

“Feel, See and Hear the Gift of Life”

April 5, 2026 – Easter

First Christian Church

Scripture text: Matthew 28: 1-10

As you read your Bibles, you find that the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – have slightly different takes on that first Easter morning. And that should not surprise or shock us. Four eyewitness accounts of any event will produce four slightly different stories because each eyewitness has a different perspective as well as different things that they notice. For example I will notice what car they are driving and have no idea what clothes they are wearing, where Amy will notice what clothes they are wearing and notice nothing about the car. Police know if two people’s stories are exactly the same, there is something fishy going on.

What I really appreciate about Matthew’s story of that first Easter morning is the undeniable, unapologetic, power of God breaking the barrier between heaven and earth. He doesn’t want you to miss the message God is sending. As we tag along with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, we first feel the message. He says in verse 2, “suddenly there was a great earthquake.” Every sense you have is attacked when the earth quakes. The feeling of the ground shaking, the sound, the sights, soon the falling debris fills the air and invades your taste and smell. Your whole being is on high alert as everything you thought was solid starts to shake.

Rolf Jacobson helps us see that as Matthew tells it, first you feel the message of Easter. Then you see it. To make sure nobody messed with Jesus’ burial place, the chief priest had Pilate seal Jesus’ tomb then post guards to keep it secure. God was not stymied by their efforts. Verse 2 continues. “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.” Imagine seeing the spunky little angel. Descending like a lightning bolt. Landing with such force that the ground shook. The heavenly messenger not only rolls the stone away from the entrance of Jesus’ tomb, but then perches on top of the stone saying both “look what I did” and “I dare you to try and knock me off.” The guards know they are no match for this heavenly messenger. They are smart enough to just freeze, act completely dead, and hope the power from high doesn’t notice them. What a sight to see as God sends one messenger to penetrate every line of defense and undo all the precautions the most powerful nation in the world put in place.

First you feel the power of God’s presence as the earth shakes. Then you see it as the spunky angel descends like lightning, rolls the stone away and sits on top of it. Then you hear what it is all about. “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has been raised.” The presence of God didn’t just come to shake things up and make a big flash. God came with the gift of life. The gift of eternal life. The gift of life after

death. “Christ is Risen! (He is risen indeed)”. Ever since the words “He is not here, for He has been raised” were spoken, the world looks and feels different.

Granted, they are hard words to hear, and even harder to believe. That Jesus of Nazareth, who died a brutal death on a cross, was dead and buried in a sealed tomb; was then raised to life again. Not just resuscitated to regular life, but resurrected to a new life, a new plain of life, life that rejoins the giver of life for ever and ever. These words are not easy to hear, and even harder to believe. But I believe them. And if true, they are the pivotal event in human history. For they answer Job’s all-important question, “If a person dies, will they live again?” (14:14) When I close my eyes for the last time here on earth, do I just slip away into nothingness, or is there something on the other side of the grave? The resurrection of Jesus answers that. For those with faith in Jesus, there is more. Jesus promised us, then He showed us more. Death will not have the final word. The empty tomb assures us that sickness and suffering, death and disease will not have the final word. “He is not here, for He has been raised.” The words that change what we see and feel.

The good work of Nkori Raphael helps us see and feel what those words changed. To begin with, we are no longer defined by our failures. One of the things I don’t like about driving a car is you can get an “A” in driving, doing everything right 98% of the time. And then the one time you fail to check your blind spot, or don’t look left again at the intersection, or drive before the windshield is completely cleared of ice, and suddenly you and the car are a crumpled mess on the side of the road. That one mistake erases all the times you did everything right. Romans, which you just finished reading, reminds us the same was true with God. We have all sinned. We have all fallen short of who God calls us to be. We may be as good as or even better than the people around us and earn their respect, but we could never keep it all together all the time in a way that earns God’s respect. The one mistake, the one failure, the one time we gave into temptation, the one time we were tired and frustrated and treated a family member with less than love – that one failure defined our ultimate future. The consequences of sin is death. But not after Easter. Romans 8 tell us, “It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also **intercedes for us**. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” After His resurrection, Jesus went to sit at the right hand of God, and He speaks to God, saying, “It’s okay. This one is with me.” and failure doesn’t define us anymore. Jesus is our advocate, and He invites us home.

Failure doesn’t define us anymore, and neither does fear. Fear is exhausting: fear of the future, fear of what people think, fear of not being enough, fear of missing out, fear of losing what we

love. But resurrection proclaims the worst thing that could ever happen – death itself – has been defeated. If God raised Jesus from the grave, what situation in our lives could be beyond God’s reach? Yes, there will still be times we feel afraid, but resurrection means that fear no longer gets the final word. We can feel the fear, and still step forward in faith, because the ultimate threat has been removed. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (I Cor. 15:55) Death is no longer the end. And when the ultimate threat loses its power, the smaller threats lose their power as well. Fear no longer has the power to paralyze us.

“He is not here, for He has been raised.” Death is no longer the end; therefore our failures no longer define us, and fear no longer paralyzes us. These words even change how we handle frustration. Someone cuts you off in traffic. A colleague takes credit for your work. Your child spills juice on the carpet for the third time. Because Jesus rose, you can afford to be patient. You don’t have to defend your honor. You don’t have to win every argument. The resurrection means your ultimate worth isn’t on the line in petty conflicts. You are free to respond with grace, not because you’re naturally nice, but because you’re securely loved. Those moments do not lose or secure your future. God has got this. Even when life doesn’t go your way: when dreams die, relationships fracture, and prayers seem to go unanswered; resurrection whispers something the world cannot offer – this is not the end. The same God who brought life out of a tomb can bring hope out of your heartbreak. Not always quickly. Not always painlessly. But always faithfully. You will still grieve. You will still ache. You will still wonder where God is in the darkness. But resurrection means the final chapter is already written. I hope and pray those moments of darkness pass and things get better, but even if they don’t, I know how your story ends. And for those who believe, those who follow Jesus’ way, those with faith, it is a wonderful ending, a glorious ending, a beautiful ending. There is the difference between optimism and resurrection hope. Optimism says, “Things will get better,” and maybe they will. But resurrection hope says, “even if they don’t, the worst thing is not the last thing. For those with faith, Jesus writes the last chapter of your life, and it is defined by forgiveness, healing, resurrection, glory and coming home to God. And it doesn’t get any better than that.

We end this sermon where it began, with everything we know about life on earth shaking, quaking, not feeling as stable as it did before. And it comes from God’s presence breaking through the barriers between heaven and earth. And suddenly the failure, fear, frustration and even death are shaken from the place of finality; and replaced by God’s love for us that overcomes failure, fear, frustration and even death.

As our bodies lose one ability after another. As our minds start to forget more names than they remember. Easter reminds us those things don’t get the last word. God does. And for those who give their life to Jesus, that last word is life – now and forever.

Mike Van Heyningen