

## “Fear and Great Joy”

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Matthew 28:1-10

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Easter Day

Fear and great joy. That’s what I was feeling on Wednesday evening. I was sitting glued to my computer screen, watching the live feed from NASA of the countdown and launch of the Artemis II lunar mission, hoping to send four astronauts on the most powerful rocket we have ever built deeper into space than any human has ever gone before. My excitement early in the day gave way to apprehension as the countdown progressed. We haven’t sent people to the moon in more than fifty years. Would we be able to do it? Tomorrow, if all goes as planned, the four intrepid astronauts aboard Artemis II will loop around the moon’s far side. Already the crew has given us some stunning new photographs of what the Earth looks like from space – this big, beautiful world we all call “home.” But just a few days ago, this mission wasn’t yet a reality; it was still just a very carefully planned dream.

I sat and watched, and my tension grew. I had watched many space shuttle launches when I was a kid. I vividly remember that fateful day in 1986 when the *Challenger* exploded. I remember the tragic day in 2003 when the *Columbia* disintegrated in the skies over Texas. Going into space is *incredibly* risky business. Wednesday morning, the four astronauts bade farewell to their families and boarded their crew module. Later, two issues arose that could have delayed the launch or forced it to be rescheduled. Those got resolved, and the countdown continued. Then, a little more than ten minutes before launch, NASA’s Test Director went through the launch readiness poll, checking in with each engineer: “OTC?” “OTC is go.” “STC?” “STC is go.” “GTC?” “GTC is go.” “MCO?” “MCO is go.” “Safety console?” “Safety console is go.” “LPE?” “LPE is go.” “RTD?” “RTD is go.” “Houston flight?” “Houston flight is go.” “ROC?” “ROC is go.” “And CDR?” That last one called out to the crew at the top of the rocket ship; Commander Reid Wiseman replied, “Crew is go.” Then came the final poll for launch, this one conducted by the Launch Director: “Verify no constraints and go for launch. EGF, Program Chief Engineer?” “Artemis Chief Engineers are go.” “EGS, Chief Safety Officer?” “The Artemis CSOs are go.” “Range, weather?” “Weather is go.” “And Artemis, MMT Chair?” “MMT is go.” She called to the crew one last time. Each of the four astronauts responded individually, and Commander Wiseman summed it up: “Your Artemis II crew is go for launch.” The Launch Director addressed the crew: “Reid, Victor, Christina and Jeremy, on this historic mission, you take with you the heart of this Artemis team, the daring spirit of the American people and our partners across the globe, and the hopes and dreams of a new generation. Good luck. Godspeed, Artemis II. Let’s go.” She said to the Test Director, “You have a go to proceed with countdown.” There were a few final steps, and then: “T-minus 10 minutes and counting.” The crew access arm was retracted; the core hydrogen tank was pressurized; and so on, step by step, minute by minute, second by second, until the final moments: booster ignition, and lift-off. My

heart leaped. The commentator on the video feed said: “The crew of Artemis II now bound for the Moon. Humanity’s next great voyage begins.” I watched for another half hour, just to reassure myself that they would successfully make it into space, as the rocket quickly reached speeds faster than 17,000 miles per hour. The whole process was *deeply* moving, and *very* powerful. It was a vivid demonstration of what we humans can do when we put our minds to a task and work together to achieve a common goal. It was truly *awe-inspiring*. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so much *fear* and *great joy* at the same time.

Something similar happened to women when they left the empty tomb with the news that Jesus had been raised from the dead: “They left the tomb quickly with *fear* and *great joy* and ran to tell his disciples.” Two *incredibly* strong emotions. Their *great joy* is very understandable; their beloved Teacher was not dead but somehow *alive*. And *fear* ... why *fear*? What could they possibly have been *afraid* of in that moment? That it wasn’t true? That the religious leaders or the Roman Empire would do something *else* against him? I think their fear came from realizing *just what God can do*. Like I was blown away Wednesday night by what we *humans* can do, these women were utterly blown away that morning by what *God* can do. Are there *any* limits to God’s power? Is there *anything* that God can’t do?

And why does it matter? What *difference* does it make that God raised Jesus from the dead? That he is still very much *alive*? Why should we care? I would like to offer three reasons why it matters.

First: The reality that Christ is alive means that *we do not have to fear death*. Jesus *beat* death. This wasn’t the first time the Gospels say that Jesus had overcome the power of death – he had raised his friend Lazarus; he had raised the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus; he had raised a widow’s son. Now, *he himself* has been raised. The Roman Empire had executed him like a criminal. He *beat* the tremendous power of the Empire; he *beat* the ultimate power of death itself. *Nothing, no power anywhere in existence, can bind Jesus*. Jesus reigns *free*. Because *he* reigns free, *we too will be free*. He *will not* let us stay in the grip of death. He *loves us* too much for that. *New life* is ours, thanks to him.

Second: The reality that Christ is alive means that *there is hope for the world*. Our world today is filled with a lot of darkness and despair. I’ve heard multiple people say it feels like the world is on fire. I don’t want to minimize that; there are a lot of truly terrible things happening around the world right now, and people are noticing. A poll conducted by Emerson College just last month indicates that 63% of Americans think that it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that a world war will break out in the next four years<sup>1</sup> – which is an increase of *eight points* from a similar poll conducted a year earlier.<sup>2</sup> We are living in dark times. But: the reality that Christ is alive means that – no matter how bad things might *ever* get on this beautiful planet! – the human story will ultimately have a *good* ending, a *joyful* ending, a *peaceful* ending. Evil *will* be vanquished. Love *will* win. We can look forward to the future with *hope*.

Third: The reality that Christ is alive means that *everything he taught still stands*. We don’t just look back into the past and reflect fondly on what wise words he had to say, the way we do with people like Socrates or Confucius. No, we listen to Jesus because he is teaching us *even now*. When he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” he didn’t just say that *back then*; he is telling us to love God *right now*. When he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he wasn’t just talking to people who were alive two thousand years ago; he is talking to each of us *today*. When he was

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<sup>1</sup> <https://emersoncollegepolling.com/march-2026-national-poll/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://emersoncollegepolling.com/march-2025-national-poll/>

asked, “who is my neighbor,” he didn’t just say “a good Samaritan;” he is telling us in our real world right now that he wants us to love people who *aren’t like us* – people of other races, people who come from other countries, people who practice different religions, people who don’t think the way we do, people we don’t feel comfortable being around, even those whom some people want us to hate – *all* of these are people whom Jesus wants us to love. When he said “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” he wasn’t just talking to the followers who had gathered around him; he is also telling us to pray for the people or countries or institutions that wish to do us harm, to pray for the people who hurt us or abuse us, to pray for the school bully on the playground, to pray for the people who call us names or put us down, to pray for anyone who threatens us or who causes fear to well up in our hearts. When he said “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” he wasn’t just saying that back then; he’s telling us *now* to treat others – *all* people – with the respect and dignity we like to receive. When he taught “forgive your brother or sister from your heart,” he wasn’t just teaching folk who lived two thousand years ago; he is telling each one of us to lay aside our bitterness, anger, and resentment towards the people who have done us wrong. When he told people to “repent” and “sin no more,” he wasn’t just talking to the sinners back then; he is talking to all of us who sin *now*, in the present, to any and all of us who do things – however intentionally or unintentionally – that cause harm to anything or anyone that God has created (including ourselves!) or that damage our relationship with God. When he said “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” he wasn’t just warning the wealthy elite among his own people, he is also telling all of us that the goal of life is not to amass riches, that greed has nothing to do with faithfulness, and that the greater our net worth, the more generous we need to be. He told his followers to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty; he is also telling *us* that we need to care about the plight of everyone in our country and around the world who suffers from food insecurity – and that we should *do something to address it*. He told his followers to welcome the stranger; he is also telling *us* that we need to receive people who are very different from us with arms wide open. He told his followers to clothe the naked; he is also telling *us* to tend to the basic needs of all poor people today. He told his followers to take care of the sick; he is also telling *us* that health matters and that we need to do whatever we can to extend special care to anybody who suffers from any form of illness or impairment. He told his followers to visit people in prison; he is also telling *us* that people who are incarcerated are still *people* and need to know that they are still loved. When he blessed the poor and the poor in spirit, when he blessed the hungry and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, when he blessed the people who mourn and the people who weep, when he blessed the meek and the merciful, when he blessed the pure in heart and the persecuted and the peacemakers, he wasn’t just blessing people back then; he was blessing anybody who falls into any of those categories *now*, telling each and every single one of them – each and every single one of *us* – that *we matter*, that *God loves us*, that *Jesus cares*. When he said that justice and mercy and faith are more important than man-made laws and traditions, he is telling all of us that we need to be *just*, *merciful*, and *faithful*. In short, he wasn’t just laying out a way of life for people to follow way back then. He is laying out a way of life for people to follow *today*. He is telling us, each and every single one of us, how to live, *right now*, in the *present*, even in these dark and fear-filled days. He didn’t stop teaching two thousand years ago. He is teaching us *right now*. The question is: *are we listening?*

For Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed!) So let’s live our lives the way he still *wants* us to live them. Thanks be to God!

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