

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## Practicing Easter Courage

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Beloved siblings in Christ,

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” We say that like it’s easy. Like Easter is automatically bright, automatically triumphant, automatically simple. But Matthew won’t let us romanticize it.

Matthew’s Easter begins with the ground moving. Not a sunrise service with soft light and lilies. Not a peaceful tableau. Matthew gives us an earthquake. An angel descending like lightning. A stone yanked out of the way. Guards trembling so hard they collapse, becoming “like dead men.”

Easter is not God politely asking death to step aside. Easter is God shaking the foundations of a world built on fear. And that matters because so much of our world still runs on fear.

Fear is how empires work. Fear is how violence recruits. Fear is how greed hoards. Fear is how scapegoating spreads. Fear is how people are convinced to trade away the well-being of their neighbors for the promise of safety.

So when the earth shakes at the tomb, it isn’t just geology. It’s revelation. It is creation itself testifying that the empire is not ultimate. The empire and religion posted guards at the grave as if Rome and Jerusalem could lock down God. As if armed force could keep love buried. As if the state could put a seal on God’s intended future.

But the guards are the ones who freeze. The empire’s representatives, trained, armed, authorized, are the ones who become like corpses. And the women... stay. That is where Matthew places the courage of Easter: not first in the disciples, not first in the powerful, not first in the official witnesses of empire, but in the women who came to the tomb.

The stone is rolled away, not so Jesus can get out, but so the women can see in. That's important. Resurrection is not an escape act. Resurrection is an unveiling. The angel says, "Do not be afraid." Which is what you only say when there is every reason to be afraid. So the angel is not denying reality. The angel is not asking them to pretend. The angel is announcing a different reality underneath reality.

"He is not here; for he has been raised." In other words, the empire and religion did its worst and it did not get the last word. And that is political in the deepest sense; the Easter confronts the powers that organize our common life around domination and death. Because resurrection means there is no regime, no system, no force (ancient or modern) that can claim final authority over life.

Now look closely: the women are not fearless. Matthew says they leave "with fear and great joy." Easter courage is not the absence of fear. Easter courage is what you do when fear is real, and you move anyway. So where does that kind of courage come from? It doesn't come from a motivational speech. It doesn't come from a sudden personality upgrade. It comes from practice.

These women have been living under occupation. They have been living with the constant background hum of empire: surveillance, humiliation, violence, scarcity, threats. They have already learned to do hard things. And that is why they can remain present and standing when the ground shakes.

The guards represent the kind of power that only knows how to control. When control fails, they collapse. But the women represent a different kind of strength, the strength that comes from love and loyalty practiced over time.

They came to the tomb because love brought them there. And love, real love, will give you courage. Because love keeps showing up. Love keeps walking toward suffering instead of away from it. Love keeps refusing to let the story end where empire and religion want it to end.

So the first witnesses of resurrection are not the people with the most control. They are the people who have learned how to keep showing despite not having control. And that may be one of the most important words for the church right now. Because many of us feel the shaking.

Many of us are trying to love our families, serve our communities, keep our faith, care for our neighbors, and stay human; while so much in the world feels unstable, threatened, and raw. So hear the good news for us in this moment, fear and great joy can coexist. You can be afraid and still go. You can tremble and still testify. You can grieve and still carry hope in your hands.

Now here is where we have to be careful, because Christians sometimes talk about Easter as if the enemy is simply “death,” period. But that can turn into an anti-death theology that isn’t actually good news for people who are grieving. It can make death into a monster that we’re not allowed to name honestly. It can even teach us to deny our finitude; as if being human is a problem to solve.

Yet Jesus does not avoid death. Jesus enters it fully. And that means Easter is not a denial of death’s reality; it is a refusal to let death be weaponized as the ultimate tool of control. Because that’s what empire does, it weaponizes death. It threatens people with death, through violence, through poverty, through exclusion, through neglect, through incarceration, through war, through disposability.

So if we want to name what resurrection truly overcomes, we have to name what deadens people while they are still alive.

Resurrection defies:

- the violence that tells certain people they are expendable,
- the prejudice that shrinks the circle of who counts as “neighbor,”
- the greed that hoards what God intends for shared life,
- the politics of fear that keeps communities divided and compliant,
- the systems that treat human beings and creation as resources to consume rather than gifts to cherish.

These are enemies of God because they are enemies of life.

So Easter courage is not just courage to believe something “spiritual” happened.

Easter courage is courage to confront what kills life in public and in private.

Courage to tell the truth. Courage to unlearn cruelty. Courage to practice generosity in a world that trains us to hoard. Courage to insist that some lives have been treated as less-than; and to repent of the ways we’ve benefited or stayed quiet.

Courage to love our neighbors in material, costly, concrete ways.

Here is one of Easter's most subversive announcements: Love remains. Not sentiment. Not optimism. Not a vague belief that "things will work out." But love as a living ethic, a community practice, a stubborn refusal to surrender one another to despair.

Frankly, the women were right to fear. They would have known that Rome would not hesitate to crucify again. They would have wondered, "Who is next? Will we be hunted? Will the Jesus movement be erased?"

Easter does not mock those fears. Easter meets them. And Easter declares, even when empire has done its absolute worst, it does not get to decide what is possible. The empty tomb is not a victory lap. It's a breach in the wall. It's God's opening in what looked sealed. It's the announcement that the future is not owned by the powers that crucify.

And the resurrection power is not only about Jesus rising long ago. It is about Christ rising again, in and through a people who keep practicing courageous love. That's why the risen Jesus meets the women on the road. Not just at the tomb, on the road.

In motion. In witness. In embodied courage. And Jesus says again: "Do not be afraid." Then Jesus gives them a vocation: "Go and tell." Easter courage is not for private reassurance. It is for public witness.

So what is the call this Easter? It might be as simple (and as demanding) as this, Keep leaning into courage. Not because you are sure it will all turn out fine. Not because you can control what comes next. But because love is worth practicing even when the outcome is unknown. Because love is how Christ stays alive in us.

So here is an Easter invitation, not to pretend you aren't afraid, but to practice courage anyway:

- Practice courage by telling the truth you've been avoiding.
- Practice courage by repairing what you broke.
- Practice courage by standing with the neighbor you were taught to fear.
- Practice courage by refusing to laugh at cruelty.
- Practice courage by giving when you want to hoard.
- Practice courage by showing up, again and again, even when you're tired.

- Practice courage by letting joy live alongside sorrow without forcing either one to disappear.

And then, church, do what the women did. Run.

Not away from the pain of the world, but toward the community. Toward the neighbors who need good news that is material. Toward the places where empire still tries to convince people that death gets the final word. Because resurrection is not only something we proclaim. Resurrection is something we practice.

So today, with fear and great joy, we say: “The Lord is my strength and my song, and has become my salvation.” “This is the day the Lord has made.” And we will rejoice, not as denial, but as defiance. For Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.