

“Trusting the Resurrection”

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Text: Matthew 28: 1-10

Imagine the scene: it's early in the morning, just before dawn. Perhaps they were still waking up. There's an earthquake, the stone is rolled away, and a person sits on top of the stone with a "face like lightning" and clothes as white as snow. I don't know about your first reaction, but mine would not be celebration! No, I would be more like the guards. Matthew tells us that they were terrified. It is likely the women were as well. On this Easter morning, there are many who are terrified, both here and around the world. People are terrified of their governments and their often-ruthless actions. People are terrified of the climate as more and more people encounter dangerous flooding, more intense tornadoes, more intense hurricanes, more intense heat waves. Some joke that mother nature appears to be drunk. Instead, the climate is reacting largely to human actions. Those fears don't mention economic fears, social isolation, employment issues, family strife—and the list goes on. This Easter morning is much like the first one. Fear, confusion, uncertainty. Amid the discussions, people wonder today where God is in all of this. There are days, perhaps multiple days, and weeks—even years—when it becomes hard to trust anything, even God.

I'm grateful that Matthew is our text for this Easter, because of what this gospel has to tell us about how God is at work even when we find it hard to see or comprehend. Judith Jones puts it this way, "Matthew's resurrection story contrasts the life-giving power of God with death-dealing human authority."

Human authorities had certainly been death-dealing immediately preceding that first Easter. Religious authorities, who often were at odds with the state, in this instance joined the state in the arrest, persecution and ultimate crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus had been stirring up a lot of trouble, especially among those who were marginalized and taken advantage of by both the church and the state. Many of them were poor, living hand to mouth, and they had few, if any, rights. They were left out, left behind, maybe even left over. Jesus represented to them not only hope for their own lives, but Jesus also represented a kingdom that was unlike any they had ever seen. Jesus spoke of the last being first, caring for the vulnerable, celebrating children, partnership with women... Jesus was among a small group who even spoke to this group of disenfranchised people. Jesus spoke of hope. He spoke of a new thing. He healed people on the inside and on the outside. Just a week ago, they celebrated his entry into Jerusalem.

But in the intervening week, Jesus was arrested. Their “king” was mocked as they paraded him through the streets. They beat him, spat on him, and even made a crown of thorns for his head. That was before they strung him up on a cross for a lengthy, painful death. Yes, the authorities wanted everyone to know who was in charge – and that it wasn’t Jesus, or the God Jesus represented. Now he lay in a tomb. Yes, he had told them he would be raised from the dead, but really? Is that something we can believe in? Death seems pretty final.

Out of love, duty and respect, the women came to the tomb on that Sunday morning. These are the same women who were present when Jesus died in Matthew’s version of the story. They saw it all. They also knew that at the tomb were going to be

soldiers that were stationed there to be sure no one stole the body. Given what they'd seen, they had every reason to fear the soldiers and the government they represented. Pilate could be ruthless. Rome was not known for its compassion for those they deemed enemies of the state. The rules didn't matter. All that mattered was that everyone under Rome's control knew their place.

As I mentioned, during their trip there was an earthquake. I don't know how great an earthquake, nor how used to earthquakes the women were, but I hasten to guess that it was a rare occurrence. Even for those who have been through multiple earthquakes, they are something to fear. The women get to the tomb, and the soldiers appear as if they are dead because they are so trapped in fear.

And there sits the angel, with a face like lightning, sitting atop a huge stone that had been rolled away saying, "Don't be afraid!" Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail asks the question, "I wonder why [both the angels, and later Jesus] told them not to be afraid." Good question! They had every reason to be afraid. Many of us do as well. Silly pastor, could you be telling us not to be afraid? Don't you have fears, too? Don't you sometimes wonder where God is as the world seems to be spiraling downward, with death at every turn?

And yet, the phrase, "Don't be afraid!" is used many times in this story, and even more so in John's version of the story. The angel atop the rock tells the women (not the soldiers, in case you missed that) not to be afraid. On their way back to the disciples, filled some mix of fear and awe, Jesus meets them and tells them again not to be afraid. In John's Gospel, Jesus meets the disciples behind locked doors and tells them, "Peace!" and not to

be afraid. Over and over again, Jesus tells us not to be afraid. What would they and us need to not be afraid? Every part of this story elicits fear. For many of us, every part of our story elicits fear. What would you need to not be afraid? What would I need? What did the women need?

The angel says it this way, “I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified one. He is not here, for he was raised just as he said.” The angel commands the women to reject their current state of fear, for the news of the resurrection brings great joy! “The resurrection has already happened. The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in (Judith Jones, *Commentary on Matthew 28: 1-10*).”

Here again is where it’s good that we’re in Matthew’s gospel this morning. In Mark’s gospel, the women react with fear and silence, but “in Matthew they run to announce the world-changing news.” Are you paying attention? The most important news in the world is entrusted to a couple of women in a day and time in which women had no voice. Often, they were not even permitted to talk to men, except in certain situations. The greatest news in the entire world has been given to those the world might just ignore. Such is the power of God. God isn’t worried about the very things we fear. God doesn’t fear the earthly authorities of church or of state. That doesn’t mean that all of us don’t have our fears, but it does mean that God continues to show us a way that we often miss clouded by fears and sorrows. Luckily for us, the women took Jesus’ command, and they went to tell the disciples exactly what they had seen and heard. Further, the angel has told the women, “To bear the good news, along with an additional message: Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee, and they will see him there. The angel doesn’t not specify exactly which disciples

they are to tell, though interestingly, the angel does not single out Peter like in Mark's Gospel."

"Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, commissioned by Jesus himself, become the first apostles. With great joy, they obey Jesus' command, bearing witness to the risen Christ. The Gospel that began with a man afraid to marry his disgraced betrothed and a fearful king who tries to kill potential rivals ends with overwhelming joy. Jesus' command to the women becomes a command to all of us: Stop being afraid! God has defeated death. Rejoice, and share the good news! (Jones)"

Women were not regarded as competent witnesses in Jewish courts, which author R.A. Hare tells us in his commentary on this passage, "it is clear that [the women's] presence in this narrative guarantees that it was not created to impress outsiders." So, I guess that means we weren't given this story to convince anyone else. Instead, the story is, "cherished by the faith community, in which women play an indispensable role as witnesses to the power of God...the story is credible only because God is credible." And God chooses who gets to be the messenger and note who it is. It is again the ones the world would not choose.

But there's more! Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail asks us, "How can we trust resurrection when death is on the world's throne?" I shared with you before that in many ways nothing has changed since the time the women visited the tomb on that first Easter. How could they trust the resurrection? How could anyone? Rev. McManus-Dail's answer to the question in our day is not any different than on that first Easter. How can we trust

resurrection when death is on the world's throne? "Because Jesus knows what we will always need to be reminded of: the good news is greater than any tyrant. Amen, alleluia. The good news of God is more alive than anything that tries to kill God, more alive than anything that tries to kill the imago dei [the image of God] in all of us. Kings come and kings go, and we may tremble still—but God? God shakes the earth with power and might so tender and so fresh it can make a tomb bloom with new life."

Alleluia! Amen!