

Easter Joy for Everyone Matthew 28:1-10
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV. East Sunday (April 16,) 2017

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

The teacher decided that during the first three days of Holy Week the eighth grade class would put on a passion play. There would be six performances with different grades attending each performance. In this way the eighth graders would learn the passion according to St. Matthew and so would the entire school.

It seemed like a good idea. As often happens with good ideas, there were a few snags. There were more eighth graders than there were parts in the passion play or the need for stage hands, set designers, etc. So the teacher succumbed to another good idea—to move in the direction of imaginative, avant-garde theater. She cast every animate and inanimate reference in Matthew. She cast:

- The tree from which Judas hanged himself.
- The broken vase of perfume.
- Five people simulating an earthquake.
- Three people doing a credible job of imitating thirty clattering pieces of silver on the temple floor.
- Bystanders.
- More bystanders.
- Still more bystanders.

She also cast the rock that blocked the entrance to the tomb of Jesus. This was not a difficult task. In fact, it was blatant typecasting. There was a boy who

had, as his mother put it, “sprouted early.” He was definitely bigger than a bread box. He was also, when he was on his knees and bent over with his hands clasping his ankles, a perfect boulder.

“John,” the teacher said, “**you will be the rock—the one blocking the tomb, not the apostle Peter.**” (Teachers cannot avoid puns, especially when they are teaching religion.)

For the Angel of the Lord, who pushes the rock aside, she chose the most petite girl in the class—Tinker Bell one size up. The contrast, the teacher felt, was positively biblical.

The first performance was for the third grade. The play was moving along with the predictable sniggers and laughs until the Angel of the Lord appeared. With her little finger outstretched, she nudged the rolled up rock. He somersaulted away from the entrance of the tomb while at the same time managing to stay rolled up. Then the angel sat on him, making the stone of death the throne of the Lord—just as it says in the Gospel of Matthew.

The audience went wild. They cheered and chanted, “Rock! Rock! Rock!” Afterward they swarmed him for autographs. He modestly signed, “Rock.”

This happened at performance after performance. Thus a star was born.

Also a critic. The teacher was not sure all this attention was good for the Rock. Perhaps the glory should be shared.

She took the Rock aside and suggested that he play the tree from which Judas hangs himself. Someone else should have a chance at being the rock.

The Rock said he did not think this was a good idea. “**I like being the rock,**” he said.

The teacher responded (with what she later thought was the best question of her career), “**Why?**”

“**I like letting Christ out of the tomb,**” the Rock said.

“**But John, the rock isn’t rolled back so Christ can get out. He is already gone.**” (Teachers are always quick to correct.) “**The rock,**” she pointed out, “**is rolled back so that the women can see in.**”

The Rock’s face twisted as he floundered for the first time in the deep waters of the spirit. “**Well,**” he said, “**how did [Jesus] get out if the rock was still stuck in the hole?**”

This is the type of question all teachers fear. There is an answer, but it is light-years beyond what the questioner is able to handle. The teacher remained silent, searching for words.

But the Rock found the words before the teacher did. **“Well,” he said, “I guess huge rocks are no big thing for God.”**

Thus did the Rock roll back the boulder from his own mind and see into the empty darkness of the Easter revelation.

The teacher said in a quiet, choking voice that he should continue in the role of the rock, since he knew the part so well. (From John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Feasts, Funerals, and Weddings*)

Easter stories like this attempt to lift up some important characteristic of the scripture account. “The Rock” illustrates some of the mystery of Easter. Like the operation of computers, the principles of laparoscopic and laser surgeries, and the attraction between two people which we call “love,” Easter is one of those things we can “get,” even when we don’t have the foggiest idea of “how” it works. As a close friend says, **“I get it; I just don’t understand it!”**

The sermon title is “Easter Joy for All.” I ask you: “What are the joys people enjoy today?”

- Youth hiding, & children finding, Easter Eggs.
- Parents hearing the laughter of their children. Grandparents hearing the laughter of their grandchildren, and having an even deeper appreciation than the children’s parents, because of the generation long experiences they have known.
- A friend of mine told me that it was spending the whole day on Saturday with his family, completely released from the responsibilities of his job:
- Memories of Easter-times gone by
- At Easter Sunrise today, right at the words "like the first bird" in the song "Morning Has Broken," a pigeon flew down and landed on the railing between the clergy and the congregation. She just sat there for the rest of the verse.

Some joys announced in one Sunday School class:

- The joy of worshipping freely without fear of being bombed
- Joy of renewal and rebirth
- Joy of Hope
- A Joy not so much an "Aha!" but more an "Ahhhh."
- The Joy of experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven at hand
- The Joy of Music
- The Joy that the Jesus Movement did not die on the cross
- The Joy of seeing these faces in worship today

On Good Friday afternoon, the final Holy Week worship was completed, and I went to visit Jean Brewer at the Oakridge Center. She was neither in her room nor in the rehab center. A nice staff person helped me to find her in the dining room, where they were having an Easter party. When I came in, they were doing a jelly bean toss contest. Everyone was laughing and really enjoying themselves. Simple pleasures. Jean wanted to introduce me to everyone as her pastor. I think the flea-and-tick collar I was wearing gave me away. I wear it, you now to try to prevent me from misbehaving and embarrassing my boss and friend, Jesus. It doesn't always work.

Then they had an Easter Quiz, with a prize for each correct answer. "Who asked Jesus, 'What is truth?'" was the question. I cheated and leaned over and told Jean the answer: "Pilate." The staff member knew I had cheated, but gave Jean the prize anyway. I think it made the staff person feel better.

She had earlier been trying to explain, after I walked in, how they were just doing the "secular" part of the Easter celebration, with the jelly beans. But they also did the sacred part. It made me think of how some people get such a twisted image of the church: frown on all kinds of fun and enjoyment that is not straight from the King James Version Bible. So many of the things I listed above are really "good joys" from Easter even though they are not "sacred."

Jesus had the same problem sometimes – people thought he was a sinner because he didn't do just what the religious people thought were pure and holy things. In the end, that's what they killed him for.

The Jesus who is my Savior and my Best Friend loves to laugh. And he usually laughs when I laugh.

We often talk about how it is holy ground inside this sanctuary. And it is. And it is an embassy for the Kingdom of Heaven. So, the ground in here, like the ground in an American embassy in every country in the world is American soil – the ground in here is Kingdom of Heaven soil. It **IS** holy ground.

But so, too, is the ground outside where Easter eggs are hidden and found.

And everywhere where God made the ground, God declared it good, and it is also holy.

Our job, as laughing, loving, Christians is to share the joy.

Like “Rock” found out from his teacher, the stone was not rolled away to let Jesus out. **It was rolled away so people could see inside, know the miracle, and REJOICE ... and SHARE the good news.**

- Christ is risen. Risen indeed!HALLELUJAH!!
- Death has been conquered.
- Creation has been released.
- So much for which we ought to rejoice.
- Let’s make sure we do it.

I’ve got a neighbor, who doesn’t like pets. She apparently doesn’t like people who own pets, either, based on some of the vile and profane things she has yelled at people walking down the street in front of her house – even the ones who obey the signs that SCREAM: **“I don’t use your living room for a bathroom: don’t let your pet use my front yard for one.”**

I have a sign inside my house that says: **“If my dog doesn’t like you, then I probably won’t either.”** When I walk by this woman’s house, I’m thinking: **If you don’t like my pet, then I probably don’t like you either.**

Confession time: I’ve thought about doing some creative things to express my displeasure for this woman, when I walk my dog late at night, sometimes after midnight, when she and all the neighbors are asleep.

But, thankfully, so far, I have not given into the temptation. **However, I’ve come up with a new idea. SIDEWALK CHALK!**

The stone got rolled away so people can see inside; so to have a reason to rejoice. I need to show some rejoicing to this woman who seems to be pinched inside

and out. I don't know what her problem is. But I don't think she is experiencing a lot of the joy of Easter.

So, this week – the sidewalk chalk is coming out. I'm going to write in letters big enough on the street in front of her house, that she will be able to see from her second story window: **YOU ARE A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD. AND GOD IS SMILING AT YOU, RIGHT NOW!**

Easter is too big, much too big, to limit the joy to only the people who come to church. I invite you this day –

- when you put a flower on the cross outside – remember: you are sharing joy.
- When you see the offering plate pass in front of you, remember: you are sharing joy.
- When you go back to work and you run into that person who is just a little too pinched to know the joy of Easter – let 'em have it. In a way that they simply cannot miss it, and in a way that they can't help be feeling how contagious it is. [I bought extra sidewalk chalk for any who want to use it to share Easter a Joy.](#)

Easter Joy is for Everyone. Let's get out there and share it. Amen? In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.