

## **The Good News Is ... Alive in the World**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 28:1-10](#)

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Once upon a time, a minister was chatting with the children about the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. He asked them, “What did Jesus say when he came out of the tomb,” hoping that they had listened to the scripture reading. He wanted to encourage the children that, with God, they could overcome their fear. He planned to point out that the disciples were afraid and that one of the first things Jesus said was, “Don’t be afraid.”

However, a young child was certain that she knew what Jesus said when he came out of the tomb. She raised her hand excitedly. “Yes, what do you think Jesus said?”

“Ta dah!”<sup>1</sup>

Ya gotta love that response. However, according to Matthew, the first thing Jesus said was not “Ta da!”, but was, “Greetings!” I can just imagine Jesus meeting Mary and Mary as they are rushing off to tell the disciples the message from the angel. Jesus meets them: “Good morning, ladies.” They fall to their knees, grabbing at his feet, almost passing out. “Don’t be afraid,” he tells them.

Don’t be afraid.

Those are almost always the first words out of the mouths of angels in scripture. It’s what the angel said to the Marys when they got to the tomb and found the stone rolled away. “Don’t be afraid.” It’s how the angel started to announce to the shepherds Jesus’ birth. “Don’t be afraid, for I bring you glad tidings of great joy.”

Back in the 1990s, there was a TV show, “Touched by an Angel.” Right around 38 minutes into the show, the angels, who looked like humans and had been interacting with the other characters from the episode’s beginning, would suddenly reveal themselves as angels. You could almost set your watch by it. Warm backlighting would come up and they would suddenly be dressed in white. And the humans in the show wouldn’t freak out. Monica’s been helping me sling hash at this diner since the episode opened and suddenly it’s special effects time – and I don’t panic? The human characters could have freaked, and the script writers could have used the line right out of the Bible: “Don’t be afraid.”

It’s a line we need to hear more often than we’d like to admit. We go through life with plenty of fear. Sometimes it’s helpful. I don’t mind that reflexive fight-flight-or-freeze reaction when I suddenly notice a car coming while I’m crossing the street. But all too often, and probably most of the time, our fear isn’t very helpful. I’d stand up for myself when that person puts me down, but I’m afraid they might ... I’d reach

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<sup>1</sup> This is a joke that’s been floating around for years; I have no idea where I learned it.

out to that person, but I'm afraid I'll be rejected or look stupid or ... I'd open my heart to God, but I'm afraid that God might ...

Perhaps our greatest fear, a fear so great and so prevalent that we need to use denial to push it out of our consciousness, is our fear of death. We fear the death of those we love. And we fear our own death.

I suspect some of you are dealing with that type of fear right now. Maybe you recently got the news about a serious medical condition – your own or that of someone you love. I know that, when the doctors cut through our denial with words like, “I’m concerned about your test results,” all that fear that’s been stuffed away can surface with tremendous power. Suddenly our mortality comes crashing through our denial and everything else was lost in the fog of fear. Even as I preach these words, even as I talk about the reality of our mortality, of my mortality, my denial still pushes it out there, away from me.

An interesting reaction when you consider that death is as natural a birth. In fact, I've heard it said birth causes a terminal condition: life.

And of course we grieve when someone we love dies. We've experienced a loss and our natural reaction is to grieve. In fact, I think that grief is a form of love. Grieving is how we love when to object of our love is no longer present.

Our scripture today asks us to confront the naturalness of death, the naturalness of our mortality. We need to confront the naturalness of death so that we can truly see how unnatural resurrection is. As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “When a human being goes into the ground, that is that.... You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them.”<sup>2</sup> Except, God has another plan.

Matthew doesn't tell us why the Marys went to the tomb that day. My suspicion is that they were grieving. Taylor describes them being “like an abandoned pup who had lost her master, staying rooted to the last place he had been without the least idea what to do next...”<sup>3</sup> And then everything gets shaken up.

The Marys came to the grave and there was an earthquake, the stone got rolled away, and an angel sat on top of the stone. And the angel told them, “Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus, but he isn't here. He has been raised from the dead. Go take this message to the disciples: ‘He has been raised from the dead and will meet you in Galilee.’”

And in this moment, a transformation of their lives was begun. These women were no longer abandoned pups. They had a purpose, a mission. And so they set off, filled with joy – and fearful, too. I understand the joy and the fear. This is wonderful

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, “The Unnatural Truth” (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 110.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

news, but will the disciples believe them? Being believed would be an uphill struggle in a culture where women weren't considered reliable witnesses in court.

For me, this is one of the jokes of Easter. Jesus shakes things up once again, letting women be the first witnesses and the first people to share this amazing, good news.

So off the women went, and Jesus met them on the way. They stepped out in faith to share the news the angel told them to deliver, they stepped out on this mission – joyful, fearful, hopeful – trusting that they would get what they needed on the way to fulfill it. And they were met by Jesus on the way.

In the unnatural power of the resurrection, new life was planted within them, new life that cannot be killed. “If we can remember that then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.

“The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him. He has asked us please not to do that, because he knows that all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are than let him take us where he is going.”<sup>4</sup> No, instead, we need to step out on the journey, trusting that God will meet us on the way and give us everything we need.

It reminds me of the story of the two caterpillars.<sup>5</sup> They were two butterflies, really – colorful, gorgeous, majestic. They sat, side by side on a tree limb, their ruptured cocoons from which they'd just emerged by their sides. “Come fly with me,” said the one.

“Caterpillars can't fly,” said the other.

“But we're not caterpillars anymore,” said the first, flexing her new wings, stretching them their full span 'til they looked like magnificently crafted stained glass windows. “Those caterpillar days are gone forever.”

“Don't be silly,” said the other. “We were born caterpillars and we'll always be caterpillars. That's the way it is.”

“Well, then, why did the Maker see fit to give us these wings?” said the one.

The other butterfly thought for a moment and then replied, “I don't know. Some sort of cruel joke, I suppose. The Maker did the same thing to the ostrich, you know.”

“Nonsense!” said the first. “Look at all the other butterflies. They're flying. What do you say to that?”

The second butterfly looked out over the meadow and said, “They're not flying. They're just being blown about by the wind. Stupid of them, too. Can't they see it's dangerous? Easy prey for hungry birds and, when they land, mischievous children as well. I'll stick to crawling and climbing, thank you very much. It may be slow, but it's safe and sure.”

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Radecke in “In Christ: A New Creation;” cited by Timothy Zingale in an email to the “Sermonshop Sermons” meeting on Ecunet.org (17 March 2008)

“It may be slow and safe and sure but it’s ... well, it’s unnatural. Butterflies fly!”

The resurrection is about being changed, transformed, given wings, sure enough. But the resurrection isn’t *only* about personal transformation. Let’s go back to that earthquake that happened when the Marys arrived at the tomb.

I’ve read<sup>6</sup> that the Greek word here, *seismos*, has the same root as the word for the guards’ reaction – “they shook and became like dead men” – as well as the same root as the word for the turmoil that the city fell into when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey last week. Even at Jesus’ death, there was this shaking.

As far as I know, there is neither geologic nor historical evidence of an actual earthquake in Jerusalem around 30 CE. I hope that there wasn’t an earthquake because that would make it clear that the metaphor is central here: God is shaking things up. Which shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus was shaking things up throughout his whole ministry. That’s why the Romans killed him and why so many of the religious elite supported his execution. The powers that be didn’t like how he was shaking things up, so they tried to stop it.

And in the resurrection, God keeps shaking things up. The resurrection is not only God’s “yes” to death’s “no.” The resurrection is God’s “yes” to the “no” of the powers that killed Jesus. And so, when we say this resurrected Jesus is Lord, we’re saying that the lords of this world are not.

And that tells us something about God: “Easter is about God even as it is about Jesus. Easter discloses the character of God. Easter means God’s Great Cleanup of the world has begun,”<sup>7</sup> and we’re invited to participate!

The Marys knew that the good news was alive in the world, there for them to proclaim. That good news, alive in the world, is ours to proclaim as well. Our mission is to be passionate about what Jesus was passionate about – the Realm of God. We are to proclaim “what life would be like on earth if God were king, and the rulers, domination systems, and empires of this world were not. It is the world that the prophets dreamed of – a world of distributive justice in which everyone has enough and systems are fair.”<sup>8</sup> This beautiful world “is God’s dream ... that can only be realized by [us] being grounded ever more deeply in the reality of God, whose heart is justice.”<sup>9</sup>

The good news is alive in the world, and righteousness, mercy, and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Note #3 from Sam Lanham in the meeting “Sermonshop 2008 03 23” on ecunet.org.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 210.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*