

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

*After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² 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.** ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ **For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.** ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “**Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.** ⁶ **He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.** ⁷ 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.**” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and **tell my brothers** to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*

James A. Harnish (Tampa, Florida), in his 1993 Easter sermon, tells the story of a little boy who was "not exactly happy about going to church on Easter Sunday morning. His new shoes were too tight, his tie pinched his neck and the weather was just too beautiful to be cooped up inside ... As he sulked in the back seat, his parents heard him mutter: 'I don't know why we have to go to church on Easter, anyway; they keep telling the same old story and it always comes out the same in the end.'"

This little boy would probably be very happy with how traditional Easter church celebrations had to be abandoned this year. Instead of wearing new springtime clothes and shoes, he could wear his pajamas and play in the comfort of his own home, and do without hearing, in his words, "the same old story."

However, brothers and sisters, just as death could not hold Jesus in the grave, COVID-19 cannot hold back our Easter celebration. We celebrate the everlasting good news. The fact is Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Nothing could hold him in that dark cold tomb, not the stone rolled over the opening and secured in place, not the guards assigned to keep watch that no one would steal Jesus' body, and amazingly, not even death!!! Alleluia! Alleluia!

This morning we are going to reflect on the resurrection story as it was told by Matthew. Matthew's version of the story is distinctive in several ways. Guards are placed at the tomb, there was an earthquake, an angel rolls the stone away and talks with the two women who went to the tomb—Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (it is not clear who the other Mary was). And unlike other gospels, we are not told why the women went to the tomb. So, with these things in mind, let's dig deeper into this rendition of the Easter story.

Matthew felt it was important to let us know that Pilate had guards at the tomb. Why? I guess you could say he was spooked by the chief priests and the Pharisees reminder that Jesus declared that he would rise in three days. They recommended to Pilate that he secure the stone closing the tomb and place guards at the tomb until at least the third day. That way his disciples could not come and steal the body and tell people that Jesus had risen, just as he said he would. Pilate took their advice. He certainly did not want any more trouble stirred up around this Jesus fellow.

It is interesting to note that at Jesus' birth, fear and jealousy overcame King Herod. Like Pilate, he took action to eliminate any possible problems that could arise because people believed

this baby to be the Newborn King, the Messiah. So, he had every male child in Bethlehem, age two and under murdered. Problem solved, so he thought.

Pilate’s steps to prevent a resurrection hoax, which is all he could think it would be, failed also. Jesus could not be held in the tomb by humanities’ insecurity, jealousy, and fear. The resurrection confirms for us, the power God has to defeat all the forces like insecurity, jealousy, hatred, and fear, fighting against him to destroy the kingdom he is building. Even in our bleakest moments we need to remember this, our God is in control.

Matthew tells us there was a great earthquake when the stone was rolled away. Likewise, there was an earthquake when Christ died on the cross. It is as though the earthquake at Christ’s death was to signify the end of the old and the earthquake at his resurrection initiated the start of something new. Sin and all that holds people captive from having a relationship with God and living in his kingdom has lost its’ grip on those who choose to follow Jesus.

This something new does not bind us to memorizing a list of do’s and don’ts to assure our own goodness. This something new fills us with the resurrected Christ, empowering us with genuine love, compassion, forgiveness, and service for ourselves and others. We are made new because of Christ who now lives in us.

It was not until after the women arrived at the tomb that the earthquake took place, Matthew tells us, as an angel rolled away the stone covering the tomb. The other Gospels indicate the stone had been rolled away when people arrived at the tomb. Other resurrection stories tell of visitors going into the tomb only to find Jesus gone and perhaps an angel waiting to share the news that Christ has risen.

In Matthew’s version of the story, the women, and the guards see the great stone unsecured and rolled away from the opening by an angel. Wow! The guards were there and saw it too and they were so frightened we are told that they became like dead men. But the angel comforted the women and told them not to be afraid, the crucified Christ is risen, go on inside the tomb and see for yourself.

The fact that the tomb was guarded and the stone was not removed before the arrival of the angel, reveals to us that Jesus was gone even before the stone was rolled away, indicating to us that the stone had been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in.

Matthew does not tell us whether the women did indeed go into the tomb to see whether Jesus’ body was in the tomb. All he tells us is that the women hurried from the tomb. The women saw him as he lived and carried out his mission. They were at the cross and saw him die. They saw him taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. And now, they saw an angel roll the stone away to open the tomb and the angel told them the tomb was empty. Maybe having experienced all of this, knowing Jesus predicted these things, they did not feel the need to go in to see if the tomb was empty. Did the women go in to see if Jesus was gone, or did they simply believe the angel? Does it matter? What does this say to us?

We are called to be people of faith, yet over and over again we are invited to come and see what God has done. It is because of our faith that we come to Easter morning full of joy and hope. We were not there that glorious morning to look in the tomb and see that Jesus was gone, but we believe the testimonies of those who were there, so we may feel we do not need to look in the tomb to see it is empty. We have faith because of a hope that lives in us that just as Jesus promised we too will experience resurrection.

But also, we have faith because we **have** actually looked in the tomb and see that Jesus lives. The invitation to come and see tells us that there is nothing wrong with doing that. It is not a sign of a weak faith. In fact, it is the opposite, it is a sign that we seek the resurrected Christ to

strengthen our faith. Every day, we are invited to come and see, and when we do, we see God’s presence, guidance and/or healing in our lives. Finding the resurrected Christ in our daily lives inspires us to live each day in faithfulness to God. God wants us to come and see what he has done.

Matthew’s version of what happened that day tells us that as the women hurried from the tomb to tell the disciples the good news, they ran into Jesus, they saw him alive. Immediately, they clasped his feet and they worshiped him. After telling them not to be afraid, Jesus told them to go quickly and tell the good news, tell his brothers, who were likely his disciples to meet him in Galilee, where they would see him. Jesus told them to go and spread the joy of the resurrection! That is exactly what the women did! They began the ministry of spreading the Gospel, right where Jesus left off.

We too are called to go and tell the Good News! Go, do not just open the church doors, but go and tell wherever you are, at home, work, or play. And tell, through words, actions, and sometimes even silence, spread the Good News. Every one of us, not just some of us, in our own unique ways are commanded to go and tell that Jesus lives!

I don’t know about you, but unlike the little boy in my opening story, I needed to hear “the same old story” once again, especially right now when so much of my everyday living has felt like it’s been turned upside-down, and out of my control. Maybe you are feeling the same way.

Madelene L’Engle’s children’s book *The Summer of the Great Grandmother* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) tells of being with her grandchildren at bedtime for reading and song. Her grandchild Lena turned to her and asked, “Is everything all right?”

She said, “Yes, of course, everything is all right.”

Lena asked again: “Gram, is everything really all right? I mean really?”

L’Engle says she “looked at that little child in her white nightgown and realized that she was asking the cosmic question, the question that is out beyond the safety of this home full of light and love and warmth.”

Every Christmas we come to the manger child and ask the same question: “Is everything really all right?”

Every Easter we come to the tomb and ask that same question: “Is everything really all right?”

Yes, brothers and sisters, everything really is all right. The battle has already been won. Jesus conquered the grave. So then, how can we doubt that our current situation will defeat us. We will emerge out of this dark tomb too, just as we have with other challenges in our lives, with new life. We have nothing to fear, not now or ever. Christ is risen...and with him we too will live evermore. Amen.