

Easter Day
April 5, 2026
Text: Matthew 28:1-10
The Rev. David B. Hodges

Easter 2026. It has been estimated that we as consumers in the United States will set a record this year and spend around \$25 billion celebrating Easter with purchases of food and candy making up the largest spending categories. As one economist points out, *while economic uncertainty remains on the minds of many, consumers are still focused on celebrations like Easter* (Mark Mathews, National Retail Federation, 3/24/26). Easter 2026. Some churches are celebrating in a variety of ways as one did last weekend in California when they hosted the *Great Helicopter Easter Egg Drop* in which 100,000 eggs were dropped into a sports stadium. That event also included a skydiving Easter bunny. On Good Friday evening, a church in Tennessee had an Easter drone show featuring hundreds of illuminated drones soaring over a large cross. The drones created a visual display of the resurrection of Jesus and the show ended with fireworks. (“Churches Try Drones and Skydiving Bunnies for Easter Outreach,” Christianity Today, 4/2/26)

Easter 2026. As conflict in the Middle East continues, Roman Catholic clergy were barred from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem last Sunday. It was the first time in centuries that access had been denied to that church identified as being the place of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Following outcry from political and religious leaders, permission was given for limited access so that the ancient tradition of celebrating Easter was able to happen

there today (CBS News, “Catholic cardinal to be allowed to enter Jerusalem's Church of Holy Sepulchre after being stopped by Israeli authorities,” 3/29/26).

As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb (Matthew 28:1). And so, begins the story that brings us to Easter 2026 in this church here in St. Louis. As we just heard, two women go to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed after his crucifixion. When they arrive, the earth begins to shake violently, and something identified as an angel appears. There were guards who had been sent to protect the tomb, and they become so afraid that they can't move. The first thing words spoken to the startled women by the angel are, *don't be afraid* (Matthew 28:5). But they are afraid because someone they loved is dead. They are afraid because they're not sure what may happen to them. They are afraid as they look into the darkness of a tomb, a place for the dead, and a mysterious being tells them that Jesus isn't there but has risen from death.

Now that could have been the story. Two women, a divine messenger, lots of fear and uncertainty, an empty tomb. Happy Easter. But there is more and that is why we are here this morning. As we celebrate this Easter morning and think about what those women experienced on that first Easter, remember that their initial reaction was an emotion that all of us experience and deal with throughout our lives, fear. It has been said that everything that happened while they were there that morning was soaked in fear, fear that seems to have been in the air. The kind of fear that you and I can identify with because all of us have faced endings, all of us have been concerned about the future, all of us have looked into tombs.

As the earth shook and an angel conveys the unbelievable news that Jesus is not there, in that moment there was a gap between Jesus and the two women and they were afraid. But what happens next closes the gap and it is what makes all the difference. Doing what the angel tells them to do, the women leave the tomb, but they aren't able to just leave their fear. They are still uncertain, still wondering what in the world has happened but their fear is now interlaced with joy because of what they have just been told. *Go quickly*, the angel says, *and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you. So, the women left the tomb quickly with fear* but also with *great joy* (Matthew 28:7-8). As one writer puts it, filled with fear and joy, the women run from the tomb and it was a time when those two emotions, fear, and joy, were holding hands (Greg Carey, Working Preacher, April 8, 2023).

As the women run from away from the tomb full of fear and joy, on the heels of the traumatic experience of finding it empty, they encounter the risen Jesus. They run into Jesus and the first thing they hear is the same thing they had already been told and the one thing they need to hear again, *don't be afraid* (Matthew 28:10). In writing about what took place that day, John Meacham points out that this encounter between the women and Jesus, is the beginning of *the story of Christianity* – a story that begins *with confusion, not with clarity; with mystery, not with certainty*. It is a story of fear and joy holding hands.

Jim Wallis is a writer and teacher who tells about being with Desmond Tutu who was the well-known Anglican Archbishop of South Africa at a worship service

in the Cathedral of St. George in Cape Town, South Africa. It was during the darkest days of the racist system of apartheid in that country when fear among the black population was rampant and the white government was trying to stifle their opposition whenever possible. Just a few weeks earlier, Tutu had been arrested and jailed for several days in another attempt by the government to make a statement.

On that day, the cathedral was filled and hundreds more gathered outside along with hundreds of police officers. As Bishop Tutu began preaching the sermon, the South African Security Police forced their way into the church carrying rifles. As they lined the walls of the cathedral, Tutu stopped preaching and for a moment he just stared at the officers who were staring at him. He then came down from the pulpit and acknowledged their power saying, *you are powerful, very powerful*. But Tutu then reminded them that he served a power greater than their political authority. *But I serve a God who cannot be mocked*. Then with a smile, he went on to say, *so since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!* Hearing that, the crowd in the cathedral was literally transformed from their fear of the police and they jumped up and began to sing and dance. On that day fear and joy held hands while the people danced their way out of the cathedral while as the security forces moved out of the way. That incident, Jim Wallis says, taught him more about the power of hope than any other moment in his life (God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It).

I believe in the resurrection in my bones. That statement was made by Jake Owensby, the Episcopal bishop of Western Louisiana, and it caught my

attention a few weeks ago when I heard him speak at a conference (Annual Clergy Retreat, Episcopal Diocese of Missouri). Bishop Jake then went on to talk about the death of his ten-year-old granddaughter, Addi, last summer. *Before that*, he said, *I believed in the resurrection of the dead. I still do. But now, I've come to feel it in my bones.* He described how Addi had been profoundly disabled with limited mobility, eyesight, and communication skills and how she loved to sit in his lap while he would sing to her. *The empty tomb of Jesus*, he says, *invites me to imagine that Addi now dwells in closer union with God, moving with grace, seeing with clarity, speaking articulately, singing the songs I once sang to her.* *This*, he goes on to say, *is what Jesus means by eternal life. A life that passes through and beyond sorrow, pain, regret, and death itself* (“Easter Is Different For Me Now, 4/3/26).

There is an old gospel hymn that talks about the resurrection of Jesus like this. *Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives all fear is gone, because I know God holds the future* (“Because He Lives,” Gloria and Bill Gaither). *Do not be afraid*, the angel said the women at the tomb. *Do not be afraid*, Jesus said after they had left the tomb and met him. What those women needed to hear that morning is what is what God is saying to you and to me on this Easter Day, 2026. As we think about the reality of eternal life with God, we can face every death, every loss, knowing that when we are afraid and uncertain we can always and, in some way, know the joy of resurrection hope. As Jake Owensby points out, eternal life isn't something that just happens after we die but it comes out of being in relationship with the risen Jesus (“Easter Is Different For Me Now, 4/3/26). It is

something that no tomb we will ever face can contain. *He is not here*, the angel said, *he has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you* (Matthew 28:6). As you leave this church, take those Easter words of faith and hope with you as we face tomorrow and every tomorrow and may God help you and me to believe in the resurrection in our bones. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.