

Easter 1A March 23, 2008
Leesburg Presbyterian Church
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Acts 10: 34-43
Matthew 28:1-10

God of empty tombs and fulfilled promises, roll away the stones that keep us locked in tombs of doubt and despair. Help us to see Christ in our midst, that we may feel your touch, hear your Word, and be moved to respond with love and enthusiasm. Amen.

The gospel story for this morning is familiar to all of us. Even those who only make it to church once or twice a year know this story about women going to a tomb in the early morning.

This year we read Matthew's version of the story. Matthew's story is the one that began with those mysterious visitors from the East coming to King Herod—to the seat of power in Jerusalem—seeking this new king; a new king who wasn't found in Jerusalem at all, but out in the countryside among the poor people of a tiny insignificant village that they had forgotten all about. Matthew is the one who tells us that Jesus' enemies remembered that he had said, "after three days I will rise again" (27:63), and insisted that a guard of soldiers be posted to secure the tomb—not just to watch over it, but to seal it up permanently. The powers that be in Jerusalem are trying to control this story from beginning to end.

Notice that in this story the women come to the tomb empty handed. They do not carry spices. They do not come to anoint the body. They are not worried about how to roll the stone away. It says that they just come to see. We are left to wonder just what they were expecting to see.

The Sabbath was past—that Sabbath that was the focus of so much of the controversy between Jesus and the tradition keepers of Jerusalem. The Sabbath was over—both chronologically and theologically. It just didn't matter anymore; and the women come to the tomb on the first day of the week; not on their day of rest, not the beginning of a lazy Sunday that we might recognize, but the first day of their regular working week. It is still very early in the morning, just barely dawn, but the world is beginning to stir, ready to put the odd events of the holiday weekend behind them, ready to go back to work, ready to get on with their lives. Listen for God's word to you as we hear the story again, from Matthew 28:1-10.

Go and Tell

This morning we have already read together the way that the Apostle Paul told the story of the first Easter to the church in Corinth—our very earliest written witness—and Sally/Jim has read to you the way that Peter told the story to a gentile household in Caesarea; and now I have read the way that Matthew told the story to the next generation. What more can I say? I know that I can never improve on their eloquence, and you know that I will not be able to match their brevity either.

It's been hard this week to think about resurrection. It's been too cold and too windy. It's too early for Easter to be here. When it is below freezing at dawn on Easter Sunday, it is just too early. I'm not ready yet, and neither is Mother Nature. I read the newspaper this week and there are not many signs of hope for the world. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan has been going on for five years now. There is an empty place in the pew over there where John Sawyer sits to critique my sermons every Sunday morning. He's in Baghdad on this Easter morning where someone is shelling the embassy today. **The situation is just not very hopeful.** The stock market has fallen precipitously; the Feds had to shore up one of the giant investment firms to keep it from going under; the price of oil is out of sight and the price of eggs has doubled in the last year. **The situation is just not very hopeful.** The election campaign has gone on interminably and I still have no idea who might give us some responsible, visionary leadership. The newspapers are full of speculation about the appropriate cost of prostitution. There hasn't been much interest in the morality of the issue, just in the price. The Supreme Court looks like it is going to rule against the handgun ban in DC where at least one young person has been killed by a handgun nearly every day—twice last week at schools. One high school will be eating their lunch in their classrooms for the rest of the year because their cafeteria has become too dangerous. **The situation is just not very hopeful.** We got a letter from the IRS yesterday telling us that they might possibly be sending us a check for \$1200 sometime in May, and there are endless basketball games on TV for the next several weeks. You'll forgive me if I seem to hear the emperor say, "Give them bread and circuses!" **The situation is just not very hopeful.**

The Easter message doesn't preach all that well these days. Hopeful talk sounds insincere or at least grossly uninformed, and *renewal* seems like a retro phrase borrowed uncomfortably from my youth. Good Friday we all understand. We all know about death and disappointment and despair. We have all buried loved ones. We know the stories about young cousins falling from fire escapes in New York City and husbands dying of heart attacks before they turn 40 and infants who can't quite make it into this world. Life is fragile and tragedy strikes by wind and by water, at home and on ski slopes. Good Friday we know well. But resurrection is still very abstract. It's much harder to sell.

But then, it wasn't all that easy in the first century either. Matthew clearly knows all the objections that people had already raised to the story. These people may not have been all that sophisticated, but death they understood. An empty tomb? There are all kinds of explanations for an empty tomb. The rumor was already out there that the disciples had merely stolen the body. Matthew wants his readers to know that they weren't the first ones to think of that. The priests had covered that base—and gotten Pilate to send Romans guards—not just the temple police who might have been willing to lie for the High Priest whatever happened. The tomb was sealed up tight and Homeland Security was there to see that it stayed sealed up.

But, at dawn on the first day of the week, two women came to the tomb. As we read this account of Jesus' death on the cross, Matthew kept inserting the names of the women who kept watch. He keeps naming the witnesses. Two of them—as required by the Jewish law—you always need two witnesses—the High Priest had to find two witnesses who were willing to testify against Jesus at his trial. But these witnesses to the death and to the burial, unfortunately, were women; and women couldn't be witnesses in any court—Jewish or Roman.

Where are the credible witnesses? We heard them all on Thursday night asking the question, “Is it I, Lord? Could I be the one who betrays you? Could I be the one who deserts you?” All of them will disappear into the night. “All the disciples deserted him and fled” (26:56). Only these women will be able to stay with him to the end. Only these women—because who would notice a few women watching it all? Who would care if they were seen there?

It was these same women who went to the tomb. And Matthew tells us that as they approached the tomb, there was an earthquake. The tomb becomes the epicenter of creation—the heavens and the earth together were there as an angel descended to roll away the stone and settle down right on top of it. It says the guards were so afraid they became like dead men. The living become like the dead as the angel announces that the dead one is alive.

As hard as this story is for the skeptics and doubters among us, it is equally hard for believers to really comprehend. Believers have heard this story so often that we expect it, and forget to be amazed. If you leave church on Palm Sunday knowing that Easter is next week, how can you truly be amazed? If you are certain that Jesus will be alive on Sunday morning, how can you truly grieve for his death on Friday? If Jesus is God somehow dressed up as a human being, death doesn’t mean anything. It isn’t final. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t count. Only when we can somehow suspend our memory for this weekend, can we feel the power of the resurrection story. Believing that Jesus is gone, we bury our friend, and our teacher. We mourn for our dead hope. We bury the dead future he had helped us to imagine; and lay to rest the vision of the way things might have been. Story over. Authority is still in Jerusalem. Caesar still holds all the power. Everything is dead.¹ Everything we hoped for is over.

But then we discover that it is not. The empty tomb becomes the sign for us of the resurrection. Please notice that none of the gospels describe the resurrection event. (Only Mel Gibson seems to have felt authorized to do that.) Matthew does not say that Christ is raised from the dead the moment the angel descends from the heavens. The angel just points out that the tomb is empty and invites the women to “come and see.” It has already happened. The *crucified one* is not there. The empty tomb was not a part of the earliest proclamations. Paul doesn’t mention it to the Corinthians. Peter doesn’t mention it in Caesarea. They just tell us that people begin to have encounters with the risen Christ. The angel invites the women to “Come and see!” Then they are instructed to “Go and Tell!” Although they are afraid—after all this is not what they expected—they run with “great joy” to tell the disciples.

They go to tell the disciples that Jesus will be waiting for them in Galilee. Galilee? Why are they going back to the hinterlands? Could anything good come out of Galilee? Jesus spent all this time getting those disciples to Jerusalem—to the big city where things happen, where activity matters, where there are notable witnesses. We want Jesus to appear to the High Priest and to Pilate and say to the Empire, “See you aren’t in control. There is nothing you can do to stop the work of God in this world.” But Jesus says, “Go to Galilee.” He will be waiting for them back where they came from; back in their own familiar surroundings; back where it all started. Just like he told them. Jesus will meet them in Galilee. He is more interested in the everyday lives of those who follow him than in what is going on in the places of power.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Easter Sunday2006,” (Easter sermon preached at Cannon Chapel, Emory University on April 16, 2006), *Journal for Preachers*, Vol XXXI, No. 3, Easter 2008, p.12.

Three times he told them that he was going to Jerusalem to die. Three times he told them that on the third day he would be raised up from the dead. Three times he told them that he would meet them in Galilee. If his enemies remembered that he had said this and worried that it might be true, why wouldn't his friends remember? Maybe this **is exactly** what the women did expect to find at the tomb. Maybe these two witnesses expected to find that tomb empty and expected to meet Jesus on the road. Maybe that's why they left with such great joy. They were right! In spite of the guards, he wasn't in that tomb! Maybe that's why they don't seem to be all that amazed when they actually encountered Jesus on the road. It doesn't say they gasped in disbelief. It doesn't say that they ran away in fear that they had seen a ghost. It says that they fell down and worshiped. No one in the gospels falls down and worships Jesus, but now these women know that this is God reaching out to them. They may have come to the tomb looking for Jesus, but instead they find God looking for them.

I think that's the amazing part of this story. Our God never ceases to reach out, looking for us. When he meets these women, he says to them, "Tell my brothers to go to Galilee to meet me" (v10). "My brothers??" All that betraying and denying and abandoning, and Jesus will still call them "brothers." That's the amazing thing. No matter what we do. No matter how we regard God. No matter how often we shove him aside. No matter how often we take that name in vain. No matter how often we doubt. No matter how often we forget. No matter how we ignore his teaching. No matter how faint heartedly we worship. No matter how we betray. No matter how we deny. No matter how we abandon. Jesus still considers us family. Jesus is still waiting to meet us where we are. Jesus is still calling to us. Still reaching out to touch the dead spots in our lives and call us back to life. On Easter we encounter a Christ who is unwilling to let the story of God and humanity end in death—even a death that we consented to and even asked for. "Give us Bar-Abbas!" (27:21). Easter is the story about how God keeps on—in spite of us—seeking us. The heart of the resurrection story is not the empty tomb. The heart of the resurrection story is that even "though **we were dead**, Jesus returned to us."² Now that you've been to the cross and to the cemetery, go back to where you live. Jesus will be there, and the situation is filled with hope again.

I am convinced that the body was not in that tomb. Death could not hold him. People kept seeing him. People kept eating with him. They opened their eyes, and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. Doubters saw and believed that he was alive. A frightened group of disciples huddled in a locked upper room was transformed into the Church and made its way to the far corners of the Empire in just one generation. And on a mountain in Galilee, the Risen Christ announced that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. Go and Tell. All these witnesses told the story to others. **Go and Tell.** Peter preached it to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house in Joppa. And I am charged to tell it to you. **Go and Tell.** Do not despair, the situation is hope filled again. It's not too early. The world is always in need of this message. The world is always ready for this message. We're all ready for Easter.
I have seen the Lord.
Christ is risen!
He is risen, Indeed!

² Will Willimon, "Preaching Easter in Alabama," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXXI, No 3, Easter 2008, p6-7.