

Easter April 16, 2017
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Auburn, NY
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Matthew 28:1-10

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

Hope Rising

Neither of the Marys knew that morning as they trudged along the path, which of the feelings welling up inside were more painful. There was the incomprehensible pain of the loss of one whom they loved deeper than anyone ever knew was possible. Like all those who experience the death of a loved one, Mary was thrust into an existence that didn't seem real except for the sharpness of the pain and the fragility of her soul. Like a leaf in autumn, dried and cracking, which the slightest disturbance would crumble.

Then there was the anger. Anger and guilt aimed at herself for not being able to stop the killing and violence at those who had killed him. All of the, "what ifs," punching her with their possibilities. The crowd that had cheered him just a week ago had become an unruly beast gone wild – seeking death and violence. The evil in the world that Jesus talked about overcoming had beat him. Jesus had talked about suffering, but was this supposed to be the outcome? Had God lost? How could this be and for what end?

She could think of no just cause for Jesus to have been crucified.

He was not a murderer – he brought people back to life! Remember Lazarus?

He was not a thief – he gave to those in need!

He was not any of those kinds of people for whom the death penalty existed. But then again, under the empire, who knew those guidelines for sure?

Jesus talked about righting injustice, but this was the ultimate injustice...done to him. How could it ever be made right? Not even God could make this right, she thought. Mary and the disciples knew they were powerless to fight this wicked deed, for they would also be killed. She even found herself hiding her face from those who passed by, so frightened was she that someone would recognize her as a friend of Jesus and drag her to a cross as well.

Jesus had said, blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Well, the only one who could comfort her was dead and lying in a tomb.

As they walked, perhaps the pain that hurt the most was the feeling of abandonment. Not just the abandonment of some the other disciples, but abandoned by God. There was a darkness that enveloped her, greater than the death. It was a darkness created in the destruction of her faith...an emptiness that is numbing. Where all the “why” questions one asks of God are left dangling, not just unanswered for that would indicate a presence able to answer. No, a place where, the “whys” just sink into the void

The two Mary’s were on their way to the tomb, to see. The gospels of Mark and Luke, have Mary and others taking spices to anoint his body, but Matthew only has the Marys going to see the sepulcher...the tomb, the place where Jesus was laid, much like people go to the grave to grieve, to pray, and to be close to a loved one. This is a ritual of grief and an attempt to find solace. They had to wait until the Sabbath was over before they could go to the tomb. Maybe the visit would bring some comfort, it was getting dark when they had placed him in the tomb and so maybe in the daylight, the place would seem better.

Visiting a grave, especially so close to the time of death is a sacred time, a time to be quiet, to remember, perhaps to talk to the person who has died. It is a time when your focus is probably on all the emotions and thoughts running around inside. It is not a time when you want any disturbance. Matthew tells us the stone is still over the tomb, there are guards, and everything is as it was. As the Marys approached this sacred space and time, Matthew tells us there was an earthquake and the stone at the entrance to the tomb was opened by an angel. An angel, a flash of lightning...it was enough to make the guards at the tomb pass out. But our Marys have been around Jesus. They have come to expect the unexpected with him, they have learned to look beyond the obvious and see the power beyond what is, maybe they even knew of angels. As shocking as the moment was, our Mary’s are full of courage and they held their ground long enough to hear the angel say (as angels always seem to say), “Do not be afraid.”

The angel tells them that Jesus is not there, reminding them that he had told them he would be raised, then he says to look and see, while telling them to go and tell the others that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. So the gospel tells us that they left with fear...and great joy.

There is still fear, but now it is coated with joy. When one is enveloped in fear and despair, rejoicing may take some time.

For Mary and for all of us, we can only see our limited vision of life as defined by birth and death. But God is not limited by the edges of life (of birth and death). Now, there is a lot of discussion and study about what happened to Jesus between Good Friday and Easter morning. Our creeds talk about descending into hell and theologians for centuries have talked about Jesus bearing the weight of our sin, casting it off in Hell and then rising. The truth is we don’t know what happened in those three days, but we take it on

faith that out of love for all of us, Jesus bore our sin, so that we may be reunited with God. The evil that Mary thought had defeated him, had met its match and Jesus came out victorious. And having gone through death, we no longer have to define our life by the visible edges of birth and death, but that life is eternal with birth and death merely the parenthesis. Death is no longer an impenetrable wall, but a wall with a doorway. Yes, it still exists, this death, but more as a marker. We still suffer when someone we know goes through that doorway, but because of this resurrection day, we know that life continues. Our separation from a loved one is still agonizing, and yet in this life we are often separated from God.

As the Marys ran from the tomb, Jesus met them...the very real physical Jesus, for they fell down before him and held onto his feet. Those first disciples needed to touch, to feel his presence, for it was on them that God's message of love, forgiveness, mercy and resurrection depended.

Throughout Matthew's telling of the resurrection, Mary and the other Mary are instructed to "see"

They go to see the tomb. The angel tells them to see the place where he lay, and to go to Galilee, there you will see him. And finally Jesus instructs them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus as well. While initially the Greek term is just to view, the other uses for "see" has a meaning to discern or understand, to know. In Matthew it is not just the ability to see the physical presence, but to look beyond and know the meaning of Jesus' presence.

See! Not death, but life.
See! Not fear, but a soul that lives on with God
See! God is stronger than death
See! More than what our eyes tell us.
Look beyond the surface.

Helen Keller once said that, "the only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." What is it that the angel and Jesus wanted Mary to see? What is it that Jesus wanted the disciples to understand? Is it more than his presence among them? Surely that is enough to shatter the world. To believe that death does not hold us captive anymore, that life goes on into eternity can give us hope and remove fear...it changes our perspective and understanding of life itself. And if you look for it, the signs of this truth are everywhere. I am reminded of a time at an internment when as we prayed our final blessing over a woman's casket, a butterfly landed on the top of the casket until we said our amen, and then slowly lifted and fluttered over to the woman's daughter where it stayed on her shoulder for just a moment before flying away up into the sky.

My mother's favorite bird was the robin and we would always see who would see the first robin of the spring before her birthday in March. The spring after she died, I went to her house on her birthday, and as I walked through to look out the front windows, there on the bushes were hundreds of robins. When I worked for Hospice there were many

people who on their deathbed, saw loved ones who had died before. There are thousands of stories that people tell of knowing the presence of a loved one in some way. Hope abounds, if we only have eyes to see. As someone once said, "Much of what they saw was determined by what was behind their eyes, not in front of their eyes." Our belief and what we know shapes what we see.

Look further and what else do we see. For the disciples that first Easter morning, before the tomb, everything was dark and tragic. Even their belief in all that Jesus had taught them seemed null and void. Even God. But with Jesus' resurrection, it became clear that those lessons still had meaning, still had power. When the powers of this world seem to overwhelm us, compassion can still win. Love can root out hate and peace can end wars. The poor will be taken care of and the sick can be made whole. And those who mourn will be comforted.

Alone, it is almost impossible to accomplish so great a task, but with God, with the community that Jesus formed, that has grown around the world encompassing millions, and with the Holy Spirit, that presence of Jesus amongst us, we can and do accomplish so much. We have that power to continue to serve, continue to love, and bring hope into the void.

Christ is Risen! Alleluia!