

Rejoice, believers: Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

Rarely are cemeteries as peaceful as they seem. My boyhood friends visited them by night to consult with spirits—86-proof spirits, as I recall. Sometimes we'd glimpse young couples having soulful, breathy talks among the tombstones.

The Mount of Olives, Jerusalem's ancient cemetery, hummed with political conversation when Passover pilgrims spent the night there. The prophet Zechariah promised that one day it would get really busy. In a great "day of the Lord," God would kick the Mount of Olives up against Jerusalem, increasing Zion's height and opening tombs as well. Saints would rise and enter the city (Zech. 14:1-5).

Unfinished business lingers in every graveyard—broken promises, betrayals, countless secrets left to perish with the departed. Sometimes visitors speak to the dead. They apologize, even plead for absolution, but none comes. Silence stands guard. The stone will never be rolled away.

The two Marys who visited Jesus' tomb carried a burden. They had witnessed Golgotha's horror and surely wanted to say something. But Matthew says they went to see the tomb. The verb doesn't suggest mere looking. Rather, they *studied* it. They were determined to defy forgetfulness.

They couldn't get close, however, because soldiers were guarding Jesus' tomb lest anybody get in—or out. Frightened officials had dispatched them.

What were the officials afraid of? Body snatching and a phony resurrection story, said the official troop requisition. Maybe they were also afraid that the young teacher might reappear.

What if he did? Was he dangerous? Might he harm someone—the priests who had condemned him or the officials who had executed him, perhaps? What *would* he say if he rose from the dead?

What would others say? Are we certain we'd welcome back our loved ones, much less our enemies or someone we've mistreated?

When we die, most of our sins die with us. When someone else dies, so do the wrongs held in secret between us. Should a loved one return from the grave, memories of our failings as parents, spouses, and other shameful specters would once again walk the earth.

Maybe the officials feared reproach more than any vindication that Jesus might get if he came back. After all, they had lied about him, beaten him and lynched him. Would his reappearance forever indict them? Must they kill him again to hide their shame?

Jesus' disciples had their own reasons for not wanting to see him again. They had fled, leaving him to face death alone. Would Jesus say, "Well, how nice to see you guys! Where have you been? Peter, do you know me *this* time?"

On this day, even heaven could not rest in peace. God shook with grief at the death of this beloved Son. Like lightning God's messenger came, kicked aside the stone and sat on it. The soldiers fainted dead away.

"Fear not," the angel said to the Marys. "You won't find him here. Go, tell his disciples and hurry to Galilee. There you'll see him."

They left with great joy, Matthew says, but fearful too. Did they really want to see him? What would he say?

They soon find out. Jesus met them and immediately said, "*Xairete!*" This multipurpose word, like *shalom* or *aloha*, means, "Hello, good-bye," even, "What's up?" At root, however, it means, "Rejoice!"

"Rejoice! Tell my brothers to meet me." My *brothers*! After all that transpired, we are still family! He hadn't come back to get revenge or condemn anyone. No, he returned to gather his family.

Our sins and betrayals died with him. He took them to his grave and now he's come back without them!

The universe is shaken. Nothing remains the same. And yet, like the two Marys, we still run off in fear and great joy, rejoicing one moment, fainting in terror the next. Amid freshly dug graves, we mourn, we grieve, we fear.

But we live in another realm as well, wrapped in the garments of our baptism, where, as Paul reminds us, our lives are hid with Christ in God. Our tombs, and those of our loved ones, prove only as secure as Christ's.

For now, as we wander between fear and joy, things above and things below, we still gather in the graveyard. Every day we dump more sins and shameful secrets of our living and dying into that tomb the soldiers tried so hard to guard. Nothing we discard there ever comes back. But *he* does. Every day. Collecting his brothers and sisters. Including us, the two Marys' joyful, frightened siblings.

Joy, by nature, is for sharing. It's dangerous and insane to keep fear to oneself, and totally unnecessary. Indeed, with a single hymn we may strike out joyfully for Galilee—and leave fear behind in the graveyard. "The Lord is risen! Alleluia!" He is risen indeed.