



THE MESSAGE AND MANDATE OF EASTER
Matthew 28:1-10

Dr. Ed Young - who is one of America's greatest preachers - tells of the time in his journey of faith **before** he was a fully committed believer and follower of Jesus Christ - much like those in our gospel lesson today. Ed Young had a dear friend and college roommate - Walt Carroll - who was a self-proclaimed atheist. However, he was a great guy and a good roommate. They got along famously. One Sunday night his friend looked at him and said: "**Ed, do you believe there's a God?**"

He said "Walter, of course I believe there is a God. I attend the Baptist Church at home - and was baptized by immersion."

His friend said, "**Ed, you don't live like it.**"

Ed responded, "What do you mean by that?"

Walter responded: "Ed, **you live just like I do. I'm an atheist.** I don't believe there's a God - and I live like there's no God. We're buddies. You do everything I do. You say there is a God - and yet you don't live like there's a God. Don't you have enough sense to know that, if there is a God - if you can get to know Him - and live the way He wants you to live, **that's the most important thing in life?**"

Ed froze - not because what his friend had said was untrue - but because it was true. He was amazed and bewildered by this truth - and it was five months later until he surrendered his total life to Jesus Christ. He was not tapping into the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Even an atheist could tell the difference.

Our lesson for today records this response to the resurrection from **Matthew 28:5**, "The angel said to the woman, 'Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.'"

There is a world of difference in attitude between believing **about** the resurrection - and actually believing **in** the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ is the only dead man in history who actually got up and started walking again - into Galilee - into history - and into human hearts and minds - that would surely produce a new way of seeing - believing - and living. The day you believe in the resurrection is the day you change the world and your life.

Yes, with human actions and self-improvement projects alone - **men and women are still practical atheists**. However, if the resurrection is true - and in Christ a man or woman can become a new creation – that would become the driving force and purpose in your life.

However, that is risky and dangerous to those thoughts and ideas that hold us in prisons with or without bars - and control our destiny.

This is where the **message and mandate** of Easter comes from. It is comforting to know that you can be a new person in Christ - but it is a challenge for you to surrender and yield your life to Jesus Christ to actually become that new person.

Today my friends if after coming to church you forget me and all the music and worship offered by the choir - you have not lost much. But if you meet Jesus Christ and forget Him - you will lose everything. The only reason we preach and sing - is because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We preachers try our best to explain the resurrection. However, according to Martin Luther, the resurrection is what explains us. **Easter is a verb** - not just a noun.

Yes, Easter must be acted upon. Its message must crawl up inside a man or woman and absolutely drive them to make a commitment. Easter is about God's work. Often it is experienced like an earthquake, as our lesson shares today. It changes the landscape. The real power of Easter is the glorious future it can open up for a man or woman - and the courage it can give in the present moment. This is what was missing in the gospel lesson today - in the life of Ed Young - and perhaps for one in our midst today.

When we lived and served in Chester, Pa., we often flew out of the Philadelphia airport. I can remember on more than one occasion getting close to the airport, but not being able to land. We went into a holding pattern. We actually could see Widener University and our home from the airplane. It is kind of an eerie feeling to know that you are so close - and yet so far away.

That is exactly how the disciples and the women felt on that first Easter morning. Perhaps some of you feel that way personally and spiritually today.

When Jesus died, life for his friends went into a holding pattern. After all they had great dreams for Jesus, and this new military kingdom he would build. He would overthrow Caesar and his rule. Now, they were lonely, confused, frustrated, and seemingly defeated. They felt deserted. They also felt useless. There was nothing they could do now. They were so close to establishing the kingdom of God - but now it seemed so far away.

The women wanted to anoint the body, but even this would have to wait. The Sabbath began at sundown of Friday. Nothing could be done until early Sunday morning.

That's what it is like to be in a holding pattern. They couldn't hurry up the process. They had to wait, be patient, and pray.

Maybe you have been or are in a situation something like that. You've gone through some bitter disappointment. You thought you were in charge of your own destiny - but circumstances have rendered invalid everything you had lovingly built or created with a loved one. You feel helpless. There is nothing you can do at the moment, except to be patient, wait, and pray.

Dr. Fred B. Craddock once taught me in a workshop that on any given Sunday - about 50% of the people sitting in the pews almost did not come that day. That figure is usually a little higher on Easter Sunday. However - that is exactly what is taking place on the first Easter morning. More than 50% of the original crew is missing. They were missing in action. They were in a holding pattern gripped by bad dreams and guilty memories - and they were filled with fear.

That is why I am glad you are here today - because Easter has a message for us today. In so many of the Easter stories you will notice that it begins at the dawn of a new day. This is your first clue that the previous holding pattern is about to give way to a new adventure and chapter in life. The power of Easter is at work in the darkness - turning the tide - preparing the way for a new day.

However, as we open the gospel lesson for today we see that Mary of Magdala is spiritually lost in a difficult holding pattern. We know from **Mark 16:9** that Jesus had ministered to a very troubled soul. She had 7 evil spirits. She was in a perpetual 911 situation. One would be a challenge for most people, but she had 7 of them. Sin had become the dominant force in her life. That is the problem you see.

Sin forces us to pay a price that we do not wish to pay - it forces us to go where we don't want to go - and forces us to stay in places where we do not wish to stay.

Jesus was able to transform her life from those destructive attitudes and habits that made her less than the person God had created her to be. She felt so close to Jesus. And when he was crucified, it was as if the props that held her up were kicked out from underneath her. Picture her in the garden, with tears running down her face until she experienced a living presence standing beside her. It was Jesus. Her life was no longer in a holding pattern. She wasn't lost. She thought she was lost, but he knew exactly where she was. God was there - keeping watch over his own. We know something dramatic is going to take place because there is a violent earthquake. A stone is rolled away and a new understanding of life and hope is revealed. On the cross, the world did all it could to Jesus. At Easter, God did all God could do to the world: and the earth shook.²

The gospel story continues with Mary running - not from life - but with a new life sharing the Good News of the gospel. Mary is now running the race that God has already won. She labors now in a kingdom that has victory ringing all over it. Her fear gives way to

the power of faith. Fear can be a good thing - **“because fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”**

Easter declares to Mary - and to us - that God is far more interested in our future than he is in our past.

Easter proclaims to all that there is a new beginning possible for those caught in the bondage of sin and death and emptiness.

Easter declares that God has the last and defining word in all things.

Easter declares that the missed moments of life can be redeemed and transformed. It is not simply that God makes us useful in spite of our missed opportunities - but that He often reaches us through our missed opportunities.³

Anne Lamott is a writer on the west coast. She was raised among the liberal mind set of the literary world of Berkeley, California. She enters into a relationship with a man who she eventually discovers is married. She becomes pregnant - and is convinced that having an abortion is the only way out of her predicament. She does exactly that.

She comes home from the abortion clinic and drinks a bottle of whiskey - and then fills herself with the codeine the nurse has given her. She does this for 7 straight days. Talk about someone who is wrestling with 7 powerful demons. She is certainly in a horrendous holding pattern and life is as black as midnight in her soul. However, she is haunted in a sense by a presence in her room.

She writes: “After awhile, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner.... The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there — of course, there wasn’t. But after awhile, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud: ‘I would rather die.’”

She felt him sitting there watching her “with patience and love.” “Finally,” she writes, “I fell asleep, and in the morning he was gone.”

The next day she was spooked by what had happened, thinking it was a hallucination born of fear and self-hatred and booze and loss of blood. But she couldn’t shake the experience of Jesus with her in the room watching her “with patience and love.”

She begins to attend church again - as she did as a child before she outgrew her need of church. One Sunday at church - she is deeply moved. She races home to her houseboat - she opens the door - goes to the top of the deck - and takes a long, deep

breath and shouts at the top of her lungs. **“All right Jesus. All right. You can come in.”**

Then she writes “This was the beautiful moment of conversion.”⁴

Easter happens to different people in different ways. Whatever holding pattern you are in today - it is no match for the Almighty. Ed Young’s friend was right. If there is a God, and if you can get to know him and live the way he wants you to live, that would be the most important thing in life.

Easter is like an earthquake. Don’t be afraid. God is shaking the world again.

Remember, Easter is a verb and it must be acted upon.

May God give you grace and strength so to do.

LET US PRAY: Almighty God, by the power of your Holy Spirit - may someone here open the doors of their lives - to the loving presence of Jesus Christ. May the difficult holding patterns they are gripped and paralyzed by - give way to your new design for life - which is fueled by resurrection power. Reclaim some troubled soul who is held by sin’s power - and now may they be held by the loving power and hands of Jesus Christ. We pray and request all things today in the strongest name on earth - Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Ed Young is Senior Pastor of the Second Baptist Church, Houston, TX. This story is found in printed literature available through his outreach media ministry known as **“The Winning Walk.”**

² Thanks to William H. Willimon, Bishop of the Northern Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church for this material. It is from a sermon entitled, **“Easter as an Earthquake.”**

3. R. Maurice Boyd, **CORRIDORS OF LIGHT**, Colonsay House, Canada, 1991, page 114.

4. Anne Lamott, **TRAVELING MERCIES**, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999, pages 48-50.