

RAISED WITH CHRIST

Colossians 3:1-4

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Matthew 28:1-10

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TEXT: Colossians 3:1 “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” (*New Revised Standard Version*)

(*As rendered in The Message translation*): “So if you’re serious about living this new resurrected life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to live consistent with the spiritual truth that we already are raised with Christ, and that God’s resurrecting power defines God’s ongoing activity in the world.

The early morning of the first Easter found the friends of Jesus in two places: a few women had ventured out to a cemetery; most of the others were huddled behind locked doors in a safe house. The first Easter began with Jesus’ friends filled with two emotions: first, *grief* – the women who went to the tomb were letting the place where Jesus’ body had been laid to rest focus their all-encompassing loss; but also, *fear* – the shut-in disciples had good reason to fear that people known to have associated with Jesus might be the next victims of the combined power of Rome and the religious establishment.

Grief and fear. These two emotions are the primary emotions with which we begin this Easter in the days of COVID-19. We grieve the loss of almost everything familiar. Christians especially grieve that we aren’t gathered in churches to celebrate Easter, that we weren’t gathered around tables to share the bread and the cup on Thursday. Our Jewish cousins grieve that they weren’t able to share the Passover feast this week around a jubilant table with extended family and friends. More profoundly, we grieve with those who have suffered the death of a loved one because of the virus. We share the horror of overloaded funeral homes, of countries which have more dead than they can handle, of grieving families denied opportunity to gather and comfort each other. And we’re afraid, too, afraid we haven’t done enough to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe, afraid of anyone getting too close to us, afraid of what it will be like if health care facilities run out of personal protective equipment and ventilators, afraid that we’ll run out of money and our lives will completely fall apart. Fear and grief seem powerful enough to cancel this Easter, or at least, to sap its joy and reduce its victory to a pipe dream.

Back to the first Easter: Suddenly, the way it began was overthrown. Suddenly, grief and fear were routed. First, an earthquake not only shook the ground. It also opened up what had been sealed shut: the tomb, yes, but more importantly, the story of Jesus and his friends. Then, the women received news from an angel, who began by saying, “Do not be afraid.” To which I say, good luck with that, but Matthew’s story says that now, their fear was being mixed with joy. The

angel announced news, news that Jesus had been raised, news that he was planning to meet his friends. Then, Jesus appeared to the women, at least that's what Matthew recalled. Suddenly, totally unexpectedly, God's power for life was overtaking the kingdom of death. Suddenly, totally unexpectedly, joyful news of a new beginning was overtaking the kingdom of fear.

Wouldn't that be just the thing for us today? If something on the order of an earthquake upended the kingdom of COVID-19 and inaugurated a new realm, a realm of hugging and health, a realm where people fill church pews and children fill classrooms and our worries can once again be about things like whether a spring snowstorm might disrupt our Easter egg hunts.

Faith does not presume a magical overcoming of the virus, but faith insists that the power that grief and fear have to define our way in the world has been overcome. It's not just that Christ the Lord is risen today; it is also that *we* have been raised with Christ! We are participating in the new life which the raising of Jesus Christ makes possible. Listen to this insight from a woman whose name is Alaina Kleinbeck: "God's resurrecting power is not restricted to a moment in time when Jesus rose from the dead, but is power that defines God's ongoing activity in response to death and destruction."¹ That quote dates from 2014, but it certainly sounds like a word for today.

How can this be true? How, especially right now, can we realize ourselves as raised with Christ? One incorrect answer would suggest that people raised with Christ are inoculated from the dis-eases of our world. Not just the dis-ease of COVID-19, but the dis-eases of poverty and injustice, the dis-ease of complacency, the dis-ease that overinvests in war-making and under-invests in health-making. People raised with Christ are not immune to the dis-ease of our world. In fact, because we find our life at the foot of the cross, we live in solidarity with people who suffer from the dis-eases of our world, trusting God's "ongoing activity in response to death and destruction."

Our being raised with Christ has to do not with protection but with practice. We are called to practice the resurrection which Jesus has given us. That's the point

¹Alaina Kleinbeck, "Telling Today's Resurrection Stories" on an Alban Institute post dated April 8, 2020

of the passage we heard this morning from the letter to the Colossian Christians. *The Message* version of this passage says, “if you’re serious about living this new resurrected life with Christ, act like it.” Act like people who experience fear but are not controlled by it. Act like people who grieve, but whose grief is grounded in hope. Act like people who, knowing we live in a Good Friday world, are working at being Easter People. Like the women at the tomb, let joy infect our grief and our fear.

The guidance to the Colossians continues, and continues to speak to us: “Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what’s going on around Christ– that’s where the action is. See things from his perspective.” Following that guidance, especially now, takes practice, lots of practice. We are way too inclined to being absorbed with the things that are right in front of us. We’re not trained to pay attention to what’s going on around Christ. But as far as seeing things from his perspective, we actually do know what his perspective is on the pandemic– it’s the same perspective he’s always had. Christ has always viewed the world from the perspective of love, love which is all-encompassing, which knows no distinctions or boundaries, love which participates in God’s love for the world, love that gave Jesus, remember, so that those who cast their lot with him don’t perish, but indeed, share his life, his risen life.

Love informs the decisions we make about social distancing. Love informs whether we hoard or whether we share. Love moves us to sew masks and to wear them in public. Love moves us to do what we can, while we’re staying home, to meet the needs of the least members of Jesus’ family, to look for ways to feed hungry people, to shelter unsheltered people, to invest in care for sick people and seek justice for imprisoned people, to remember the people most likely to be forgotten while this pandemic rolls on. The real action, the action going on around Christ, is active, self-giving love. Love is how we act like we’re serious about living our resurrected life with Christ.

John, in his first letter, recognized that “perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18) Our love is far from perfect, but that’s why we practice it. Our joy continues to be mixed with grief and fear, but that’s why we practice it. Our acting like the resurrected people we are is far from perfect, but that’s what makes us want to practice resurrection. What we can be sure of is that God is still at work in our world, still in love with our world, still overcoming the powers of sin and death, and still helping us practice the risen life Jesus is sharing with us.