

Matthew 28:1-10.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped 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.”

Dear Christian brothers and sisters,

After a hard winter, spring is a welcome season! Trees are beginning to bud. Lawns are becoming green. Crocuses and daffodils are greeting the warming sun. Soon tulips, azaleas, and lilacs will burst open with blossoms. It makes one wonder how glorious the world must have been when it was first created, especially that pinnacle of beauty God designed in particular for Adam and Eve: the Garden of Eden.

Sadly, that first garden and the rest of creation were marred by sin. But if we can still get a sense of its original glory by looking around us—spoiled by sin though it be—then imagine how much greater is the glory coming from the garden where Christ was buried and rose again—a glory that can never fade or be marred by sin. Today let's be filled with joy by this second garden, the garden where Christ rose from the grave. It's a Garden of Glory.

Theme: The Garden of Glory!

- 1. Full of power**
- 2. Full of grace**

The Bible tells us that near the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden there was a new tomb. Jesus' body had been placed there. This is where the women were headed on that first Easter day. They were anxious to finish giving Jesus a proper burial. But that would prove unnecessary. Matthew chapter 28 tells us, **“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”** (verses 1-4)

What an amazing display of power in this garden! It seems the violent earthquake was simultaneous to the angel's entrance into our world. He was one of the mighty princes of heaven—so powerful as to toss the stone away from the tomb like a toy, so fearsome that battle-hardened soldiers dropped in sheer fright.

But even with such power, he was only a servant of someone much more powerful and awesome—someone who did what the angel could not do, someone who had defeated death. We are told, **“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’” Now I have told you”** (verses 5-7).

Jesus didn't merely cheat death. He met it head on. He had truly died. His lifeless body had lain in the tomb until the third day. But then his body grew warm once again. His eyes opened. His lungs filled with air. He came back to life. When he defeated death, he did it not merely for himself. He defeated death on behalf of the entire human race. The angel with his power only made an impression in a certain garden and only on a handful of people. But Christ Jesus encompassed and swallowed up death for everyone throughout the world and through all generations that came before him or will come after him. Now Jesus says, **“He who believes in me will live, even though he dies”** (Jn 11:25). Christ's glory is a glory of power!

On the cross, Jesus had set aside the full use of his rights and privileges, and even the full use of his power as God, to suffer and die. But when Jesus rose from the dead, he began to make full use of his power as God once again. This is called his state of exaltation. In his state of exaltation, he passed through the walls of the tomb with his body—invisibly, wondrously, gloriously. In his state of exaltation he is no longer confined to the laws of physics. The Bible says that God **“appointed him to be head over everything”** and that he **“fills everything in every way”** (Eph 1:22,23). The angel did not remove the stone from the tomb to let Jesus out. He opened the tomb so that the women and others could see for themselves that Christ had truly risen.

When we plant gardens, we always expect something good to spring up. Those who planted the garden where Jesus' tomb was—would they have expected such powerful glory to spring forth from their garden? But now if Jesus has arisen in such a glory of power, where does that leave us? We're still here on earth while he's exalted in heaven. Are we left to fend for ourselves in life and make it through death on our own? The answer is no. The glory that radiates from that garden is not just a glory of power, it is also a glory of grace.

Death can be frightening. We fear for what will happen to our children after we die, the pain we may experience before death, and the medical costs to our families. We fear that moment of crossing into death itself. We tend to look back and size up our lives. Did we do well? Did we do everything we could have? Did we leave behind us a rose garden or a path of destruction? Death becomes truly dreadful because the divine judge can easily uncover piles and piles of guilty sin left in our wakes. We don't want to face death panicked with guilt.

But the glory from the garden of the empty tomb is a glory of grace. Consider what pains the angel took to alleviate the women's fears. He cared nothing about the quaking soldiers. He showed them no concern at all. But he reached out to the women in the gentlest, friendliest way and told them, **“Do not be afraid.”** He reminded them of Jesus' words. He showed them the empty tomb. He underlined the news by asking them to take it to the disciples. Such a glory of grace!

The glory of grace doesn't end there. As the women are on their way, from out of nowhere Jesus meets them. Does he appear threatening to them? Just the opposite. He comes to them in a familiar, friendly way. They can even run up and embrace him. Listen again: **“So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped 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’”** (verses 8-10).

Jesus calls his disciples “brothers.” Even after he has entered into his state of exaltation, he hasn't forgotten that he became one of us and why he became one of us. He came to take the punishment for our guilt away by his death on the cross. His resurrection is proof that he succeeded. Now, to all who put their confidence in Jesus, there is only friendliness, love, goodness, grace, kindness, and generosity from God. Past sins are no longer brought up or thrown in our faces. They are gone, forgiven. Death itself is no longer punishment for sin. Jesus is living proof that we too will rise from death. Jesus is proof of God's grace.

Jesus certainly did not leave us alone after he was exalted. The resurrected Jesus still comes to us in such familiar ways—through the voice of a pastor speaking God's Word, through the gentle splash of simple water and a promise in Baptism, through the tangible evidence of his body and blood in, with and under those visible elements of simple bread and wine in his Supper. Through these means we may cling to him in faith as the women did that first Easter morning. We may be assured that he is with us, that we are forgiven, and that we won't have to die alone.

We will experience the same victory over death as he did, and he will share with us all the glory of heaven that belongs to him. Unlike the beauty of the Garden of Eden, the glory of this garden can never fade or be ruined because Christ is its glory, and we will be with him and live for all eternity. Amen.