

(Matthew 28:1-10 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.<sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.<sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.<sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.<sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.<sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.<sup>7</sup> 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.' This is my message for you."

<sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

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## As Good As It Gets

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

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Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Nineteen years ago, Easter morning 1980, I had little idea what lay ahead that day. It was the first Easter after I had just a short time before finalized plans for a huge change in my life. I had heard a call to the ordained ministry. I had in my possession a letter of acceptance from Harvard Divinity School. I had just notified the company of which I was a vice-president that I was resigning my post in the mid-summer, and that I was selling our house and moving our family to Boston.

It had been a time of incredible changes, huge decisions and high emotions. And yet I had never been more certain of anything, nor happier in my life. And so I came to this first Easter after feeling God's presence in my life in this intense way sure of one thing: this Easter would be just incredible. I would experience the resurrection like never before. And I planned to give it every chance to be like the explosion of fireworks I imagined.

I convinced my brother Jeff to go with me for the sunrise service. But this wasn't just an ordinary sunrise service. It was at the Cathedral of Pines in Rindge, New Hampshire. Rindge was over an hour away, and not only that, this service was a really at sunrise, and not just really at sunrise, but the service actually ended at sunrise. That meant that we left home at 3:30 that morning. What a good sport my brother was!

So there we were at quarter until 5:00 in the morning in the pitch damp dark of the New Hampshire woods. The parking lot at the cathedral was full. Many had come in campers and stayed the night. Others had arrived even before we did. In all there were hundreds recognized only by the beams from their flashlights bouncing up the path, like so many overgrown fireflies.

I had been to the Cathedral of the Pines before and knew that the sanctuary was actually the open ground under a canopy of pine trees in the southern New Hampshire mountains. The pulpit was at the very edge of a precipice. So, as you stood in the Cathedral you took in a panoramic vista of the southern New Hampshire ridges, which braided themselves like great loaves of challah. But, of course, that was from memory, for it was now still night, and the whole service took place in the darkness and required flashlights to follow the bulletin.

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The service was precisely timed. Everything, including the sermon was assigned exact fractions of the clock. All this control of the seconds was designed to maximize the symbolization of the awesome surroundings. Exactly, on the last verse of the last hymn, the sun was to break the eastern mountains in a magnificent display of resurrection light. The living beauty of God's creation was to be unmistakable. And on this particular Easter the display was especially spectacular. The morning was brilliantly clear. The sun's light was sharp and sudden. Day overcame night in the course of a verse, and no one seeing it could doubt the fact of eternal life. It was gorgeous.

I girded myself for emotions which I knew would overpower me and send waves of vertigo rushing over me. I stood there. I watched the sun break the mountains on cue. I readied myself. I held onto a tree for balance. And then that was it. Nothing, at least nothing special.

I couldn't believe it. Where were the skyrockets? Where was the rush of dizziness? Where were the tears of joy? Where was the confirmation that I had heard rightly God's claim on me? Where was the experience of Easter morning that I had anticipated so much? No, where was the Easter I had so carefully staged to be overwhelming? I was there holding onto a tree like a fool, and nothing much else was going on at all.

I think if I had been thinking straight I would have turned to everyone and said, like Jack Nicholson did in the title line of a recent film, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

I was too stunned to make such a challenge. Instead, I drove the hour and more home in the quiet dawn of Easter 1980, speaking hardly a word to my brother, flipping from radio channel to radio channel hoping that one of the radio preachers might summon up for me the awe at Easter I had somehow misplaced. It never happened. I arrived home tired, disappointed and not a little worried about my fitness for the vocation to which I had committed everything.

Matthew's version of Easter, for some reason, always recalls for me the indifference I felt on this Easter of which I had expected so much more. I'm not sure exactly why. When you read the story in Matthew, it has all the parts. There's an earthquake. There's an angel. The women experience fear and joy. They even see Jesus, whom they fall down and worship. It has all the parts. But somehow it never moves me in the same way Easter in the other Gospels does. Mark is more stark and leaves a lot of provocative questions. John gives us the wonderful conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, who mistakes Jesus for the gardener, and it gives us doubting Thomas. And Luke gives us rich imagery of doubt and fear, and especially he gives us the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. But Matthew is straightforward, business-like. It seems to lack a certain

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passion. For me it recreates that rather passionless Easter sunrise at the Cathedral of the Pines. The parts were there, but somehow it didn't add up.

Passionless Easter; it seems like an oxymoron, like Scrooge at Christmas. My response to that long ago Easter sunrise and to Matthew always frighten me a little. I wonder where the fire is. It's a little frightening, like the comment in Jack Nicholson's movie: "What if this is as good as it gets?"

His character, Marvin Udall, suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, which has kept him locked away in his apartment, separated from the outside world forever, a world that seems to pose nothing but danger. To further protect himself he is the most disagreeable of men. But then something changes. Marvin Udall begins to break out of his shell. He falls for his neighbor's dog that he got forced into dog-sitting for. He begins to care about his gay neighbor, whom he has heretofore treated brutally. And most of all, he begins to have feelings for the one waitress who will wait on him at the restaurant, Carol, played by Helen Hunt.

Marvin breaks into his psychiatrist's office and demands to be treated. He is now motivated to get better. In a very funny scene, the psychiatrist refuses to talk with him because he doesn't have an appointment. The interchange is meant to make it clear that there is no quick fix in sight. Marvin leaves the office furious. For the first time in his life he wants to be better more than he wants to hide, and it's not at all clear that he can have what he wants. In one of the most acerbic lines in the film, on the way out he stops in the waiting room full of other's suffering one imagines similarly intractable conditions to his; he stops long enough to spit at them, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

Here is Marvin Udall allowing himself to want to be better, thinking that it may not be possible that he will get any better, and fearful and even angry that he has let himself want to.

Most of us may not have problems as severe as Marvin Udall, but if the Christian message is on the mark, we are all something like him. The Christian message suggests that we are in need of wholeness, that we are in need of newness of life, that we are in many ways not alive. It suggests that we are not free but are in one kind of bondage or another. Most of the time we live in this less than ideal reality, coping as best we are able, thinking, perhaps, that it is just how normal life is. But then, maybe quite to our surprise, we may find ourselves drawn to the positive side of this message. We may be drawn to the promises of love and freedom, newness of life and wholeness. Maybe we even have some experiences of it, or at least catch glimpses of it. We stick our toes in, and then maybe more and more.

And then we may jump in all the way. We may allow ourselves to openly desire the promises. We may open our arms to embrace them. And sometimes, maybe more times than not, at this moment when we finally say, "Here I am, take

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me,” it suddenly goes flat. Just when we’ve made the rather courageous leap of faith to say, “Yes, God, I want more out of life; I’ll take those promises” – Just at that moment when it should all come together, instead of fireworks we may experience a dull silence and feel little different than we did before. And we may be left asking, “What if this is as good as it gets?”

Somewhere C.S. Lewis says that one of the difficult things about becoming a Christian is coming to grips with the fact that your life and the things you do are pretty much the same as before you became one. He’s right, of course, but that can’t be the whole story. Otherwise why bother. And more important, we are promised much more than that. Like Marvin Udall, once we’ve actually allowed ourselves to believe it can be better, once we’ve let down the guard, once we have become vulnerable to possibility, it would be too cruel to find out that things really don’t change.

Matthew is often called the Gospel of the church. It is often recognized as the Gospel that most obviously is addressed to an early but well formed institutional church and a Christianity that was no longer brand new. Matthew, then no doubt, contended with people who, like us, sometimes found their faith providing less than spectacular light shows.

So, Matthew gives us Easter. All the parts are there. Matthew’s Easter acknowledges the grandness of the day. But it also allows for the times when Easter is a little less than exhilarating.

Marvin Udall decided he was ready to get well, but it didn’t happen all at once as he had hoped. That left him full of fury and doubt. But a curious thing had happened. The desire to get well couldn’t be extinguished; it wouldn’t let him go. And step by difficult step he began to change. The great joy in the movie was watching him keep going against the odds. It was in seeing the sparkling moments of change, such as when he confessed to Carol that she made him want to be a better man, and when he told her how he recognized and appreciated her directness and integrity, things very few others bothered to see in her. The great joy in the movie was watching the little, hard-won Easters mount up, one after another, until it became clear that he was getting better, indeed.

Matthew’s Easter gives us the big resurrection at the tomb for all who find themselves in that big Easter frame of mind. Matthew also gives us the Easter that sneaks up on us, the kind where we think not much is happening, the kind that is cumulative. We hear the story’s familiar words, and maybe they creep up on us. Maybe we meet Jesus on the way from the tomb or on our way out the door from Easter service, or maybe on our own road of disappointment and tears, our own Emmaus, or maybe when we bend over to take the ham out of the oven, or maybe in the midst of an ordinary conversation, or maybe a hundred or a thousand other times when we least expect it. We meet Jesus, not necessarily in the sound of

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trumpets and shouts of alleluia, but in those micro-bursts of light that flash through our consciousness hardly detectable, when we're doing the things of our life mostly the same, or we think we are. And then one day we notice that everything has become different, that the wholeness and newness of life we have longed for has infused itself within us. Like Marvin Udall, step by step, hardly recognizing it was happening, we have become well.

Finally, then, though it may not be Easter morning – it may be in the middle of the summer, or the fall, or even the winter – but finally we know the answer to the question we asked in the doldrums. Is this as good as it gets? The answer is no. It gets better, much better; we get better, much better. And all that we have dared to long for, all the promises we had been willing to believe in and had felt foolish for doing so, all that Jesus had sworn to us, becomes as real and bright as we could have ever hoped. On that day we say, “Christ the Lord has risen today; he has risen, indeed!” Thanks be to God. Amen.

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