

## **Perplexed, Terrified, Disbelieving, and Amazed**

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Easter Sunday - April 17, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12

### **OLD TESTAMENT READING Isaiah 65:17-25**

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

### **GOSPEL READING Luke 24:1-12**

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Today is Easter. How do you feel? Do you *know* how you feel? I’m not even sure how I feel, but I’ll tell you one thing: in spite of all the times I’ve wished people “Happy Easter” recently, happy is not the feeling going on in me right now. Happy is so darn bland, so blah.

It's been a strange two years since we celebrated Easter from home in 2020. We felt blessed that day to be connected virtually because the blizzard outside would have stopped us getting to church. We've seen a lot of ups and downs since then. I won't bother to list them; take your pick. Like the disciples on that first Easter morning, we've been perplexed, terrified, disbelieving, and amazed. And, like them, so much more: Panicked. Grieving. Distraught. Determined. Frustrated. Desperate, angry, even outraged at times. Dazzled, maybe even ecstatic, at others. And sometimes just exhausted. We've run the emotional gamut: From overwhelmed to overjoyed.

Rarely just-happy. And that's OK, because Easter is not about a happy ending. It's not an ending at all. It's a beginning. The birth of something new, outside time, not measured in years. The rebirth of something older than time. More powerful than pandemic, earthquakes, tornados, wildfires and wars. A force that changes things from the inside out. A force that changes us.

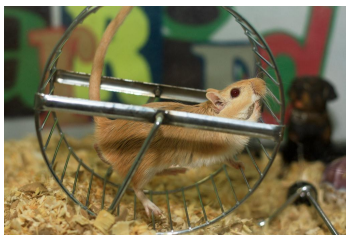
The most persuasive proof of Jesus' resurrection is that the disciples changed, from overwhelmed to overjoyed. From a collection of broken, shattered, disconnected individuals, to an energized, cohesive, growing community. Yes, they had their struggles, their arguments. But the most persuasive proof of *their* inside-out change is that you and I are here today. Celebrating life, courage, resilience. Light in times of darkness. Hope in times of despair. Life beyond death.

The world has suffered a lot. We've all suffered, one way or another, but some much more than others. The common teaching is that we learn and grow from pain and suffering.

If that's true, we should all have PhDs in wisdom by now.

Hmmm. Look around. Maybe we need to suffer some more?

You know, the most hopeful thing I read all week is this: Recent research has proved, we grow through positive life events as well as negative ones. No kidding. Those Easter morning highs, they count, too. They even have a name for it: "post-ecstatic growth."<sup>1</sup> That's what the disciples experienced. It took awhile for their new life to take root, and the way was rocky at times, but they changed. Jesus wasn't the only one who came back to life that day. Ecstasy hit them, too.



What I love about ecstasy—not the drug, you understand—is that it takes me outside myself, knocks me off the hamster wheel of daily life into a new way of being, a new way of looking at the world. Easter is about ecstasy - literally, moving me out of stasis, out of complacency, out of running in place and getting nowhere. Ecstasy moves me beyond death into life.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Marie Roepke coined this term, quoted in *The Atlantic*, March 2022, p. 12. "Our best moments can inspire us, connect us to something greater than ourselves, and open our eyes to new possibilities" Amen to that!

This isn't just about Jesus. It's about God and God's intention from forever and ever. We hear about new life back in the Old Testament, from Isaiah: "For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth," God says through the prophet. And from there on out it's not about pain and suffering, or about just being happy, but about joy and delight. Ecstasy. Eternity. Listen: "Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be." Like the days of a tree. Well, for sure, trees live longer than people, but their lives are more than an endless succession of days.



Think about trees with me for just a minute. We're learning more about them all the time. Start way back: 10,000 years ago in what we know as Utah, a change in climate made it impossible for aspen trees to grow from seed. Did the aspen lay down and die? No! A single male aspen spread its roots underground, popping up as new trees covering a

hundred acres or more: all genetically identical to the first. Essentially one tree. It's older than human civilization. That same root system somehow feeds the wildflowers, dancing through the understory. Life beyond death.<sup>2</sup>



Then there's the Methusaleh date palm, named for the oldest man mentioned in the Bible. The tree is a representative of a long extinct species brought back to life from seeds discovered at Masada, in Israel. Masada is the fortress where, about 40 years after Jesus' death, nearly 1000 Jews chose to die rather than be taken as slaves by the besieging Romans.<sup>3</sup> (Does it sound familiar?)<sup>4</sup> Only two women and five children survived. Six more seeds from

the same cache were germinated; luckily, two of them were female. Methuselah became a daddy. 700 dates were harvested last year.<sup>5</sup> The kind of dates Jesus would have eaten. Life beyond death.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, 2018, pp. 130-133, and Suzanne Simand, *Finding the Mother Tree*, 2021, Ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masada#History>. Accessed 4/16/22.

<sup>4</sup> On the radio this morning, I heard that Putin promised the 2000+ Ukrainian soldiers holding out in Mariupol their lives, if they would surrender. The deadline passed without surrender.

<sup>5</sup> <https://arava.org/arava-research-centers/arava-center-for-sustainable-agriculture/methuselah/6-new-ancient-date-trees/>

And maybe most emotionally moving for us today is the Survivor Tree. Do you know about it? In October of 2001, 9/11 clean-up workers digging through the rubble at Ground Zero discovered the burned and broken remains of a pear tree. They gave the corpse to the New York Department of Parks and Recreation, who miraculously nursed it back to life. In 2010, it was planted at the



9/11 memorial site. It's now 30 feet tall. And every year since 2013, those who tend it have given seedlings to three places around the world that have experienced devastating tragedy: places like Sandy Hook. Las Vegas, Parkland; but as far away as Haiti, Norway, and Christchurch, New Zealand. Those receiving the seedlings commit to nurturing the young trees as a symbol of resilience, hope, and new life in a world of hurt. Life beyond death.

What do we learn from the trees? Whether 10,000 years, or 2,000 years, or 21 years old, they sustain life by sharing life, by moving outside themselves, beyond their lonely existence, to spread life. Or, as Martin Luther said, "Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime."

It's what the risen Christ does: shares life. It's not just our old friend Jesus back in a body; he is now the Christ, spreading life throughout the world. Just coming to church, even on Easter morning, doesn't entitle any of us to an "Admit One" ticket to heaven; and eternal life is not an endless succession of days without end, but a depth of life here and now, a grafting into sacred community that is reborn day by day. Heaven is the meaning in the moment: this moment. Every moment.

It's hard to give up my place on the hamster wheel. I feel busy and important there. I'm at the center of my universe. But I'm not sharing life with anyone or anything else. I may be happy, sort of, but I'm like the living dead.

This is the mystery of Easter: it's not just about happiness. It's about ecstasy. The stone rolls away and knocks us out of ourselves. And we die. We die to our lonely self-importance. But in dying, you are given back to yourself more fully than you could ever imagine. You are not alone in your suffering, your longing, or your joy, you are an irreplaceable part of a larger and more beautiful whole. Jesus' willing death on the cross knocked his disciples into something new. His resurrection changed them. It changes us still. Without your willing gift of yourself, the whole is incomplete. When our attachment to our personal survival is seen for what it is—a ticket to our



own ultimate extinction—we can begin to understand that true eternal life is woven into the larger life of all humanity and all creation. Jesus is the resilient, always returning, tree of life. Suffering and joy. Life and death. All of a piece. And finally, in Christ, all *is* at peace. It's not a happy ending, it's a new beginning, full of delight. Full of ecstasy. Full of growth. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia.

Indebtedness: In addition to sources mentioned elsewhere, I learned of the resilience of the natural world from *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide in Trying Times*, by Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams, 2021. I'm indebted to Judy R. for the Martin Luther quote. The second to last picture is Frank Wesley's Altar of God, (20th Century) from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. Also my friend, Pastor Joy McDonald Coltvet.

### **Prayers**

*God of all creation, lover of life and of everything, please help us to love in our very small way what you love infinitely and everywhere. We thank you that we can offer just this one prayer and that will be more than enough, because in reality every thing and every one is connected, and nothing stands alone. To pray for one part is really to pray for the whole, and so we do. Help us each day to stand for love, for healing, for the good, for the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation, because we know this is what you desire. (Richard Rohr)*

We are one small part of the great body of humanity, but we pray today for the whole as we pray for ourselves: We pray for relief from suffering caused by human aggression, from Ukraine to Yemen to Myanmar; for compassion for those suffering from natural disasters and weather events, from the Philippines, to South Africa, to our neighbors in Taopi; for those questioning random acts of violence from Chicago to South Carolina, for healing for those laboring with covid, from Shanghai to New York. Help us remember when one part of the body suffers, all suffer, and that our task is to protect and shelter our sisters and brothers everywhere.

And may the ecstasy of the empty tomb startle us into an eternity that already lives within us, and promises life infinite in depth and breadth, now and forever. As Jesus taught us we also pray: Our Father in heaven,....



I have come into this world to see this:  
the sword drop from men's hands even at the height  
of their arc of anger  
because we have finally realized there is just one flesh to wound  
and it is His - the Christ's, our  
Beloved's.

I have come into this world to see this: all creatures hold hands as  
we pass through this miraculous existence we share on the way  
to even a greater being of soul,  
a being of just ecstatic light, forever entwined and at play  
with Him.

I have come into this world to hear this:  
every song the earth has sung since it was conceived in  
the Divine's womb and began spinning from  
His wish,  
every song by wing and fin and hoof,  
every song by hill and field and tree and woman and child,  
every song of stream and rock,  
every song of tool and lyre and flute,  
every song of gold and emerald  
and fire,  
every song the heart should cry with magnificent dignity  
to know itself as  
God:  
for all other knowledge will leave us again in want and aching -  
only imbibing the glorious Sun  
will complete us.

I have come into this world to experience this:  
men so true to love  
they would rather die before speaking  
an unkind  
word,  
men so true their lives are His covenant -  
the promise of  
hope.

I have come into this world to see this:  
the sword drop from men's hands  
even at the height of  
their arc of  
rage  
because we have finally realized  
there is just one flesh  
we can wound.

-Hafiz