

## 2023 04 09 – Awe and Great Joy

**Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10** (The Inclusive Bible)

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning,  
Mary of Magdala came with Mary to inspect the tomb.

In every version of the Easter story, it is the women who come to the tomb on Sunday morning. Mary of Magdala, also known as Mary Magdalene, is always there. The other women vary. In the Gospel of Matthew she is accompanied by another Mary identified earlier in the story as the mother of James and Joseph. Could this other Mary be the mother of Jesus? Could James and Joseph be his brothers? Maybe. We're not sure.

What we do know is that the women came early, just as the sun was dawning. The other gospels suggest that they came bearing spices or perfumed oils to anoint Jesus' body. This would have been part of their funeral rituals, their way of preparing Jesus' body for its final burial. But some scholars believe that Matthew's account is different. It doesn't mention the spices or the oils. It says that Mary of Magdala, and the other Mary, came to "inspect the tomb." Is it possible that they came hoping that Jesus' predictions of his own resurrection were true? Did they come hoping that the tomb would be empty?

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/6/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

It takes a lot of faith to have that kind of hope when, just a couple of days before, they had witnessed Jesus' horrific death on the cross. Do you think you would

have that kind of faith? Do you believe in the possibility of new life? Do you believe that life can come out of death? Do you believe that resurrection is real?

Let's be clear, I'm not talking about resuscitation, about the kind of miracles that doctors perform these days, where someone's heart starts beating again. I'm talking about resurrection, transformation, rebirth, about new life coming out of death. Do you believe that when death occurs, when a person, or a relationship, or even an organization dies that something new and amazing will rise up? Do you have faith in the life-giving power of God? Some scholars say that, in this story, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary had that kind of faith.

As soon as the two Mary's arrived, there was an earthquake and an angel came to roll back the stone at the entrance of the tomb. Matthew's account is the only one where the women actually feel the earthquake and see the stone being moved. In all the other gospels the tomb was already open when they arrived. This is also the only version where Roman guards are present. But the guards were so terrified at what they felt and saw that they "fell down as though they were dead."

So the women were the only ones that remained standing. They were the ones who heard the angel say,

Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus, the crucified, who is no longer here. Jesus has been raised, exactly as it was foretold. Come and see the burial place.

We can imagine that the women followed the angel into the tomb and found it empty just as they had hoped.

And the angel goes on to say:

Then go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Jesus there. That is the message I have for you.

So the women do as they are told and they run to carry the good news to the disciples.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew tells us that as the women hurried away from the tomb, they did so with awe and great joy! The joy, of course, came from their belief that Jesus, their teacher, their rabbi, is no longer dead. That he is risen.

Their awe is another emotion altogether. One definition goes like this:

Awe is the feeling of respect and amazement that you have when you are faced with something wonderful and often rather frightening.

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/awe>

What the women had witnessed: the earthquake, the angel in white, the empty tomb, was truly awe-inspiring. Think of the feeling of standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or the top of a mountain or gazing up at the stars in an endless

prairie sky. Imagine, the fear of heights, the feeling of insignificance, the wonder at the size and the beauty of what you were seeing.

Today we celebrated the baptism of two little children. As we explore the emotions that these women were feeling that first Easter morning, I invite you to think about the feeling of a parent holding their new-born baby. Their joy would indeed be great. Their awe would also be very real. The wonder of birth itself—the fact that a new human being now exists in the world. The respect for God’s creative ability and the intricacies of human biology. And the fear at the thought of being responsible for this tiny human being. Awe and Great Joy!

The women were feeling both of these emotions as they ran to share their news with the other disciples. When suddenly Jesus appeared before them, saying “Shalom.” They fell before him and embraced his feet. Jesus could sense their fear and repeated what the angel had already said, “Don’t be afraid! Go tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see me.”

I wonder why this ancient writer thought it was necessary to include this encounter with Jesus in the Easter story? It doesn’t happen until later in Luke (on the road to Emmaus) and, some would argue that it never happens in Mark. Did the writer think that the women needed this reassurance? Or was it the other disciples that were skeptical? Did he believe that the empty tomb was not enough?

How many times have you and I needed that same kind of reassurance? Even though we believe in the possibility of new life, of rebirth, of resurrection, we still watch closely every spring for that first crocus on the south-facing slope, that first meadowlark singing on a fencepost, or that first robin in the backyard. Even though we know that life goes on after the death of a loved one, or the loss of a relationship or the ending of a career, we still struggle to move on and often need the reassurance of a friend, a family member or a counsellor to get us through. Even though we believe in the re-creating power of God's love the threat of climate change, of nuclear war and the increasing social and political divide in our own country keep us searching for signs of God's kingdom on earth. We need all the reassurance we can get.

This is why the Easter story, Jesus' resurrection, is such an important reminder of God's promise of new life, of the triumph of the Love over death. This is why, each year, as spring arrives we retell the story of the empty tomb. This is why on Easter Sunday we allow ourselves to feel awe and great joy as we sing our Easter Hallelujahs!