

The Easter Difference
April 20, 2014
Matthew 28:1-10

Our Scripture reading is found in the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew's Gospel beginning in the first verse. As you listen, remember that everyone involved in the story knows that Jesus has died and that his body has been placed in a tomb, which has been sealed with a large stone.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.

Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God who makes the impossible possible, in dying and rising to new life you challenge our assumptions about how the world works. Help us to acknowledge our fears, and accept our uncertainties. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Pam Driesell, a Presbyterian pastor, tells a story of her good friend Mary's recent Easter experience. To make sure her four-year old daughter Elena really understood what Easter is all about Mary tried talking to her about it.

"Mommy, will the Easter bunny bring me purple jelly beans?"

I am sure he will bring you jelly beans, Elena. But, remember, Easter isn't about the bunny. It's about Jesus.

"But will they be purple?"

Yes, honey, I am sure there will be some purple ones in there. Honey, the important thing about Easter isn't the bunny. Easter is about how much Jesus loves you and me and the whole world.

"Mommy, HOW MANY purple jelly beans will the Easter Bunny bring me?"

Elena, I think he will probably bring plenty of purple jellybeans. Do you know how much Jesus loves you?

"Mommy..."

Yes Elena?

"Will he bring me tootsie rolls too?"¹

What a world Elena inhabits! Those of you with young children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren know just how important the right candy can be to a child on Easter.

While we expect a focus on sugary fun from a four year old, we may be less apt to admit that sometimes our own Easter experiences overemphasize things we buy. It is hard to resist purchasing new Easter outfits, creating Easter baskets for others, decorating with lilies, and securing the best food possible for a family feast.

None of these things are bad, but hopefully you came here this morning because you are seeking something more:

- perhaps you are seeking wisdom for a challenging situation,
- maybe you just want to connect or reconnect with God,
- or it's possible you may be here for the Easter difference.

¹ Pam Driesell. "Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans." <http://day1.org/2865-beyond_bunnies_and_jelly_beans>

Think about how the day begins. The two Mary's know that Jesus is dead. The future they had been planning for themselves died with Jesus. They were mourning. In the midst of their grief they did the only thing they knew to do; they went where Jesus was.

Three days ago they were unprepared for Jesus death. Today they are prepared to mourn. They just want to be close to Jesus.

While all four Gospel writers include this story, only Matthew features special effects that would play well to a modern audience on a movie screen. One contemporary paraphrase explains the earthquake greeting in this way:

Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it.²

Fear overcomes the women. Mary and Mary are paralyzed by fear as the scene unfolds before them.

Fear is their initial response to the arrival of an angel. Fear has been everyone's response. Before angels can utter good news, they have to calm their intended recipients. The Gospels have featured several angelic greetings that move the story along to where it is today; they often begin: "Don't be afraid."

- "Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."
- "Don't be afraid, Mary."
- "Don't be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."
- "Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife. Her baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Name him Jesus; he's going to save all people from their sins."³

And now, this morning we have another angelic appearance that begins with these words:

² Matthew 28:2, The Message

³ Alyce McKenzie. "My Favorite Angel: Easter Reflections on Matthew 28:1-10."

<<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Favorite-Angel-Alyce-McKenzie-04-11-2014>>

"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."⁴

Mary and Mary did the only thing they could: they rushed off to do as they had been instructed. As they hurried down the road they encountered the Resurrected One. Jesus' initial word was "Greetings,"⁵ but was followed immediately by the now familiar phrase "Do not be afraid."⁶

In my retelling of the story to emphasize the fear, I failed to slow down and talk about the main event. While the actions of these two faithful disciples are important, it seems as though Jesus' overcoming death deserves more attention. Our modern sensibilities want answers.

- What happened while Jesus lay dead in the tomb?
- Exactly when did Jesus stop being dead?
- How did he begin living again?
- How did he get out of the sealed tomb?
- Why don't people who know him well recognize him anymore?

Theologians have amazingly complex and largely unsatisfying answers to all of these questions and to many others we might raise. There is no one right answer to any question in part because the biblical accounts don't tell us this part of the story.

Whether or not this is a place our minds want to go, we must not linger there. Greg Carey, a UCC lay person who teaches New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, writes:

I confess the actual, physical resurrection of Jesus. I'll freely admit that I have no idea what that means or what it would have looked like. Even the Gospel accounts differ.

⁴ Matthew 28:5b-7

⁵ Matthew 28:9

⁶ Matthew 28:10

That said, it matters that God raised Jesus' body. Some people need the resurrection to prove something about Jesus. I don't.⁷

This morning our goal must not be to explain how the Resurrection happened, but to understand what Jesus' Resurrection means for us. George Mason, a Baptist pastor, helps us begin moving in that direction when he writes:

Christ is still on the loose . . . And this is the thing we have to keep before us today. We are not here for a history lesson on what exactly happened that Sunday morning at the tomb. You will not believe in the resurrection of Jesus any more than Mary would have if the same thing does not happen to you that happened to her.

Because Christ is free from the grave, he is free to free you from the grave and to meet you unexpectedly along the ordinary paths of your life. Fear is one of those graves Christ wants to free you from.

Craig Barnes, the new president of Princeton Theological Seminary, also emphasizes the experiential nature of the story:

The question that Easter asks of us is not "Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?" Frankly, that's not particularly hard.

What the Gospels ask is not "Do you believe?" but "Have you encountered a risen Christ?"⁸

This is a loaded question, and a dangerous one. Jesus was a revolutionary. The risen Christ was and is a world changer. He lives today in another body – in the church, which is often called the Body of Christ. This is where we are most likely to be introduced to him.

All who follow the Way of Jesus are a part of the Body of Christ. In the quest to keep encountering a risen Christ Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, suggests that it is time for the church to rise again. She writes:

⁷ "Is The Resurrection for Real?" <<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Is-the-Resurrection-for-Real-04-18-2011>>

⁸ Craig Barnes. "Savior at Large." <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2248>>

The Body of Christ is rising today where it is growing less self-centered and inwardly focused, and living with its heart turned toward the cosmic and eternal, its attention focused intently on loving God and neighbor.⁹

By moving from fear into God's future we become a part of the Easter difference. To help us find our way there let me return to the wisdom, frankness, and curiosity of preschoolers.

Sarah Lund, our UCC regional minister, tells a story about her experience last Easter with her then three year old son. They went to church that morning for a special worship service – to see the Risen One. She writes:

Before entering the sanctuary, he knelt at the wire cross filled with flowers, took a yellow carnation from the white plastic bucket sitting on the ground, and added the flower to the cross. Then he yelled out, "I don't see Jesus!"

Sitting in church as worship started, I whispered in his ear, "Jesus is in your heart." He quickly replied, "But he's too big for my heart."¹⁰

Sarah's son is right. Jesus is too big for his heart or your heart or mine. Jesus can never be limited to such a small space. This day we are reminded that he was also unwilling to remain confined to a tomb sealed by a stone.

All around the world today ministers will say "Christ is risen" and the people of God will respond "He is risen indeed."

Don't be afraid. We are an Easter people, and we have been called to make an Easter difference in our world. Amen.

⁹ "An Easter Message from the Presiding Bishop." <<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/04/07/bulletin-insert-easter-day-a/>>

¹⁰ Sarah Lund. "The Secret Message of Easter." <<http://sarahgriffithlund.com/2014/04/16/easter-hope-hunt/>>