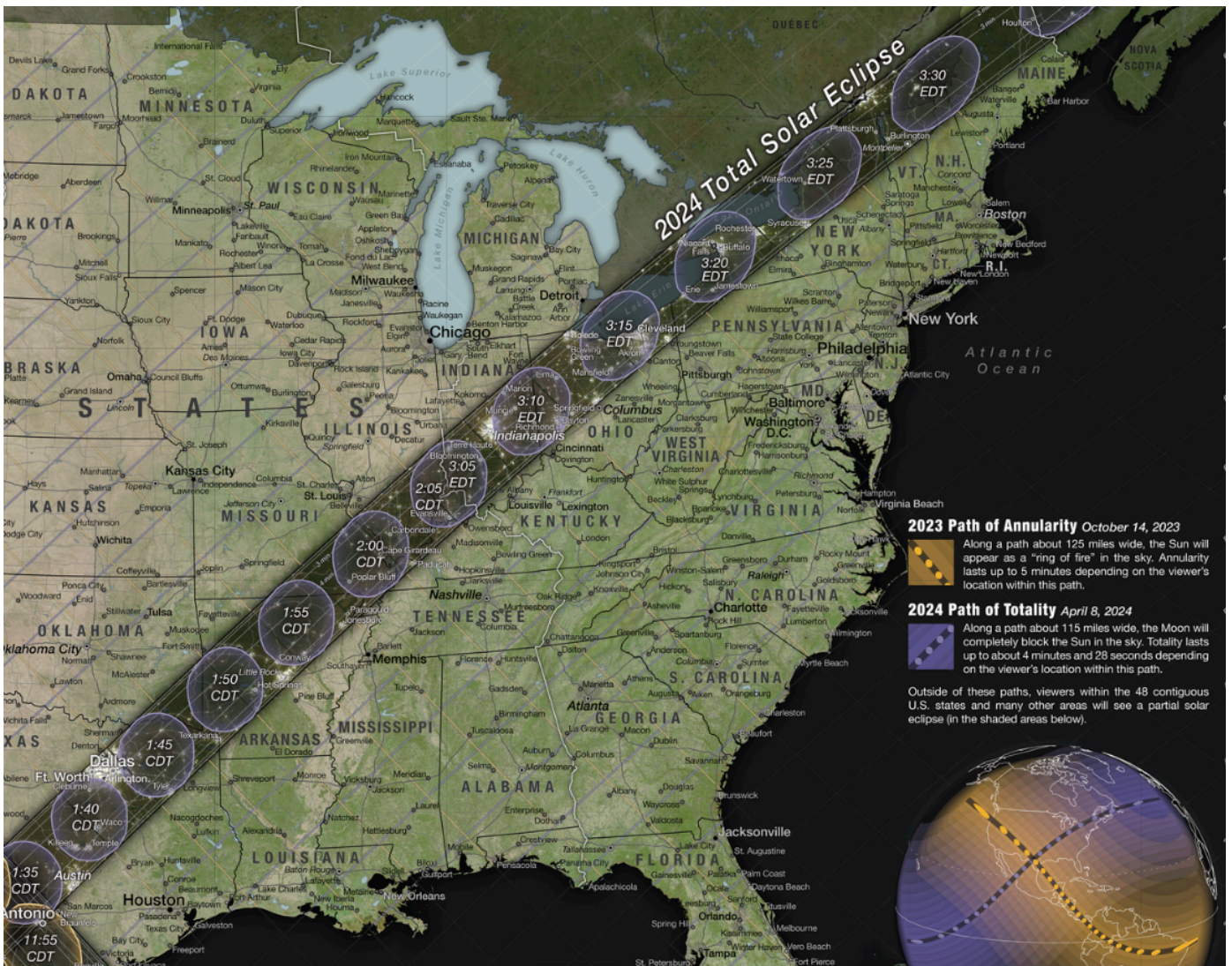
IV.

Several months ago, when all the hoo-ha started about the total solar eclipse, two things happened. First, Linda got on-line and ordered a bunch of NASA approved Eclipse Glasses; sufficiently dark enough to protect one’s eyes from a light so bright that it is too much for us to directly look upon it. The other thing that happened, was that the wordsmith in me was struck by the term, “the Zone of Totality”; which I find to be a fascinating concept.

To review the science, a solar eclipse occurs when the Moon passes between the Sun and the Earth, allowing the Moon's long, thin shadow to intersect the Earth's surface. The shadow comprises two concentric cones called the “penumbra” and “umbra.” For observers on the Earth who are within the larger penumbra, the Sun is only partially blocked. Observers within the smaller, central umbra, the Sun will be completely blocked; this is what is called “the Zone of Totality.”

V.

Beginning at around 2:35 p.m. EST the Zone of Totality will begin to be experienced by folks in Austin, Texas. The zone will then move, almost directly NE in a line called the “Path of Totality” over Little Rock, Arkansas to Muncie, Indiana to Akron, Ohio to Buffalo, New York then onto Rochester, Syracuse, Watertown and, then, to Canton. (See NASA map [here](#).). While a partial eclipse will begin in Canton at 2:11:39 p.m., the Zone of Totality will not arrive here until 3:23:53 p.m. having taken about an hour to travel diagonally across the U.S. from Austin. Our experience of the Zone of Totality will last 3 minutes and 1.9 seconds; with the partial eclipse lasting here for 2 hours and 27 minutes, until 4:37:13 p.m.



Now, here is an important thing to remember: one's experience of the eclipse is a *function* of one's particular *perspective*. So, depending on your viewing *location* within St. Lawrence County, these times will vary slightly. Fortunately, the County Chamber of Commerce has a viewing [timetable](#) on their website so you can be sure you catch the entire show.

VI.

I don't know about you, but what I find so amazing is that with a just few clicks we can determine, to a fraction of a second, when and where on earth all this will occur so that we can all be on-hand to observe it. Remember, what we are watching is actually taking place 238,855 miles away, for the moon, and 150 *million* miles away for the sun.

Now imagine living 100s or 1,000's of years ago, and going about your business with absolutely *no* inkling that an eclipse was about to happen, or that such a thing was even *possible*. Then, one day the sky begins to darken with the sun being increasingly obscured until, finally, it is blocked out *completely* and, unbeknownst to you, you have entered the Zone of Totality. Meaning, the light from the sun is gone from this world and your life, and you have no idea *what* the heck is happening. You are literally, *in the dark*. Worse, for those few minutes of the total eclipse, you have no reason to believe that the sun is *ever* going to return. Your *entire* understanding of the world has come undone.

VII.

Which is exactly the same situation Mary Magdalene faced that first Easter when she stood weeping outside the empty tomb, except the darkness which met her was figurative; as in the figure of her friend Jesus being missing from the tomb. Standing there, she had *zero* expectation that the one she had come to believe to be the Son of God would *ever* be coming back. Then, suddenly, there he was standing there, saying, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" And, slowly, the sun began to reappear in the sky, and the light pervaded the world.

Regardless of how great our knowledge of scripture, or how deep our faith, the greatest challenge of Easter is experiencing it for ourselves. Don't get me wrong, all the traditions, rituals and interpretations of Easter are great, but they are only ever from the perspective of looking at it backwards through time.

VIII.

As a preacher, my ability to convey the meaning, significance and impact of Easter goes about as far as the ability of *someone* to relate someone *else's* experience of an eclipse to you. While you can certainly get a *sense* of it, unless you are experiencing it for yourself it is simply impossible to fully comprehend. Unfortunately, this puts us in kind of a bind, doesn't it? Short of the invention of a time machine, how can we fully understand Easter (let alone experience it for ourselves) since, to the best of our knowledge, this was a once in the history of the world kind of event? (A head-scratcher to be sure.)

When I began today's sermon, I told you this eclipse is a once-in-a-lifetime experience; or, a once in an 830 year experience for those living in Canton. However, I have come to discover that *world wide* solar eclipses (in some form or another***) occur fairly frequently; on average, every 18 months or so. Whether we see and experience them, however, is a function of where we are standing; it all depends on our perspective.

IX.

Every year at Easter, as we have done for 2000 years, we gather as the followers of Christ to celebrate his resurrection from the dead. While that is remarkable, in and of itself, *why* he did it, and what he *accomplished* in having done so, is the true profundity:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

Got it; check. That said, this is merely *someone* relating someone *else's* experience of the resurrection; we should desire more. The "more" we should desire, is to have our very *own* experience of that first Easter morning, right here in this day, in this age and, moreover, in our very own lives.

X.

What I am here to tell you this morning, is that such a thing is possible. Like a solar eclipse, the resurrection is actually happening all the time; however, our experience of it depends on where we are standing: geographically with respect to an eclipse, and spiritually in terms of one's faith with respect to the resurrection. Rooted in the science, or in the theology, how could we ever expect them not to be?

I have been doing parish ministry for over 30 years now. What I can tell you with absolute certainty is that each and every one of us will endure our own experience of the Zone of Totality. When, like Mary Magdalene, we will stand outside ourselves awash in darkness and uncertainty. Such a moment is frightening, disorientating, and, oh, so very humbling.

XI.

Once we enter the Zone of Totality we are confronted with the realization that *everything* we have come to believe, or thought we knew, means *nothing*. It is a *whole* new ballgame, people. I have seen it, I have watched it happen, it has happened to me, and it will happen to you as well (if it has not already).

At such a point in one's life, it is a good news/bad news kind of situation. The good news is we get a choice. The bad news is it is a very hard choice to make; not just the first time, but it is a choice we have to *keep* on making. This, in a word, is called "Faith."

Now, to be clear, such a faith is *not* something we muster, or imagine, or dream up, or work at tirelessly all the days of our lives. Faith is a *gift* we must first accept and receive, and *then* work at tirelessly all the days of our life...to ENJOY!; because *enjoying* the gift is the best way to *keep* the gift, and it is the best way to *share* the gift.

XII.

This morning, I would invite us to take a lesson from Mary Magdalene. On that day when we, too, find ourselves in the Zone of Totality and are plunged into darkness by the events of the world and by what we ourselves are experiencing, let us not simply shrug our shoulders and, as did the other disciples at the tomb that day, simply return to our homes and our old ways of understanding ourselves and the world in which we live.

Instead, let us linger in, and grow in our faith that God does so love the world; that we might allow ourselves to be delivered from such darkness so as to receive the joy of a great light, a divine light, which will literally illuminate the whole world: the love of God to be found in Jesus Christ. Alleluia, Christ has risen, and such a love is, now, lifting us forever more out of every darkness.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

(John 8:12)

Amen.

*** There are different kinds of solar eclipses; click [here](#) for more info:

“Total” like the one next week.

“Annular” when the Moon
appears smaller than the Sun
so it does not completely cover the Sun.

“Partial” when the Sun, Moon, and Earth
are not perfectly lined up
and only a part of the Sun will be covered.

And, “Hybrid” when an eclipse shifts
between annular and total
as the Moon’s shadow moves across the globe.