

“When We Awake, When We Arise”
Delivered Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026
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[“I Feel Sorry for Jesus.”](#)

People won't leave Him alone.
I know He said, *wherever two or more
are gathered in my name...*
but I'll bet some days He regrets it.

When I was in seminary, one of my professors paraphrased this particular bit of scripture in a memorable way. This phrase also comes from the gospel of Matthew, which we heard a bit of today - earlier in its telling of the life and ministry of Jesus, in chapter 18, verse 20, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” In one of our Congregational Studies classes, my professor updated this to “Wherever two or three gather in my name *and aren't total jerks about it*, then I am with them.”

(In the interest of full disclosure, she didn't use the term “total jerks.” She used another term I'm loath to use from the pulpit. But it comes to the same!)

Oh, we laughed! All these hopeful ministers-to-be

appreciated this nod to the fact that when we spend a lot of time in churches, we are unfortunately sometimes witness to behavior that ...well, maybe doesn't belong in a church. That maybe doesn't belong anywhere, at least anywhere we mean to talk seriously about love, and human community, and how we do the hard, transformational work of companioning one another through the darkest of times, when renewal and hope feel impossibly remote.

Do not be afraid! We hear that phrase repeated twice in the reading from Matthew. First of all, an otherworldly creature dressed in white so bright as to be blinding tells the women this, after an earthquake and the revelation that their friend - whose execution they had witnessed mere days before! - was no longer in the tomb. THEN, that selfsame friend appeared before them, quite alive. And what they are told is "Do not be afraid."

Seriously?

When they are taking their leave of the angel, but before they encounter Jesus, we hear "So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

Afraid, yet filled with joy.

What a summation of the human experience in uncertain times, when one suddenly catches a glimpse of something that might...just...be... hope.

What went through the minds of those women - I will *a/ways* take a moment to point out how significant it is that in all four Gospels, women are the first witnesses to the resurrection, to the reawakening of hope for the world in the foundational story of Christianity - what on earth did those women think and feel when the tomb was empty? When they met a man who seemed both to be and not be their friend (they do not recognize him in every Gospel) - because he was not the same broken and battered person that had been buried? As they considered this man, this strange vision, he gave them their second “Do not be afraid.” Reassuring them that even though reality appears confusing and terrifying, hope does in fact arise. He wants them to find comfort and reassurance, though he understands the strangeness of the situation.

Ah, but what am I doing?

“See? I’m talking like I know.

It’s dangerous talking for Jesus.

You get carried away almost immediately.”

You do. / do. I want to go to this well and draw from it what I wish to receive from it. Whatever might have been done and said on that Sunday morning long ago is lost to the fog of time. What we have now is all the “talking for Jesus” that has been done over and over, by different people for different reasons, throughout all of history.

Now people can make any meaning they like from any text they choose. They - we - can twist beautiful words into hate and transform hateful words into beauty.

I know that there are people within the sound of my voice this morning who have had the stories of the life of Jesus used against them, to do harm and sow shame and pain, and I wish that that had never happened. I wish I could somehow prevent it from ever happening again. But it's happening right now, somewhere in this country, somewhere in a church - where far more than two or three are gathered. They are gathered in what they claim to be the name of Jesus...but they are *being total jerks about it*.

“Cozily they tell you what He wants
and doesn't want
as if they just got an e-mail.

Remember 'Telephone', that pass-it-on game

where the message changed dramatically

by the time it rounded the circle?

Well.

People blame terrible pieties on Jesus.

They want to be his special pet.

Jesus deserves better.

I think He's been exhausted
for a very long time."

I suspect that if the historical Jesus could know the sorts of things being done and said in his name, he would NOT be happy about it. But there I am again - trying to project my experiences as a middle class American white woman living in the 21st century onto the scattered and inconsistent historical record of a Palestinian Jew, a brown man living over 2000 years ago under the rule of the Roman empire. It's dangerous every time we do it. We are witnessing that, every day, here in our country, where white Christian Nationalists pervert the message of Jesus, of loving thy neighbor, of feeding the hungry and housing the unhoused and comforting the prisoner - every day under the banner of Christian Nationalism, people in our country are neither. They are unChristian and they are not serving the interest of our country, but only the false prophets who center their own agendas, egos, and search for power. It's enough to make you want to flip some tables, I tell you what.

But we are here, every single one of us, no matter what hurtful theology has been thrown at us, no matter how people have twisted beautiful words into arrows to aim at our hearts, we are here because of so many untold generations of ancestors who survived. Who kept going when they were scared. Who held true to their word and their responsibility even when the world around them didn't seem to make sense any more. Who found a way to say yes again and again in a world that wanted them to shut down, to say no, to turn away from words and deeds that might inspire them to kindle a flame of hope in their hearts, despite everything.

“[More](#) than the fuchsia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me. When all the shock of white and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath, the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us, a return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf

unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.”

The shock of white and taffy here - the bright audacity of spring - sets up an echo in my mind of the impossibly white garment of the angel. Who living in that age and time could possibly get clothing that bright and white? Are we not constantly being coated by the dust of the world? The worry and heartache and sorrow and anger and fear and all the dust that lands on us, that weighs us down? Who could expect to look at the mud after spring rains and see anything so bright and beautiful arising from it? But without that mud, we would never get the blossoms. Without the dust of this world, there is nowhere for our roots to take hold. Our roots, and the roots of all of us, everywhere, for always, who have rooted in times of darkness and fear and never stopped seeking the light, and the joy.

It is dangerous anytime any of us purports to speak for another, to know the inner thought and landscape of another. Ada Limon is careful to tell us that it's what the tree's unfurling leaves SEEM to say - the interiority of the tree is not assumed, but that does not diminish the beauty and meaning that we can take from it when we see it happening. When we get a sign or sight or signal that there is still good in the world, that there are people still gathering - by two, or three, or ever more - who are trying

very hard *not* to be total jerks about it, about *any* of it - we are allowed to take on that hope as a part of our sacred vision for the world. Of course we know there are people out there acting like jerks about this - about the story of Jesus, about any meaning we try to make that is generative and full of hope, people who would deny not just the existence but the sacredness of our immigrant neighbors, our transgender neighbors, our neighbors who speak other languages and practice other faiths and come from other cultures - we know. We know they're there. They exhaust us. And that exhaustion can make hope hard to reach for.

But really...we don't know.

None of us know the interiority of Jesus.

None of us know the soul of the tree.

None of us know the heart of our neighbor, the pain they may have experienced that is leaking out in ways perhaps they don't even understand.

Fine, then, I'll take it.

Please know that if you *take* it you do not have to *keep* it. I am not here to advocate for any of us harboring in our hearts for a single moment any abuse or hate directed at us or people we love. I am here to advocate for seeing that as dust, dust we can shake off, dust that after

transformation *may* become fertile soil. Like last week's earthworm, there may be thoughtful, slow, transformation available to any of us. But we aren't responsible for others doing that work. If we take it, we are also empowered to let it go.

I'm sorry, dust.

I'm sorry, neighbor.

I'm sorry, mud.

I'm sorry, winter.

I'm sorry, Jesus.

For all the harms that are done in the name of any and all of these things, may we remember all the healing and the healed ones who went before us. The ones who survived, who thrived, who were able to access their joy even *while* they were afraid, confused, uncertain. May we praise those who break cycles of harm and violence, for they sow peace and change in the world.

We are made of stardust and of silence, we can access joy and hope and love as well as sorrow and despair. If you find a truth inside any sacred text, anywhere in this world, embrace it and ask how it compares to the love in your heart. Bring it here and ask how it compares to the love in our community. Hold it inside and give it space and silence. Share it with those you love best and ask what it

sparks in them. There is renewal available for us. There is rebirth available for every one of us, all the mud and dust of us that both fill the universe and are only the tiniest speck within it. We hold the contradictions of human existence within us, each one, and we still continue. We still seek joy and connection and the truth within the hearts of us all. We still gather to do good, to sow good in the world, and that is the promise and hope of Easter. That is the resurrection we aspire to, that all we gather to do points us to the time beyond the suffering, that we all plant things that will bear fruit long beyond our time here.

What a beautiful thing that is. What a beautiful thing we are.

So may we continue to be.