

Easter Day Yr A, 12/04/2020
Matt 28:1-10
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“From fear to great joy”

The following true story is told of a pastor who was asked to conduct a graveside service for a member of his church. The only problem was, the cemetery was more than an hour and a half away from the church. The pastor wasn't feeling well so he decided to ride with the Funeral Director in the Coach. [This is NOT what a pastor should do during this time of COVID-19!]

By the time they arrived at the cemetery, the flu had invaded completely and he said he felt like the Chinese Army was having a pogo stick Derby on his head and stomach. Feverish and sick, he made it through the service, but he was starting to look like most flu victims, like death warmed over.

As they headed back home, the funeral director suggested the pastor stretch out in the back of the coach. It had curtains and nobody would see him. The pastor thought it was a good idea and promptly fell asleep.

He awoke when the vehicle stopped. Taking a few minutes to fully awaken, he slowly sat up and drew the side curtain to see where he was. He was face to face with a gas station attendant, who was surprised and shocked to see a body in the back of the hearse staring back at him.

With all the colour drained out of him and his eyes as wide as saucers, the gas pump flew into the air, and the attendant ran on shaky legs back into the gas station, while the funeral director tried to catch up to explain the whole situation.

I'm pretty sure that's how the women who came to the empty tomb that first Easter morning must have felt.

It wasn't a funeral director who shared the Good News with the women, it was an angel. And not just any angel but the Angel of the Lord. But, it still startled them

almost as much as that preacher waking up in the funeral coach startled and scared the gas station attendant.¹

And yet, the fear that the women initially felt soon vanished. So let's take a closer look at Matthew's version of that first Easter morning.

The first detail Matthew gives us is the time and day. It was Sunday, the first day of the week, and it was at dawn. Both of these details are important for us Christians. The first day of the week, Sunday is our Sabbath day. Why did we change it from Saturday to Sunday? Well, because it is the day on which Jesus was raised from the dead, that's why. So, for Christians, every Sunday, no matter what season of the church year we are in, is a reminder to us and a celebration of the resurrection. We are a resurrection people, and resurrection is a symbol, a sign of our hope. We live that hope each time we come together to worship on Sundays.

Matthew goes on to tell us the time—it was at dawn. Dawn marks the beginning of a new day. In this case, dawn is a symbol of the end of an old age and the beginning of a new age—the age of resurrection. When dawn comes, darkness ends and there is light. Just as light helps us to see and give life to the natural world—so spiritually the light of Christ raised from the dead helps us to see beyond darkness, beyond fear. The light of Christ raised from the dead helps us to see new life, new light, new hope. Perhaps that's also why we may often say “It dawned on me,” when we have those AHA and EUREKA moments. The resurrection was an AHA and EUREKA moment for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, as well as Jesus' other disciples—their lives were dramatically changed from despair to hope, from sorrow to joy, from fear to love.

Matthew then gives us another important detail in his Easter story. He tells us that it was two women followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who “went to see the tomb.” Both of these women were also at the cross and watched Jesus

¹ Billy D. Strayhorn, “A Crib, A Cross, And A Cave,” at: <https://sermons.com/sermon/a-crib-a-cross-and-a-cave/1440545>.

suffer and die there. How that must have broken their hearts as they were filled with tears of grief. Both of these women were also around to watch as Jesus' dead body was placed in the tomb. Again how sad that must have been for both of them—thinking that they would never see Jesus again. Now, on this new day, they came to the tomb again. Perhaps they came to process their grief some more, just as sometimes you and I may go to the grave of our loved one. The tomb for the women and the grave for you and I somehow helps us to remember. In remembering, maybe it helped those two women to share the memories with each other about how important Jesus was to them; how he had made a difference in their lives. Maybe when we remember at our loved one's grave; we too are able to share memories of how our loved one was important to us and made a difference in our lives.

Yet, I think Matthew is saying something even more than this symbolically by telling us Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were at the tomb. I think that he was saying that these two women were at the right place at the right time; and because of that they were a sign, a symbol of faithfulness. Their faithfulness to Jesus by watching him suffer and die on the cross; and their faithfulness by watching him being placed in the tomb; and their faithfulness by being at the tomb now is going to be rewarded in an AHA, EUREKA, LIFE CHANGING WAY! You may also have experienced a reward because of your faithfulness in some AHA, EUREKA, LIFE CHANGING WAY. One example of that may be the blessings you and I receive from loving relationships—relationships that have a profound influence on us and change our lives for the better.

The next detail Matthew gives us is the earthquake that happened when an angel from heaven came down to the tomb and rolled back the stone entrance and then sat on the stone. Matthew then describes the angel and the response of the guards and the women. Shafts of lightning blazed from the angel and his clothing shone like snow on a bright day. I find it rather ironic that the guards were so overcome with

fear that they were paralyzed. Guards were to be strong and brave, yet here they felt powerless to do anything except be afraid. Of course the combination of the earthquake with the descending angel from heaven and the angel's appearance and act of removing the stone entrance all point to God's powerful action and presence.

Then the angel speaks not to the guards, but to the women: "Do not be afraid," he says. It is in the form of a command, and it is a comforting word—just as a loving parent speaks a word of comfort to a young child who wakes up from a nightmare. The angel goes on to tell the two women—Jesus is no longer dead, God has raised him from death, come and see the empty tomb, then go and tell Jesus' other disciples that he will meet them in Galilee.

As they quickly go, Matthew tells us that their fear was now changed into a deep awe, wonder and great joy. Then, they were surprised with even more awe, wonder and great joy as Jesus himself met them and said, "Greetings!" According to one biblical scholar—Dr. William Barclay—the word is *Chairete*, and can be translated to mean "Rejoice!" I'm inclined to agree, since the presence of the risen Christ is certainly an awe-filled, wondrous, great joy kind of experience—worth rejoicing over!

Such joy and rejoicing is like the singer who reaches the highest note in Handel's Messiah when they sing the aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and sing the word "risen."

Even more than that, such joy is trusting and believing no matter what happens to us in life—the good, the bad, the ups, the downs, the successes, the failures—Jesus is always with us and he always loves us. In other words, it is not dependent upon what we can or cannot do—rather, it depends upon what God has already done for you and me and the whole world by raising Jesus from the dead. Moreover, his resurrection presence is always with us to bring hope, joy, peace and love because no tomb, no rock could keep The Rock of Ages from coming out and living in your life and mine.

So, like Mary Magdalene, who later became known as “the apostle to the apostles,” we have a story to go and tell—a story worth telling to everyone! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen!