

Anyone who has ever taken a physics class may remember Newton’s laws of motion. Even if you’ve never taken physics or had to memorize Newton’s laws, you’re probably familiar with the basics. The first law is the simple observation that an object at rest tends to stay at rest unless an outside force acts on it to get it moving. **It’s called “inertia.”** Then, once an object gets pushed, were it not for friction and its sapping that object of energy, the now-moving thing will keep on moving in a straight line until some other force stops it. That’s why in outer space, where there is no friction, if you throw a baseball at 45 MPH, the ball will keep on traveling at that same speed potentially forever. It would have to hit something or get sucked into a planet’s gravity or else it would just keep zooming along at 45 MPH. That’s about all the HS physics I can remember!!

**But this much I know: An object at rest tends to stay at rest unless some outside force acts on it.** Long ago on Easter morning, Jesus’ corpse was a fine example of “inertia.” It wasn’t going anywhere on its own. But even before the angel rolled the stone away, our heavenly Father exerted an eternal “force” of glory on the body of our Lord. **It made his body new. It made the Resurrected Jesus hurtle out of that tomb even before somebody opened the front door.** Ever since, and forevermore, Jesus has been moving *in a straight line* that leads to the bright riches of God’s heavenly kingdom.

Matthew alone depicts for us precisely what outside “force” acted on the stone to move it: *“An angel came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it,”* as though it were a park bench. The angel was dazzling like lightning and fearsome looking. He scared silly the Roman guards at the tomb. In fact, they fainted dead away. The women might have followed suit had **the angel** not taken pains to address them tenderly and as quickly as possible: *“Do not be afraid...”* **And then the angel tells them in verse 6 that Jesus is not there:** *“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay... Tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.”*

Most children know and appreciate all the excitement and wonder that comes with Christmas. Adults know that the excitement is slightly diminished by all the fuss, expense, and behind-the-scenes preparations that can also come with celebrating Christmas. **Christmas looms large in our collective consciousness, so it may come as a surprise to know that historically Easter has been the pre-eminent Christian festival and much much larger.**

Why has this change in popularity come about—at least in our culture? Part of the reason may be that **Christmas has more familiar associations** that include a touching story of the birth of **a unique and special baby boy**. Aren't all babies unique and special? My point is that a story about birth is far more accessible to most people than a story about death and resurrection—**death** being a familiar but not attractive concept, and **resurrection** being not only unfamiliar but also otherworldly and by and large unknown. Even so, the yearly narration of the Easter story can bring some helpful new insights into this event that we may think of as unknown, otherworldly, and mysteriously inspiring.

The story in Matthew's gospel reveals the classic conflict of good versus evil through the surprising announcement that death is defeated in the return to life of the wise teacher, Jesus. **It's vitally important to note that this is not resuscitation but Resurrection.** Resuscitation has become more common because of 21st century advances in medical science. There have been an increased number of situations in which people who would otherwise be pronounced clinically “dead” are able to continue their lives because of **speedy and effective medical intervention**. The first century situation of Jesus being raised from the dead, however, is more than simply being brought back to life. Resuscitated people eventually die. **Resurrection is about the transformation of the body we have known into a new body, in essence, unknown until Jesus came;** *“sown in dishonor and raised in glory; sown in weakness and raised in power,”* as Paul puts it. A body that lives on eternally with God.

The concept of resurrection is complex and confusing to many people, without even mentioning that the Bible story which includes earthquakes and angel

messengers, sealed tombs opening, and a man last seen dead and buried now alive again in a new and wonderful way. All of that means our rational minds naturally have difficulty accepting these sorts of *unknown* things. There is no denying that the story offers a strange mixture of *fear* and *joy*, along with an equally strange mixture of heavenly promise and precise detail.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to “*look at the tomb*” where the body of Jesus was placed. Their journey was interrupted by a sudden violent earthquake, and just as unexpectedly an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone covering the entrance to the tomb and sat on it. This creature spoke to them in precise detail about the amazing promise of the Resurrected Lord: “*He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee*” (v. 7). This detail is then repeated when Jesus himself meets the women and tells them: “*Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me*” (v. 10).

Do you notice that even in the Resurrection story *fear* plays a central role? Once again, we see Jesus offering reassurance, and freeing the women at the tomb from the fear they are experiencing. By the way I think, *the fear the women experience is entirely justifiable, because they are talking to a dead man!!* I call this the fear of the *unknown*. The women have no way to comprehend or process what they are experiencing, so they are *filled with fear*. Jesus understands this and speaks peace into their very real fear. He also reassures them with his physical presence, as they clasp his feet and worship him. But once again, as we saw throughout Lent, Jesus not only speaks peace into their fear, but he also gives them a mission. *He sends them out into the unknown!* You see, Jesus’ followers are always on a mission. Jesus appoints the women to be the very first tellers of the glorious Easter news.

In Matthew’s version of the Easter story Jesus does not appear to the disciples in Jerusalem, or in the Upper Room, or on the road to Emmaus. Jerusalem, the center of political and religious authority, is intentionally downplayed in what may be another example of *the amazing reversals* in the story of the life and

ministry of Jesus.

For instance, if we take an overview look at the Gospels, it was a reversal of expectations that the birth of the Savior took place in a humble stable. It was a visible reversal of expectations that Jesus entered Jerusalem not on a white steed, but humbly riding on a donkey. It was yet another reversal of expectations that the Master took on the role of a servant in washing his disciples' feet. And now, with the great reversal of victory over death, the Risen Christ gives priority to out-of-the-way Galilee where his ministry began.

Remember Galilee was home territory to Jesus, but Galilee was not viewed as important, especially when compared to the power and prestige of the capital city of Jerusalem. Galilee was seen as a backwater kind of place, and Galileans were thought of as country bumpkins (kind of like where I grew up). The story of Peter's denial of ever knowing Jesus concludes with Peter being identified as a Galilean (Matt. 26:73). His country accent gave him away.

The name Galilee comes from the Hebrew *galil* which means "border," with the connotation of Galilee serving as a boundary area between *the known and the unknown*. To those at the perceived center of power and influence in Jerusalem, Galilee was distant, strange, and frankly unimportant. This strangeness was heightened by the fact that many Gentiles lived in that region. It was a trade route and a crossroads area populated by Greeks, Phoenicians, Syrians, and other non-Jewish people, worshippers of other gods, aligned with the Roman Empire, the occupier and oppressor of the Jews. And yet, Jesus tells his disciples to go to Galilee to meet him. **Galilee is where he gives them the Great Commission to go and "make disciples of all nations"** (Matt. 28:19). How appropriate it is that this new mission is initiated in Galilee, a Jewish place, but with people representing a melting pot of cultures and nations.

With all that was strange and amazing surrounding the events in Jerusalem, the Risen Jesus takes his disciples back to what was familiar to most of them, back to Galilee, in order to prepare them for something altogether new and

wonderful. This journey takes them away from Jerusalem and their *paralyzing fear*, their hiding behind closed doors. By going to Galilee, they move away from any speculation and second-guessing about what comes next. They went back to Galilee and were given work to do—important kingdom work. They didn't isolate themselves in a private, exclusive club of "first disciples," but they drew their circle wide enough to include "*all nations*."

Dear friends, Matthew's Gospel reminds and reassures us that Jesus *goes ahead of us* and will meet us in whatever is our equivalent of Galilee, so we never have to be afraid of the *unknown*. We don't have to go to some unknown place to encounter the Risen Christ. We don't have to go into some hyper-spiritual zone. We can go to a familiar place, like home, or to someplace completely *unknown* that is new and different. Either way, Jesus will meet us there. Once Jesus was set free from death, he has been moving in a straight line that leads us to the bright riches of God's heavenly kingdom. That's called inertia!

Christ makes everything new, and with God's help we overcome every fear, discover new courage, let go of old hurts and prejudices, enter new relationships, and learn new ways of faithful living. Which one of your fears does Jesus want to take from you today?

Fear of inadequacy? Fear of circumstances? Fear of death? Fear of the unexplainable? Fear of hell? Fear of the unexpected? Or fear of the unknown?

Jesus can and he will free you from all your fear if you simply ask him. On Easter Day, and every day, we can know without a doubt: That we are loved, we are forgiven, we are accepted by Christ, and we are sent out to join in Christ's ongoing work. **Knowing this, we're able to live a new life that takes us to the known and the unknown with Jesus, to love, forgive, and accept, as Jesus did.**

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!* Amen.