

GO!  
A homily for Easter Sunday by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls, New York City  
April 21, 2019

On the Sunday morning two days after Jesus' death, three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — took spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, as was customary in a proper burial. Along the way, they wondered who would roll away the heavy stone from the entrance to the tomb.

To their surprise, the tomb was already open, and a young man dressed in a white robe was sitting inside. Sensing their alarm at his presence, he reassured them and explained, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him."

The verb translated "raised" in this passage is a widely used Greek verb that in the New Testament often means "rise" in a metaphorical sense: "nation shall rise against nation," for example, or "no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." It can also mean to get moving in a physical sense: "Get up, let us be going." On Easter morning, the young man said, speaking of Jesus, "He has been raised; he is not here."

The young man continued: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Jesus had often told his disciples that he would never leave them, that his presence would always be with them and his spirit would always remain among them.

In response to these words, the gospel of Mark says that the three women "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

That's the end of the story. In the earliest manuscripts, the story ends here. The women fled, for terror and amazement had seized them. They were afraid.

Easter doesn't begin with the peal of trumpets and a profusion of daffodils. It begins with death and terror. Something must come to an end. The loss must be significant, and the sense of uncertainty in its wake must be pervasive. Only then is there room for Easter — for something new.

Like the women at the tomb, Lane Wallace also knows about uncertainty and fear. She's a well-known aviation writer for *Flying* magazine and the *Atlantic*, author of six books on space exploration, and producer of numerous television and video projects. She has a penchant for the kind of flying adventures that make most people queasy just reading about them.

Some years ago, Wallace decided to close the door on the safe but suffocating life she had been living. She became a pilot and then, eventually, an adventure writer. For her, the path to a different life led through difficult places where, as she puts it, the

“hazards and consequences are real, and there’s no guarantee of a happy ending.” If she wanted a new life, however, she had to face her fear.

In a monograph titled, *Surviving Uncertainty*, Wallace describes an event that symbolizes the challenge. While traveling in Europe, she decided to take a flight lesson from an expert instructor in a small mountain ski plane. Because the conditions were ideal, her instructor asked if she would like to try landing on one of the Alpine glaciers high up in the Mont Blanc range. She said yes, and so they did, landing uphill on a glacier in the shadow of one of the high peaks.

As the plane turned to take off again downhill, its skis got stuck in the snow. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to work them loose, the instructor leaned over and opened Wallace’s door.

“I need your help,” he said. “Go to the wingtip and push back as I add full power. That should rotate us. But once the plane turns, I don’t have brakes, so I’m going to have to take off.”

He pointed to an area further down the mountain at the other end of the glacier. “I’ll come back and pick you up there,” he said.

The plan worked, and the plane lifted off. Wallace writes, “I watched the red and white ski plane get small in the distance, the sound of its retreating engine quickly swallowed by the vast, uninhabited silence of the glacier and its surrounding mountain peaks. And there I was, standing in the midst of all that majestic snow, rock and ice. Alone.” She was wearing a light fleece jacket, shorts, and tennis shoes.

Wallace goes on to say that the emotions she felt that morning as she surveyed the seriousness and uncertainty of her situation would be “familiar to anyone who’s found themselves on unexpectedly shaky ground, with no clear map or guide to tell them where to go next, or how to safely get there.”

She began to panic. “Focus,” she told herself. “You’re okay right now. This can work. Don’t get overwhelmed by the distance to be covered. Take one step at a time. Keep your balance. Breathe. Look around. When are you likely to find yourself alone on a glacier again?”

It took longer than Wallace imagined possible, but she eventually made her way down the glacier to where the plane and her instructor were waiting, as promised. The thrill of new discoveries and accomplishments, she says, comes only to those who risk venturing into unpredictable and sometimes frightening territory.

Sometimes, we have no choice in the matter. The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the diagnosis of a serious disease, the failure of a relationship; these come unbidden into our experience. Other times we go knowingly into unpredictable territory, when we leave a secure job, or start a new relationship, or confront a wayward child, or start a new venture. Whether by choice or by circumstance, we leave routine and security behind and walk down a path where our footing is uncertain and the outcome is unpredictable. Only then do we enter that transformative place where, as Wallace says, “the possibilities are suddenly wide open.”

The message of Easter is that something must end before something else can begin. The death of the old opens the door for the birth of the new. Peril precedes possibility.

During times when life feels either terrifying or tomb-like, we need faith that the dawn will come — a rebirth of promise and possibility. My guess is that's why most of us are here this morning. We seek the spirit of Easter.

I have good news: the key to resurrecting your life can be found in the Easter story itself. Recall what the young man at the tomb told the women. He told them to leave the tomb behind and go. He also said that the one whom they sought would go ahead of them.

Want to resurrect your life? Then go — go! Go back to school. Go back to work. Join a gym. Join AA. Move in together. Move into your own place. Apply for a marriage license. File for a divorce. Start taking classes. Stop taking lessons. Make the call. Cancel the appointment. Do whatever you have to do.

As you go, the spirit of hope and possibility will go ahead of you and meet you there. Bury the parts of your life that need to be left behind. Put yourself in a place where life has a chance to do something new.

The contemporary American poet Christopher Goodrich captures this spirit of faith and adventure in his poem titled, "A Thing Like Weather."

Once again I return to happiness,  
which means something, somewhere is in bloom

and the notion, however ridiculous,  
is born again: love will not go on without me.

See how a thing like weather changes  
everything? The warm earth spins a little at a time

so I won't lose my footing, and the April wind  
pushes me toward collecting what it is I came for:

the belief that even in the beautiful places,  
I am exceptionally possible.

The message of Easter is that you and I are exceptionally possible, and love will not go on without us. This Easter, return to happiness. Go, and the love that unites us will go before you and sustain you.

Go!