

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Living as Easter People
April 5, 2026
Matthew 28:1-10

Presbyterian pastor Pam Driesell tells a story about her friend Mary and her Easter morning experience with her four-year-old daughter, Elena. Wanting to be sure Elena really understood what Easter is all about, Mary tried to explain it to her.

"Mommy, will the Easter bunny bring me purple jelly beans?"

I am sure he will bring you jelly beans, Elena. But, remember, Easter isn't about the bunny. It's about Jesus.

"But will they be purple?"

Yes, honey, I am sure there will be some purple ones in there. Honey, the important thing about Easter isn't the bunny. Easter is about how much Jesus loves you and me and the whole world.

"Mommy, HOW MANY purple jelly beans will the Easter Bunny bring me?"

Elena, I think he will probably bring plenty of purple jellybeans. Do you know how much Jesus loves you?

"Mommy..."

Yes Elena?

"Will he bring me tootsie rolls too?"¹

What a world Elena inhabits! Those of you with young children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren know just how important the right candy can be to a child on Easter.

While we expect a focus on sugary fun from a four-year-old, we may be less apt to admit that sometimes our own Easter experiences overemphasize things we can buy. For some, it can

¹ Pam Driesell. "Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans." Available from http://day1.org/2865-beyond_bunnies_and_jelly_beans

be hard to resist purchasing new Easter outfits, putting together Easter baskets, decorating with Easter flowers, and, of course, securing the best food possible for Easter dinner.

None of these things are bad, but hopefully you came here this morning because you are seeking something more. Perhaps you are seeking wisdom for a challenging situation. Maybe you just want to connect or reconnect with God. Or, it's possible that you simply need a First Christian Church Easter experience.

Let's enter the story. Think about how it begins. The two Marys come knowing Jesus is dead. The future they had been holding onto has slipped away. They are grieving. And in that moment, they do what many of us would do. They go to the place where he was.

While all four Gospel writers include this story, only Matthew features special effects that play well to a modern audience, especially on the big screen. One contemporary paraphrase – a version I shared during the sunrise service – explains the earthquake greeting in this way:

Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it.²

Fear overcomes the women. Mary and Mary feel paralyzed as the scene unfolds before them.

Fear is their initial response to the arrival of an angel. But we should recognize this is consistent with expectations. After all, fear has been everyone's response.

Before angels can utter good news, they need to calm their intended recipients. In the events that have led up to today, the Gospels have featured several angelic greetings, including:

- "Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

² Matthew 28:2, The Message.

- "Don't be afraid, Mary."
- "Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife. Her baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit."³

And now, this morning we have another angelic appearance that begins with these words:

"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."⁴

Mary and Mary did the only thing they could: they rushed off to do as they had been instructed. As they hurry down the road, they encounter the Resurrected One. Jesus' initial word was "Greetings,"⁵ but was followed immediately by the now familiar phrase "Do not be afraid."⁶

In my retelling of the story to emphasize the fear, I failed to slow down and talk about the main event. While the actions of these two faithful disciples are important, it seems as though Jesus' overcoming death deserves more attention.

Our modern sensibilities want answers. What happened while Jesus lay dead in the tomb? Exactly when did Jesus stop being dead? Why don't people who know him well recognize him anymore?

Theologians have amazingly complex and largely unsatisfying answers to all of these questions and to others we might ask. There is not one right answer to any question in part because the biblical accounts don't tell us this part of the story.

³ Alyce McKenzie. "My Favorite Angel: Easter Reflections on Matthew 28:1-10." Available from <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Favorite-Angel-Alyce-McKenzie-04-11-2014>

⁴ Matthew 28:5b-7.

⁵ Matthew 28:9.

⁶ Matthew 28:10.

This morning our goal must not be to explain how the Resurrection happened, but to understand what Jesus' Resurrection means for us.

George Mason, the recently retired long-time minister of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, helps us begin moving in that direction when he writes:

We are not here for a history lesson on what exactly happened that Sunday morning at the tomb. You will not believe in the resurrection of Jesus any more than Mary would have if the same thing does not happen to you that happened to her.

Because Christ is free from the grave, he is free to free you from the grave and to meet you unexpectedly along the ordinary paths of your life.⁷

That kind of resurrection is not something we analyze from a distance. It is something we encounter. And that raises an even deeper question. It's one the former President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Craig Barnes, pushes us to address:

The question that Easter asks of us is not "Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?" Frankly, that's not particularly hard.

What the Gospels ask is not "Do you believe?" but 'Have you encountered a risen Christ?'"⁸

This is a loaded question. It is also a potentially dangerous one. Jesus was a revolutionary. The risen Christ was, is, and always will be a world changer.

He lives today in another body; he is alive in the church, something we sometimes refer to as the Body of Christ. This is where we are most likely to be introduced to him.

⁷ George Mason. "Christ on the Loose." Available from https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025eb/christ_on_the_loose

⁸ Craig Barnes. "Savior at Large." Available from <https://www.religion-online.org/article/savior-at-large-john-201-18/>

And in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we've never insisted that you have to explain exactly how the resurrection works in order to belong.

Week after week, we come with questions, with hope, and with hunger, trusting that the risen Christ meets us there.

We invite all to the table. We welcome all to the feast. And we trust that Jesus cannot be contained or controlled, and is fully present among us.

In moving from fear into God's future, we begin to live as Easter people. And maybe the clearest glimpse of that comes not from theologians, but from a child.

Sarah Lund, my former regional minister, tells the story of Easter morning with her three-year-old son. They went to church to see the Risen One.

Here's how she tells it:

Before entering the sanctuary, he knelt at the wire cross filled with flowers, took a yellow carnation from the white plastic bucket sitting on the ground, and added the flower to the cross. Then he yelled out, "I don't see Jesus!"

Sitting in church as worship started, I whispered in his ear, "Jesus is in your heart." He quickly replied, "But he's too big for my heart."⁹

And that's it, isn't it? Jesus is too big.

He's too big for our hearts, too big for our categories, and too alive to be located in just one place or explained in just one way.

Which means if we are looking for Jesus only here and now, relying only on what we already understand, we might miss him.

In reality the story doesn't end at the tomb. It doesn't even stay at the burial site. It isn't contained within the walls of the church.

⁹ Sarah Lund. "The Secret Message of Easter." Available from <http://sarahgriffithlund.com/2014/04/16/easter-hope-hunt/>

So maybe living as Easter people looks less like having all the right words and more like being willing to follow knowing Jesus has already gone ahead.

Christ is risen. And somehow, we are part of what comes next. We can join the women, going and telling, living as Easter people.

Amen.