

Easter Sunday  
Year A  
April 12, 2020  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:  
**Matthew 28:1-10**

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, 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; there they will see me.

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This morning's gospel reading starts out in darkness. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have arrived at the tomb anticipating the silence and darkness of death. But instead, a great earthquake rumbles, and an electrified angel with clothes white as snow descends from heaven, rolls back the stone that blocks the tomb, sits atop the stone and then, incredibly, tries to convince the women not to be afraid. Not too many of us would stick around to see what happens next, but the two Marys did. And they discovered that the Jesus who had been crucified, was no longer in the tomb. The angel tells them that, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And so with "fear and great joy" they ran to tell the disciples the news.

All of us have known fear and all of us have known joy, but that blend of fear and great joy, is an experience that doesn't occur every day. I can imagine that it occurs to a woman who is about to give birth to her first child – eagerly anticipating the event, but not knowing quite what to expect. Perhaps you are experiencing that combination of fear and joy this morning. It is, after all, Easter morning, the day of resurrection, the most joy-filled day of the church year. Yet, illness and death surround us and we find ourselves fearful of what is to come. We're all balanced on that knife-edge of uncertainty, not sure whether it makes sense for us to be filled with joy or frightened out of our wits.

In a letter written to his creative writing students at the University of Syracuse, upon the closing of the school in response to the outbreak of the Corona Virus, the novelist George Saunders wrote that "the world is like a sleeping tiger and we tend to live our lives there on its back. We're much smaller than the tiger, we're like Barbies and Kens on the back of a tiger. Now and then that tiger wakes up and that is terrifying. Sometimes it wakes up when someone we love

dies or someone breaks our heart, or there's a pandemic. This is far from the first time that tiger has come awake. He/she has been doing it since the beginning of time and will never stop doing it.

The tiger awakened for me last week – or perhaps it's more accurate to say that I awakened to the presence of the tiger. Checking my email on Thursday morning I received the news that a fellow diocesan priest, a vibrant, energetic rector of a parish in Queens had died alone in his hospital room. He is the first, and I fear not the last, of our priests to succumb to the ravages of Corona.

A few hours later I received a text from a dear friend and colleague in Southold. She had been diagnosed with COVID-19 earlier in the week, but her symptoms had seemed mild. However, her text let me know that she now had pneumonia and had been confined to bedrest. She is an important leader in the community and devoted to the care of the marginalized among us. Now she rests at the margins herself.

And I get a call from the oldest priest in the diocese, also with a positive Corona diagnosis. He is at the rehabilitation center at Peconic Landing - surrounded by death and illness. Yet, despite having walked the earth for 93 years, and already suffering from a number of non-Corona related illnesses, he was quite upbeat and looking forward to returning to his cottage. It seems that Lady Corona is no respecter of age, class or apparent well-being.

Later that morning I received a call from my son Nate, a firefighter in San Antonio. Facing the looming prospect of being on the front lines of a battle against the disease, Nate admitted to me that he was scared. As a firefighter he has witnessed the agony of countless accident victims with crushed limbs and severed body parts and seen how, even when experiencing the worst agony, people can "man-up, as Nate would say" and bear the pain they are going through. However, Nate tells me that the panicked faces of those who can't breathe, whose lungs are filled with fluid that causes them to feel like they are drowning, are the most desperate he has ever seen. Nate doesn't scare easily, so the thought of him fearing the future, caused me to tremble.

In the afternoon, I walked down Main Street in Greenport, passing no one, encountering only silence. With the stillness of Peconic Bay in the background, I could see the flashing lights of an approaching patrol car. Trailing behind the siren-less patrol car was a funeral hearse and a near empty black limousine. Absent were the streaming headlights of the usual lengthy funeral procession. The vehicles crept through the empty streets to the graveside where two or three masked mourners would bear the grief for all the loved ones instructed to remain in their homes.

In the darkness of the moment, I recalled one of my favorite Arkansas priest's assessment of a beloved bishop's management skills, "Hell, he couldn't organize a two-car funeral." I smiled through my tears – as we humans often do. It's a God-given relief, really, to laugh at death. And then, reluctantly, I climbed aboard the awakened tiger's back.

It doesn't quite feel like Easter to me – and it probably doesn't to you either. It feels a bit like Jesus is still in the grave, and no one has rolled back the stone that blocks the tomb. Yet, I live in the sure and certain knowledge that Jesus rose from the dead, is raised from the dead, and will be raised from the dead.

In all her childlike wisdom, my granddaughter Collette, refers to this time as the Corona season. In her mind, this time of staying home, playing games, working on art projects with her family is simply a fifth season – an interval that takes place somewhere between the cold days of winter and the warmth of spring. Although she has lived on this earth less than five years, so knows that the season of Corona will end. We may not be the same, once the season has passed, but that's the nature of resurrection. Old things die away, and all things are made new.

After the season of Corona, when once again we can worship together in the house of God, even though the day appointed by the church calendar as Easter Sunday may have long passed, we will together celebrate Resurrection Sunday. I'm imagining taking the palm fronds that we would have held high on Palm Sunday and laying them down on the pathway leading into the church – so that we can remember Jesus's triumphant, palm-strewn entrance into Jerusalem.

This morning we heard the prophet Jeremiah say to the people of Israel,

*The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.*

The Season of Corona is a time for us to find grace in the wilderness as well. And to hold fast to the promise that the day of resurrection will come.

The Lord's pledge to Jeremiah and to Israel is a promise in which we too can find an Easter assurance:

*I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.  
Again I will build you, and you shall be built...,  
Again you shall take your tambourines,  
and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.*