

TODAY WILL BE DIFFERENT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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Easter Sunday is my favorite Sunday of the year. As many of you know, my favorite holiday is Thanksgiving — the festival of gratitude. But Thanksgiving doesn't fall on a Sunday. Besides, if you are going to rise from the dead, it somehow seems wrong to do it on a weekday. Arriving at the end of a bleak and barren winter, Easter celebrates possibility — the ever-present possibility that today might be different, decisively different.

The screenwriter and novelist Maria Semple is best known for her television show *Arrested Development* and her best-selling novel *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* Semple begins her latest book with the following paragraph:

Today will be different. Today I will be present. Today, anyone I speak to, I will look them in the eye and listen deeply. Today I'll play a board game with Timby. I'll initiate sex with Joe. Today I will take pride in my appearance. I'll shower, get dressed in proper clothes, and change into yoga clothes only for yoga, which today I will actually attend. Today I won't swear. I won't talk about money. Today there will be an ease about me. My face will be relaxed, its resting place a smile. Today I will radiate calm. Kindness and self-control will abound. Today I will buy local. Today I will be my best self, the person I'm capable of being. Today will be different.

The three women who took spices to Jesus' tomb on a Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago had no inkling of anything different. Jesus had been crucified two days before by Roman soldiers, becoming yet another casualty in the Jewish resistance against an increasingly brutal Roman occupation. By the time Jesus was executed in the year 33 of the Common Era, the Romans had been ruling Palestine for more than 150 years.

Every time the Jews rose up in revolt, the Romans would punish the perpetrators, usually by crucifixion. During the Roman crackdown about the time Jesus was born, about 2,000 Jews were crucified. By the year 70, more than 10,000 crosses ringed the hills around Jerusalem, most of them in regular use. The death toll of Jews during the Roman occupation exceeded one million — a proportion roughly equal to the Jewish death toll under Hitler.

When Jews around the world gathered last evening at sundown to commemorate Passover, they did so with the knowledge of what has remained tragically the same throughout their history, but also of what has been different. Sometimes death passes over, and sometimes it doesn't.

In the case of the Jewish rabble-rouser named Jesus, death did not pass over. As was customary, several of his friends went to his tomb on the third day after his death to anoint his body with spices. It was a labor of love they and others like them had performed countless times for their fallen friends. As the three women set out for the tomb, they had no idea that this day would be different, decisively different.

To their surprise, the tomb was already open, and a young man sat inside, dressed in a long, flowing white robe — the conventional garb of an angel. He explained that Jesus had been raised — lifted up. The verb translated “raised” is a widely-used Greek verb that would typically have meant something like “he has been lifted up and taken elsewhere.” The verb was sometimes used metaphorically, so you can read it as resurrection if that's what you need to find in the text.

Seeing the empty tomb, the three women knew immediately that the day had turned out to be different, decisively different. According to the gospel accounts, they immediately left the tomb and went to tell other followers of Jesus what had happened. Together, they remembered what Jesus had often told them. He said that he would never forsake them and his presence would remain with them.

The women believed the day could be decisively different — and it was. The other followers of Jesus believed the same. Two millennia later, two billion followers of Jesus around the globe bear witness to the decisive difference one day can make.

Most of the time, you and I live as though today will mostly be the same as yesterday. We also live as though our supply of days will continue indefinitely.

In his book titled *To Bless the Space Between Us*, the Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue says, “We take on days with the same conditioned reflex with which we wash and put on our clothes each morning... We dodder through our days as if they were our surest belongings.” He adds, “If we could be mindful of how short our time is, we might learn how precious each day is.”

O'Donohue goes on to point out that we typically come to this realization only when tragedy strikes. As he says, “There are people who will never forget today.”

All of us can name days in our lives that we will never forget. For some of you, that day has come recently. A sudden death, a devastating diagnosis, an agonizing betrayal, a freak accident — and suddenly today becomes the day we will never forget. Too late, we realize how much we had taken for granted. Too late, we realize how precious each day is.

The backdrop of Easter reminds us that destiny travels silently and sometimes arrives tragically. But Easter mostly looks forward. It invites us to embrace the promise each new day brings to us. Today need not revisit the frustrations and failures of yesterday.

Today, we have a chance to love anew what we have loved before and to pursue possibilities we may have ignored before. Today will be different. Easter invites us to open ourselves to the possibilities that lie within us and around us.

In his book, John O'Donohue tells a brief story that conveys this sense of openness and possibility. He writes:

A man awakes this morning beset by an old emptiness that has gnawed for years. By now he is adept at managing it. He accommodates himself to another day; instinctively, he sets the compass of his mind. Later in the morning, at work, he receives a call from a woman he once knew. He had never forgotten her. He always sensed that she might have had the measure of his emptiness. Now, out of the blue, she is wondering if they might meet for dinner. As he puts down the phone, he imagines he can hear a door opening — and senses that things may never be the same again.

The message of Easter is that today will be different. It's a completely new opportunity to shift our focus from all that is past to all that is possible. It's a chance to cherish again the people and things we most deeply love. And it's a chance to make a change — to take the next step towards becoming the kind of people we most deeply long to become.

Maria Semple ends her book, which is titled *Today Will Be Different*, with a paragraph that echoes almost exactly her opening paragraph — but not quite. Eleanor, the book's protagonist, has learned a thing or two during the one day that has passed. She has discovered some things about her life and made some changes.

But Eleanor also realizes that the commitment she made to this day at its outset needs to be repeated each and every day. The book concludes, "Today I will be my best self, the person I'm capable of being. Today will be different."