

*“The Next Right Thing”*

Based on Matthew 28:1-10

Delivered on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Today is Easter Sunday, but if we are honest, it still feels more like Holy Saturday. By that I mean Holy Saturday is the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, a day when the disciples who were following Jesus were left alone and afraid. It was the Sabbath, the mandatory day of rest, and so they did nothing. They could not ‘do’ anything, except hide wherever they were. What’s more, they were afraid of the Roman authorities, afraid that if they went anywhere, their life was at risk. In just two days, their whole lives had changed. They didn’t know what would come next. So, they just waited.

Now, Jesus had said very plainly in his teachings that He would die and rise again. But what they witnessed, wasn’t something you’d expect a person to recover from. Jesus had been scourged with a whip, and beaten, forced to carry His own cross. Then He was nailed to that cross, where He bled out and likely suffocated. The soldiers made sure He was dead, driving a lance into His side. Water and blood gushed freely from the wound. He was most certainly dead. His lifeless body was taken down from the wood, and He was sealed in a tomb by a boulder. Sure, Jesus said He would rise again, but He did not describe all of this. Did He actually know what He was saying? Was He ever who we hoped for? What do we do now? We had to have heard Him wrong. He had to have been wrong. This is too much.

Saturday was predicted to be a turning point, the peak day, in our battle with COVID-19. Nearly 21,000 Americans have died, including the loved ones of APC members. We had long since passed every nation in the number of infections, but yesterday, we passed Italy in the number of loved ones lost. It’s not the kind of number one you want to see for your nation.

I think that we can identify with the disciples on that Easter Saturday. We know that everything has changed, and we are wondering what will come next. We hope that life will go back to normal, but we have seen too much around us. Like disciples bound by the Sabbath, we are bound by stay-at-home orders. We cannot ‘do’ anything, except stay secluded, at socially distances, or else we put ourselves and more so, others, at risk. In just two months, our whole lives have changed. We don’t know what comes next, so, we also wait.

We have been told that on the other side of the peak is some kind of recovery. We have been told that if we continue this social distancing, numbers will go down. The hope is for fewer infections, fewer hospitalizations, and fewer deaths. Yes, the calendar says it is Easter Sunday, but it feels like Holy Saturday. Because the virus still remains a threat, even if there are fewer cases. Hospitals are still crowded, even if fewer people are admitted. Loved ones are still dying, even if fewer died today. And there is no projection or prediction that can change what we’ve already seen.

In the prelude today, Rick did an amazing job arranging four songs for us. Each one represented a day in Holy Week, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunrise. But the centerpiece of that performance wasn’t a hymn, but a song from a movie. The song is “The Next Right Thing,” and it comes from Disney’s Frozen 2. I’ve watched this movie a lot over the last few weeks with my kids, And this song captures the feeling of Holy Saturday.

In the movie, Queen Elsa, essentially gives her life for answers that might help save her people. Her sister Anna on realizing Elsa has died, is at first crippled by her grief, but she carries on to fulfill what Elsa started. In this song, I see her expressing what Mary Magdalene must have felt, what Peter, Andrew, John, James, Matthew and Nathaniel must have felt, what James, Jude, Thomas, Simon and Philip, must have felt, and what the other Mary's, Salome, Cleopas and many others, including Jesus's own mother, all must have felt.

*Anna sings, "I've seen dark before, but not like this, this is cold, this is empty, this is numb. The life I knew is over, the lights are out, hello, darkness, I'm ready to succumb. I follow you around, I always have, but now you've gone to a place I cannot find. This grief has a gravity, it pulls me down, but a tiny voice whispers in my mind: 'You are lost, hope is gone, but you must go on, and do the next right thing.'"*

The disciples were faithful Jews, so I don't doubt that the next right thing for them was prayer, to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, by praying and keeping the Sabbath. They loved one another by grieving together and waited for their opportunity to show their love for Jesus, by anointing Him for a proper burial, one that the Sabbath prevented.

*Anna goes on to sing, "So, I'll walk through this night, stumbling blindly toward the light, and do the next right thing and, with it done, what comes then? When it's clear that everything will never be the same again, then I'll make the choice, to hear that voice, and do the next, right thing."*

This is the place that Mary Magdalene was in, when she and the other Mary went to the tomb. They had put everything they had in their faith that Jesus was the Messiah, that He was the King promised by God, that He was the image of God to them. Even though He said all those things about being handed over, about being killed, and about rising on the third day, here they were, on that third day, still unsure of everything, stumbling blindly toward the tomb in the dawn's light, to do the next right thing in that moment.

As they head to the garden, there is an earthquake that shakes the ground beneath them, and at the tomb, an angel has rolled the stone away and now sits on top of it. The guards are on the ground, alive, but looking like they have been killed, and the angel has the audacity to say, "Do not be afraid!" Who in their right mind would not be terrified in that moment? But he says, "You're looking for Jesus. He isn't here. He's been raised, just as He said He would be."

The stone isn't rolled away so Jesus can escape, but to show the women that He isn't there. Matthew says the women scurried off, quickly away from the tomb, in a mixture of terror and great delight, yes, with fear and great joy, only to be greeted by Jesus on the road, to see Him whom they hoped for. Imagine the emotions within these women, who were the first proclaimers of the gospel and Jesus's resurrection. Maybe you can identify some with them now, because they freshly had what we search for. They had hope. And in the midst of our pain in this life, we want and search for hope.

Today, is a day of hope for us. And boy do we need it, now as much as ever to replace our fear. We live in a time when pain and suffering are broadcast to us from all over the world, it is easy to get lost in despair, to feel an overwhelming need to change it all, and an equally overwhelming paralysis because the problems are too big. When I look at news in the world in every country today, everyone has a big idea. They are rallying around populist political figures or advancing

their ideological stance, hoping that maybe their thing, just maybe, it will fix everything, fix not just coronavirus, but everything that ails us. If only, yes, if only, X, Y or Z would happen – all would be right.

But Easter's hope, as a popular Christian song says, it "won't fix your life in five easy steps." The hope I'm talking about comes from love, the love of God we celebrate on this day. You see, Easter isn't about the miracle of all miracles, some supernatural stunt, that if you can prove, it means God is real, and Christians are somehow perfect. No, Easter is about believing that God's love is greater than all else, but most of all, it's greater than our sin and greater than the power of death itself.

As I've said before, from our perspective, what you and I think all powerful God should do, doesn't seem to always line up with what is going on in the world. I cry out in lament that the God I love and serve doesn't just fix everything now. The problems of this world are just too big, pain and suffering too great. Why God, why or why, won't you just come back right now? Or whisk us away so that we don't have to endure all this? Why did you make it all this way in the first place?

But regardless of the answer to these questions, I hold on to the historic faith of the Church, that the God who is all-powerful, who is all-knowing, and who is all-loving, chose to enter into this broken creation, overrun by sin and death, to share in our humanity, to live as we live, and die on a Roman cross, taking on the full force of sin and death in order to give us life, to conquer these forces by submitting to them for us, to give us a gift we cannot earn and do not deserve, but which is offered freely – God's love & mercy, and God's life, abundant and eternal.

So, yes, here we are in this Easter Saturday moment, in a broken and troubled world, waiting, and we want the next big thing to come, and we want God to fix it all right now. But for whatever reason, God has called us to share in fixing this broken world. You see, in Jesus, we have seen God's love and by the Holy Spirit, that love has been poured into our hearts. This love has been put inside of us, not for us to hold it there, but to share it, and to spread it.

The love of the Holy Spirit is placed inside the believer expressly to change the world, yes, it is there to reconcile all things to God through Jesus, who came to be God among us, and by His life, death and resurrection, has already done the '1' great thing.

And so, our job is simply to believe and do the next right thing, to remember His love for us, to remember all we have seen and been through together, and follow His command: To love one another, just as Jesus loves us. Because Love never fails. The world sent love to the cross to fail. But love rose again for you. Amen.