



Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Bishop Erik K.J. Gronberg, PhD

BpGronberg@ntnl.org

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Sermon for the ELCA Synods of Texas and Louisiana

Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSV)

28:1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 28:2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 28:3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 28:4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 28:5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 28:6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 28:7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 28:8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 28:9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 28:10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Siblings in Christ; Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Risen Christ.

A normal Easter Sunday in my ministry experience has been rising well before dawn for a sunrise service followed by festive liturgies, youth Easter breakfasts, egg hunts, and all manner of glorious communal activity, celebrating together the coming of spring and the end of the Lenten fasts. Of course there was that one Easter in Wisconsin where there was 18 inches of snow...but I digress.

A normal Easter is filled with expectation. I did an informal poll around my dinner table the other night and asked our three children, aged 4, 7, 11, what they loved about Easter. The immediate responses were egg hunts, time with friends, biscuits and gravy at the youth breakfast, celebrations and candy, toleration for the inevitable pictures, and finally, mostly I know to please their two pastor parents, an admittance that church is good too. Lots of people (negotiable if that's good), special music, and the service early in the dark where we bring the Christ candle back into the sanctuary...

The honesty of children is a gift. For they speak the reality of normal Easter and the things they celebrate are good. Yet these things are, this year, despite the hopes of many, unavailable. In 2020 Easter has come and very little is normal. This is Easter in the time of COVID-19. Not a Chinese virus, mark that well, but a human virus that spreads quickly and has disrupted and changed our normal for good. So if our normal is changed, then the question must be asked, what good can come of this disruption of the normal?

On a normal Easter morning the preacher's task is bringing a celebratory community back to a bit of reality for a moment. To remind the community that the reason we are here is that someone died. And not just died but was executed in a horrific way. Executed by a procedure exactly designed and intended by the dominating powers to extract pain, inspire fear, and encourage the population to be docile. On a glowing Easter morning, in the face of pastel colors and beautiful hats, the preacher has the challenging task of reminding a community, the majority of which probably missed Good Friday liturgy, that for us to proclaim "Christ is Risen," we must also remember Christ was crucified.

But this is no normal Easter. The reality and possibility of sickness and death from pandemic is more real to us today than it has been in living memory. Many churches, schools, and businesses have been closed now for over a month with uncertainty of when gathering will be allowed again. Family gatherings have been cancelled. Birthday parties are cancelled or postponed along with synod assemblies. Funerals have been held with only a few mourners present and shared via video with others. This is anything but normal. And the question is, when this pandemic passes, what will normal be?

Normal is a funny thing. It is an assumed shared reality yet it is actually an illusion, a construct. What is normal for me may be quite abnormal for you. So if we want to get back to normal, what will that be? And who gets to decide?

This is the trouble with Easter. It was never intended to be normal. In Matthew's text the faithful women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, went to the tomb. Interestingly, as opposed to other synoptic gospels, there is no reason given why they are going. No note of the normal roles they might play in anointing the body with spices. No, on this first Easter the women simply go "to see the tomb."

Are they trying to make some normalcy out of what they experienced? To make sure they didn't dream what they had seen when Joseph of Arimathea had received Jesus' body for burial? There is sense in this. To go and see the tomb, to make sure it actually is there, that would give some structure, some normalcy, closure as we often call it to all they had experienced.

But Easter isn't normal. A great earthquake shakes the land. An Angel appears and rolls away the stone and sits on it. Once more the men, the Roman guards, faint at the site of God's power, but the women stay engaged. By staying alert they hear those words from the angel my children, those who I polled about Easter before, have been schooled to repeat. What do Angels say? "Don't be afraid." Don't be afraid because something completely abnormal has occurred and nothing, nothing, will ever be the same and that is good news. No, it isn't just good news, it is the best news possible. Normal has been disrupted.

Normal is control, the status quo. Creating a situation in which normal is accepted so that people do not question, or believe they have no power to question, what has or is happening to them. This was the situation of the followers of Jesus. Normal to them had become the domination of empire, of systemic inequity. As the power that occupied Palestine at that time Rome was normalcy. Rome was legitimacy. Rome was life and death. Accept domination and work within the system and you might have a decent life in which enough bread would be provided for your family not to starve. Reject that, and Rome would demonstrate, as it did on the body of Jesus Christ and countless other bodies of its time, its power of death.

Rome owned the power of life and death. It was, as it always has been for empire, its greatest power. Rome had perfected the ability to bring death and destruction and call it normal. But there were cracks in the narrative. Tacitus, writing of the great exploits of his father-in-law Agricola's campaigns in Scotland 50 years after the execution of Jesus, puts into the mouth of Calgacus, chieftain of the Caledonians and Agricola's enemy, a critique of Roman normal: "They plunder, they slaughter, and they steal: this they falsely name Empire, and where they make a wasteland, they call it peace."

Yet Rome could call such a thing a peace because 2,000 years ago they had the power of life and death. Peace was what they said peace was. This has and always will be the assumption of empire, vocalized again a long time ago, in a galaxy far away by an Emperor Palpatine who warns a young Skywalker, flush in combat with Darth Vader and defiant to the end, "now you will die."

Death is a powerful motivator. Yet life, life lived fully, life resurrected, is even more powerful. And that is the wonder and abnormality of Easter. In Easter, life conquers death. From that first Easter Sunday to today, Easter cannot and should not ever be normal. Because of that, the church should never be normal, even though it so often falls into the comforting arms of normalcy.

2,000 years ago Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb to see. In so doing they encountered an angel who proclaimed to them that the normal had changed. That life had conquered death, the empire did not have the final say, and whatever they believed to be the status quo would no longer hold. They were to go and be the first preachers of the resurrection. They, the faithful women, were called to proclaim to the other followers of Jesus that the world had turned and that Jesus had, as God always does, gone ahead of them into a new reality, a new normal.

The law for us today is that too often the church has fallen back into the old normal. After that experience of the first Easter things very quickly began to move back to normal. Women, the first preachers of the resurrection, were told their voices as preachers and priests were not needed. The church sought imperial authorization and power. Despite the prophets in its midst too often the church becomes a tool of imperial and colonial oppression; a manifest destiny that found normalcy in scripture for oppression of women, slavery, apartheid, white supremacy, and the stealing of land from indigenous peoples.

Gratefully, after almost two millennia our church recognized some normal must change. Yet as our church, the ELCA, celebrates 50 years of ordaining pastors who are women we must face the truth that many of our communities are unwilling to welcome the voice of a woman as pastor, particularly a woman of color. We must face this non-normal Easter day that ten years after welcoming into our rostered ministry pastors who identify as Queer+ the vast majority of congregations seek heteronormative candidates. That despite rejecting the Doctrine of Discovery we have done very little to make amends to Indigenous communities as we live on stolen land. Our sinful self, the old Adam, reverts to what we know and have trusted, stifling our attempts to live into a new normal.

COVID-19, not a Chinese virus, has shaken all of what we Americans know to be normal. It has rocked us and our assumptions in a way no one in living memory can recall. It has brought to us a randomness of infection and death. A social dislocation we are struggling to make sense of as we continue to come to recognize physical distancing protocols and other structures put into place cannot shield us fully from the reality that friends, family, loved ones, will be impacted by this virus and that some will die. The virus, like empire, has a power that we cannot control. Yet, in the midst of this new normal we have the opportunity, on this abnormal Easter, to proclaim a word and live into a new reality.

Rome, like every empire before it and since, had the power of death; to make a wasteland and call it peace. What Rome forgot is that it did not have the power of life. That power belongs to the Word of God alone. The Word of God who spoke, as John 1 testifies, the world into being. This living Word, this powerful word, this Word against the wheel, is in fact the word of life. The life that can conquer the normal, the status quo, the word that in fact can and does conquer death.

On that first abnormal Easter Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came as faithful disciples to see the tomb of their leader. What they found was the world had been utterly changed and a new mission given. Death had been defeated again by the power of the living word of God. God's living resurrected word that breaks open possibility and moves immediately outward towards God's creation, a creation dying for God's word of hope. This is the church's word to share, our word, our mission.

On this Easter we are called again to commit ourselves to follow this word. I pray there will never be another normal Easter. In the midst of this present crisis, we commit our world, our church, and ourselves to following Jesus, God's word, ever more boldly. Christ goes before us with this clear message. "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Thus we set out, accompanying those first faithful women, prepared to encounter the risen Word of God.

Christ is Risen...Christ is Risen Indeed. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen.