

Suddenly

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
April 16, 2017
Easter – Year A

Matthew 28:1-10



The other day, I got in my car, turned right onto Royal Oaks, and was driving along at about forty miles an hour, listening to one of my favorite stations, when, suddenly...

How do you think this story is going to end?

Or this one. A couple is hiking in the deep woods of Alaska, making their way toward the waterfall at the end of the trail. The sound of the water gets louder and louder, crashing against the rocks. Her boyfriend turns to her, and, suddenly...

Or this one. 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...

I suspect most of us hearing the first two scenarios would determine that the “suddenly” was a prelude to a fearful thing. Suddenly, a deer ran out in front of my car and totaled it. Suddenly a bear stepped out onto the trail, freezing the couple in their tracks. But when we hear the third suddenly, the one that greets us in the text this morning, if you are like me, because you know how the story ends, you relaxed a bit and thought, “Nothing to fear here.”

Of course, I could have been driving along, listening to my favorite station, when suddenly the announcer breaks in and says Chris Joiner just won free tickets to the Pilgrimage Music Festival for answering the trivia question correctly. Or her boyfriend turns to her on the wooded trail and suddenly pulls out a ring and gets on one knee. And those two Marys, on the way to the tomb, do have a great deal to fear.

“Suddenly” is one of those words that can go either way – it can usher in fear, or joy. And in Matthew’s story of the resurrection, it occurs twice in these short ten verses, inviting us to lean in and listen, pay attention, because there is fear here, and great joy, then and now.

We left Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that dark night, all the candles extinguished, the stone rolled firmly in place, the tomb sealed. They observed from across the way as the large boulder was pushed into place. At some point, they went away, home to observe a heart-breaking Sabbath. The next day soldiers are placed on guard to make sure the tomb is secure.

The sun is beginning to break on the third day, the two Marys making their way. And suddenly...the earth is shaking beneath their feet. You remember last week, when Jesus was entering the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Matthew said the city was shaking. When Jesus cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and dies, Matthew says the earth shook and the rocks were split.

Only in Matthew do we catch a vision of this fearsome angel, face like lightning, clothing white as snow. The earth is shaking; the guards are shaking; the women say nothing...suddenly...

That's one way the word "suddenly" can go.

I was talking with a friend who has been bombarded with a host of bad events in his life. He said, "It's like I went to bed one night, the world made sense. I had a good job, a healthy family, dreams for the future, and suddenly..."

If you've ever eaten at the table with one of our homeless guests on a Wednesday evening or stayed the night, you know that almost every story about how they became homeless contains a "suddenly." And sitting with refugees in Lesbos, Greece, listening to them talk about how they left their homes amid great danger, somewhere along the way, suddenly...

Suddenly. That's how it happens. Worshipers gather amidst waving palm branches last Sunday, children dancing down the aisle, waving, shouting "hosanna." The worst thing that happened here were some children crying, startled out of their usual Presbyterian peace by raucous hosannas. But in Egypt? You hear the chants, the singing, and you can make out children's voices, and then, suddenly...

"That was sudden," we sometimes say, and the words usually do not precede a happy occasion.

If my children were here they would tell you their father does not like surprises. If the first I'm hearing about the bad grade is the moment I'm looking at the progress report, that's not good. They learned to prepare me.

“Wow, Dad, this chemistry class is really difficult...”

“I’m not sure I did well on that quiz the other day, Dad, just so you know...”

But if every time I ask, “Do you have any homework?” the answer is “no, I did it at school. It’s easy.” If I ask if they’ve studied for the test and they say, “yes, I’m ready,” and then a few weeks later...suddenly...a bad grade just drops out of the sky? Well, Dad’s gonna need a minute.

“Suddenly” implies something has been upended, something has happened for which you did not plan and which you have discovered you have very little control.

That includes resurrection. The one thing all the stories of resurrection tell us is that it was unexpected in every way, then and now. You are walking along, preparing to see a tomb, and suddenly you are face-to-face with an angel sitting atop the stone, face like lightning.

The angel is the one who names the women’s feelings. “Do not be afraid.” And then, a message, as stunning today as it was then, “He is not here, for he has been raised...”

And they leave quickly, Matthew says, “with fear *and* great joy.” How is it possible to be fearful and joyful at the same time? Tom Long sums it up I think:

“The wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive. The terrible news of Easter is that Jesus is alive. Nothing is nailed down anymore.” I told you last year that my friend John calls me every Easter morning and says, “Jesus is on the loose.” It gives me great joy, and, if I’m honest, fear, to hear it. All those plans I’ve made, all those things I think I’ve got all figured out, all of it is up for grabs if Jesus is on the loose.

I got in a political conversation the other day, which is happening more these days it seems. It was with a fellow Christian, and I guess you could say, for want of a better phrase, that he was “on my side.” I was speaking about an issue and expressing some feelings of hopelessness and cynicism. I think I may have even said something about building a bunker and stocking it with food. I was just trying to make a joke, but he stopped me. “I’ve heard you say a time or two in sermons that God is God and we are not and that Christ is Lord of all and Head of the Church. Do you believe that or not?”

And I said, “I’d appreciate it if you would just listen to my sermons quietly like a good Presbyterian, and not start quoting them back to me. I thought you were on my side.”

That's the thing, though. He's right. If it is true that Jesus is alive, then suddenly I'm not allowed to throw my hands up, and I'm certainly not allowed to draw up lines and demonize those with whom I disagree. Righteousness, mercy, justice, and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. We are called to look for him, at work in the world, to join that work, to not be afraid, to not lose hope.

And it is at that moment, at the intersection of fear and great joy, that suddenly...Jesus is present to them. That's the second "suddenly" in this text. It is in some ways an odd, unexpected moment. The women are not prepared for it. The angel wasn't prepared for it; he had told the women to go tell the disciples that they would see Jesus in Galilee. But here he is, not *in* Galilee, but on the road to Galilee...suddenly.

We had expected to see him here today, hear him in the brass and bells and organ fanfare, in the choirs, in the Hallelujah Chorus.

We had expected to see him here, with a cross covered in flowers, the sanctuary blooming in white, dressed up in our finest.

We had expected to see him here, pressed against one another in the pews, among this crowd, in the peace that passes between us.

But on the road? At that place where the music is a memory, and the hallelujahs have turned back into hosannas, or cries of forsakenness? When the blooms have fallen and the sky turns dark? When we are alone, putting one foot in front of the other, and the crowds have gone home? When our hearts tremble and peace seems a dream?

We expected to see him here, but what about when we go back into this trembling world, and all we have to go on is a word from a messenger, a rumor of resurrection – well, the preacher said Jesus was alive - but now we're back in the mess of life and we're trudging along the road, and beginning to wonder if we can believe this good news to be true, whether this Sunday to Sunday affirmation of faith really means anything at all, whether it can sustain us?

We expected to see him here, but what about out there, on the road, when there's a tug of war going on between fear and joy and the journey seems just long enough that fear may win?

It is at that most unexpected moment when, suddenly, he is present. He is near.

I wanted Easter to be perfect. Any pastor who says otherwise is not being honest. We hope that every person who comes through these doors never faces an uncomfortable moment, never sees anything that implies anything less than excellence. Last week, I was walking into the courtyard and I saw the flower beds, and there were weeds. I went to Glenda and said, "Please make sure the landscaping company gets out here and pulls those weeds. We can't have weeds on Easter." And I got an email from someone who has been having trouble hearing on Sundays and wanted to know if we had corrected the sound system. It made me remember that we were getting new speakers about halfway back. I called Rich and he said they wouldn't be in by Sunday. "How can they not be in by Sunday. Do they not realize it is Easter?"

And on it went. Just that morning, I had blogged about a weed that suddenly popped up in our yard. It bloomed yellow, but it was still a weed, and I wanted to pull it up. It was Kim who said she would not allow me to pull it up, because it was beautiful. "How can it be beautiful?" I wondered, "when it came up so suddenly?" Beauty must be cultivated, fertilized, controlled. But I couldn't deny it. There was beauty there...suddenly.

So you know what? There are some weeds out there. And the speakers didn't get here. And it rained on our sunrise service. And, it turns out, Jesus is still risen. We do not live our lives in the perfection of a perfectly manicured lawn. Our lives are lived on the messy road, somewhere between fear and great joy. And the good news of this day is that's where Jesus meets us...suddenly.