Scripture

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Matthew 28:1-10

New International Version (NIV)

Poem: “Beginners” by Denise Levertov

‘From too much love of living,  
Hope and desire set free,  
Even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere to the sea—‘

But we have only begun  
to love the earth.

We have only begun  
to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
—we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision
how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.

Introduction

1. Springtime in Minnesota often feels like a small and sometimes non-existent blip between winter and summer. This year, the combination of a warmer than usual March and the COVID-19 “Stay-at-home” order beginning on March 29 has felt like one of the most elongated Spring seasons in recent Minnesota memory!
One of the springtime traditions in the Collison Household is to long for the flowering crabapple tree in our front yard to bloom. This video was taken on Palm Sunday with a morning temperature of 28 degrees Fahrenheit, and the ice barely being out on the nearby lakes. So, there is still some wait ahead to see the annual, and beautiful bloom!

2. For the curious—the Flowering Crabapple is a popular ornamental tree native to the Northern Hemisphere.\(^1\) Its blossoms appear in April and May announcing the arrival of spring with pink and white flourishes of color. The Crabapple tree is closely related to apple trees but has much smaller fruit.

The small red apples provide ornamental beauty to the tree year round because some of it remains on the branches even through the winter months when it is frozen and withered.

It is striking to see the tethered grip of crabapple fruit clinging to its’ tree’s branches despite the force of gravity’s insistence, high winds, and frozen brittleness. The crabapple fruit’s primary vocation is waiting…

\(^1\) http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/garden/07424.html AND http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malus (accessed 4-11-14)
...like this photo I took of our crabapple tree on Monday, March 23 as our physical distancing expectation was really beginning to show in our neighborhood with no traffic and few people moving about. I was captivated by how our tree waits for spring...with a sort of haunting and still beauty until the warmth of the spring sun awakens the tree’s roots, trunk, branches, and twigs in order to invoke the creation of new crabapple buds on the same twig as the expired fruit. Slowly and gracefully the withered crabapple fruit is released from its branch to return to the ground from which it had come and complete the full cycle of life, death, and renewal. And, in all of the seasons, the tree provides fruit to wildlife and the ground, willingly and faithfully.

3. Today, on this virtual Easter Sunday, we celebrate with hundreds of millions of people around the world the most important of all Christian remembrances because, as the Apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the Early Church in the Roman province of Corinth, “if Christ has not been raised from the dead our faith is useless and we are to be pitied among all people.”

Easter is the pinnacle of this week and all of the days and events leading up to the first Easter are critically important to relive as well. They are important because, like the life, death, and renewal of the fruit of the Crabtree and all living things, the events of the first Holy Week invite us to relive the exuberant joyfulness, the profound disappointments, and the surprise turn of events such that they awaken us to God’s ongoing renewal in all things, including our own individual lives and during a time of global pandemic.

4. The Pandemic has felt to many, like a profound reset with life on the other side of this point in time never being the same as life before this moment. The first Easter was a moment reset as well. To that point, in Jesus’ religion and elsewhere, it was the norm to pay back eye-for-eye-tooth-for-tooth, shed blood for the forgiveness of sins, and pay religious leaders to do certain actions and rituals in order to be reconciled to God. The resurrection of Jesus marked a new epicenter and pivot in human history. No more retribution. No more shedding of blood. No money for forgiveness. Reconciliation with God is through faith alone. Grace and love are the new law. And, compassion, mercy and justice are the new ethic.

5. The “resurrection reset” has real and day to day implications for Christ followers because, as we see in today’s Scripture and all of the final chapter of Matthew’s biography of Jesus—those who believed in the resurrection and considered themselves followers of Jesus were instructed to teach and embody all that Jesus taught. That is an immensely difficult task because we live in a world of good and evil that is scary at times. Fear holds us back from taking the kinds of risk necessary to love everyone including our enemies. Fear holds us back from standing against the

---

2 1 Corinthians 15:14.
injustices of our world. Jesus and the events of the first Easter help curb our fears and infuse us with courage and surprisingly—joy.

6. The resurrection of Jesus was recorded in all four gospel biographies (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) each with slightly different points of emphasis. Matthew’s account included an emphasis on the theme of fear. Matthew noted that the tomb guards were so afraid that “they shook and became like dead men.”³ When the two women disciples (both named Mary) arrived very early in the morning they encountered an angel and (because seeing an angel is highly unconventional) the very first thing the angel said was, “do not be afraid.”⁴

Matthew recounted that the women hurried away from the tomb “afraid yet filled with joy” and as they ran to tell the others, suddenly Jesus appeared to them, and the first thing he said was, “do not be afraid...”⁵

On this Easter, while facing a global pandemic two thousand years after the angel and Jesus said, “do not be afraid”—our hearts still burn with wonder and anticipation as we think about and embody the reality of Christ’s resurrection, and hear those words again today—Do. Not. Be. Afraid. And, like the reality of the women, we take that advice, mix it up with a very natural response of fear and yet see a deeper invitation than a fear response. Our invitation is to see the death and resurrection of Jesus as God’s timeless pattern that gives us the means to transcend the effects of fear, awaken to love, and to spread God’s limitless joy.

First, let’s look at some of what it means to transcend the effects of fear.

A. Transcending the Effects of Fear

1. The women of the first Easter were afraid when seeing an angel and a risen Christ. For certain, they were the most courageous of those following Jesus and still, they were afraid. It was the women disciples who stayed with Jesus through the entirety of his suffering, crucifixion and death. Everyone else either hid, fled, or denied knowing Jesus, for fear they would be captured and killed with Jesus. How did the women have the courage to do, what so few others were willing to do? What gave them the courage to transcend or go beyond the effects of fear in their lives?

2. Well, for one, they were women! Historically, men have gotten a lot of airtime in the Easter narrative. I am drawn to the women in the Easter narrative because of both how the Gospel biographers consistently mention them, and the role that women have played since the origins of the human experience. Since the beginning of there even being what we call “women” and “men,” it has been women alone who have endured the strains of birthing. For thousands of years it has been women who have navigated societies around the globe with their rights and standing stripped away by oppressive societies and systems. And, even today women continue to face unthinkable physical abuse at the hands of men. And yet, consistently women prove to be courageous and resilient in the face of oppression and fear.

3. The women who followed Jesus around the events of the first Easter were prime examples of such resilience. And, they transcended the effects of their fear largely because of their expansive

³ Matthew 28:4.
⁴ Matthew 28:5.
⁵ Matthew 28:8-10.
love of Christ and others. Most expressly in their actions. Gospel biographer Luke tells us that they moved with Jesus every step of the passion week and, were the first to be at the tomb on Easter Sunday to administer the spices they had prepared for Jesus’ body.\textsuperscript{6} Despite the horrific crucifixion and intimidating presence of Roman guards the women always stayed close to Jesus for the purpose of solidarity and to be an attending presence. There was little they could solve or change about the circumstances around them. And, they were engulfed in fear just as every Christ follower was in the chaos of the first Holy Week. Yet, the women were not immobilized by their fear. They were compelled to be present and attending by the force of their nurturing love.

Oh, how much all of humanity needs to embrace the qualities that these women exhibited on that first Easter. And, it speaks to all of us right now, in a moment when so much is out of our control.

4. In our day to day lives most of us are asking questions such as “How many more people are going to die?”, “Is someone I love going to die?” “Will I die?” and even “How much longer will we have to live like this?” We can’t help but feel sequestered physically, emotionally, and quite possibly spiritually as well. Western culture and American life have taught us that being in control of our job, finances and personal destiny are nearly unquestionable rights and attainable moral values. Yet, no such aspirations are a match for the reality that, as one publication put it, “all data is incomplete and all conclusions are subject to change.”\textsuperscript{7} Beloved friends, we are not in control.

5. Strangely, admitting that fact, and constantly reminding ourselves of that fact, is a starting point for living life that transcend the effects of fear. Doing so makes us available to the power of love. The women of the first Easter showed us how to do this. They were “afraid yet filled with joy” because they gave themselves to the idea that everything was ultimately out of their control and free from needing to control, they let themselves be awakened and compelled by love.

B. Awakened to Love

1. I give witness to this kind of courage and love flowing 2,000 years after the first Easter and during a unique season in the life of this congregation. 2019 was the year we celebrated Easter in April and in June we had another experience that felt very “Easter-Like.” June 30\textsuperscript{th} was the first Sunday of the week after this beloved community was cast out of the family of churches that we had been a part of since 1885. The reason we were removed is because we refused to follow denominational policies that exclude LGBTQ members from equal standing. And, despite our best efforts, and the remarkable efforts of so many allies in the denomination, we were unsuccessful in convincing a majority of Annual Meeting delegates to re-consider equality for an entire group of people whom God loves and considers equal regardless of Christian religious tradition’s majority rule voting machinations.

2. The Evangelical Covenant Church denomination is no different than other Christian denominations. Denominations are good at creating religious systems and catechisms along with retirement accounts and property trusts. But, when institutions get to a point where they have the need to protect themselves over all else, the teachings of Jesus inevitably get compromised. And,

\textsuperscript{6} Luke 24:1
\textsuperscript{7} https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/fog-pandemic/608764/?utm_source=newletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=masthead-newsletter&utm_content=20200404&silverid=NDU3MjQ0NDU2M0ybS0 (Accessed 4-4-20)

"Easter: Afraid, yet filled with joy" © 2020 Dan Collison Page 6
unless there is a humble recognition and admission of this truth, every Christian institution will go down the path of choosing itself over everything else, including Jesus.

3. The Apostle Paul believed that Christ’s love is so expansive that it surpasses human knowledge. The depth of the expressions of those who have loved others for the sake of Christ through the ages happens despite institutions that serve themselves and is proof of the resurrected Christ in our world. And, its seen in individuals—women and men, young and old, who have sacrificed all they have in love of others. They have cared for the diseased when no one else would. They have brought aid and literacy to places few would go. They have set aside lucrative careers and comfortable lifestyles to share their education and experience with people who can never repay them monetarily. They have challenged social convention, given up personal ordinations and faced the shame of exclusion to write a more just story line with race relations, gender equality and the sacred identity of LGBTQ identified people.

4. Why do Christ followers subject themselves to so much danger and ridicule? Because incredible joy awaits those who have given themselves to God’s love of all things and all people, no matter the cost. Once we experience the generosity and openness of God’s love for everyone, it is freedom! There is something that needs to be said about this freedom, though. Jesus warned his first followers that the love of God is so big and not contained or controlled by religious traditions, that it would cause the division of things as big as religious traditions and as intimate as family units. For our community, the cost of love and inclusion was religious affiliation and some families and relationships as well. Yet, in the end there was a unique Easter kind of joy waiting for us on the other side of character assassination, systematic intimidation, and ultimately, exclusion.

What do I mean and how can any of this be “joyful”?

C. Spreading the Joy of God

1. First, I believe that the word “joy” is largely mis-understood in our time and is relegated to almost exclusively positive experiences. We think of birthday parties and concerts as “joyful” experiences. And, yet in Scripture and the Christian tradition the concept of joy doesn’t step joy away from happiness and pleasure, but it does ground joy as an experience that is most intensely felt when placed in proximity to difficulties and overcoming kinds of experiences.

One of the most famous New Testament verses speaking to this is in the book of Hebrews where Christ followers are exhorted to:

“…run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1b-3. NIV

2. The “race” marked out for our community of faith was to advocate for the rights and sacred identity of our LGBTQ friends, siblings, parents and grandparents because they were being denied a

---

8 Ephesians 3:19.
place in our churches. The shame that the leaders of our community were subject to at the hand of the denominational leaders was astonishing. On Thursday of the last week in June 2019 in Omaha, Nebraska, me and another pastor were paraded in front of 500 of our peers where the rules of our trial were established last minute and then changed while we were out of the room. Clergy were given permission to speak whatever was on their mind, specious or otherwise, with us not being able to either be in the room or respond to accusation. The outcome was inevitable.

Friday was the day that our relationships were shattered when the popular opinion rejected all of us, and told us to leave. After the vote against First Covenant Church, about two hundred Covenant pastors and delegates left the convention center and limped our way to a nearby church…

…that generously offered its space to us to lament, hold, and support one another. Later that night my spouse Holly and I caught our breath in the first quiet moments we had all week. Our emotional state was somewhere between total disorientation to a beautiful and deep seeded sense of peace. We were so deeply grateful to have a Savior and a faith that models the Easter truth that death is never the end…and the “in-between” is never the end as well!

3. Sunday, June 30, was a remarkable moment few will forget. It felt like an Easter. It was a moment to recognize the personification of the Hebrews Scripture where so many brave souls from the First Covenant Community “ran the race marked out before us, and for the joy set before us.” And, it seemed as if our community was transported back to the first Easter where the first Christ followers were suddenly thrown into shock and transformation. I think that many of you would agree with me that beyond shock and transformation the leading sense of our Easter-like moment was also “being afraid and yet filled with joy” because we knew that we were flowing in God’s timeless pattern of death and resurrection because of God’s limitless love.

Conclusion

1. I began speaking of the life, death, and renewal of the flowering Crabtree in its annual cycle. My purpose for choosing that specific illustration is because this Easter is unlike any in previous memory. On so many past Easters we have come together in large gatherings and then went out into an emerging Minnesota spring-scape. This Easter has more of a waiting feel. Waiting for the Pandemic to be over. Waiting for those who are sick to recover. Waiting for the corrections and recovery of our economy, and the return to schools. And, for millions who are suddenly without

“Easter: Afraid, yet filled with joy” © 2020 Dan Collison Page 8
work—a paycheck. And, as I read in an article recently, our “…waiting, like hoping, demands an object.”

2. To me, the Crabtree represents an Easter object lesson in hope and God’s limitless joy because while the tree seems to be in a season of disorientation and clinging to past fruit, a future spring season will emerge and present itself to her branches. The invitation to Christ followers on this Easter and all kinds of Easters that may appear in the flow of our lives and congregational life—is to work toward not fearing physical death, institutional frailties, or frailties of all kinds because even when things fall apart, there is always a new beginning at hand. Jesus shows us that in the first Easter. With God and with the Easter promise--waiting is our season of transformation where we know that death is never an end, it is always a beginning.

Prayer

God of all, Jesus Christ God’s Son, Holy Spirit, three in One—On this Easter Sunday we pray that the power with which your rose Jesus from the dead is the same power that you enliven our lives no matter the circumstances that surround us. Jesus Christ, lover of our souls, teach us how to embody your expansive love. Holy Spirit set our hearts aflame with joyful courage to live compassionate, merciful and just lives.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Benediction

As our week now begins…may we see the death and resurrection of Jesus as God’s timeless pattern to transcend the effects of fear, awaken to love, and to spread God’s limitless joy.

He has Risen. He has Risen indeed!

Amen. Go in Peace.

---


“Easter: Afraid, yet filled with joy” © 2020 Dan Collison Page 9