

Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017
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Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

This is my third Easter here at Trinity.

My first year here, we heard Mark's account of the first Easter. The way Mark tells it, three women went to the tomb early Easter morning, but soon they fled, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone" (Mark 16:8)

My second year, we heard Luke's account of that first Easter. The way Luke tells it, several women went to the tomb early Easter morning. They left shortly thereafter, but they had things to say to those who hadn't come with them. They talked about "two men in dazzling clothes" in the empty tomb. "But these words seemed to [the others] an idle tale" (Luke 24:1-12).

This year, we just heard Matthew's account of that first Easter. It's the same story, of course. And yet it's not; they all tell it a little differently. I hope that doesn't disturb anyone. For my part, the variety of ways of talking about Easter is a point in favor of its veracity. I think of crime stories on TV. The cops always get suspicious when suspects tell them exactly the same story, using the same phrases and details to give everyone an alibi. If the Resurrection were nothing more than a conspiracy concocted by early Christians to prove Jesus was raised, they would have gotten their stories straight.

Writing about the different Easter stories, Frederick Buechner says:

The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt. ⁱ

Our best chance this morning to get a glimpse of that "something unimaginable," it seems to me, will be for us let Matthew tell the story his own unique way this year.

The way Matthew tells it, there were guards at the tomb. That's the first thing that sticks out for me. None of the other gospel accounts speak of the soldiers. If you were here last week, you might just possibly remember that's where we left off. The chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to secure the tomb, lest Jesus' disciples steal the body and tell the people he had been raised. So Pilate accommodates their request and posts a guard and seals the tomb.

To be honest, I found it a bit distracting at the time. I actually made a note in my files that maybe we should drop those verses next time we read Matthew on Palm Sunday and end instead with the poignancy of "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary," as Matthew describes them, "sitting opposite the tomb" where Jesus had just been laid (Matthew 27:61).

But apparently it's an important detail for Matthew. First, there's that request that led Pilate to post the guard, as I already mentioned, beforehand. And then, next, beyond where we left off this morning, we hear that the guards reported back about what happened and that, then, the priests and elders came up with a plan to pay the soldiers to say that the disciples must have stolen the body while they were asleep.

It's almost as if Matthew is going out of his way to "militarize" Easter, which seemed almost bizarre to me at first. And then I remembered that (way back at the beginning of the story) Matthew is the one who includes Herod in his Christmas story. Herod, having learned from the Magi of a newborn king, was afraid of what it all meant for him, so he sent soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the male children, two years of age and younger.

Soldiers at the tomb on Easter morning is, I now begin to think, an essential and chilling detail for us to notice, and not merely a distraction ... maybe especially just days after reports that the U.S. military dropped what's being called the "mother of all bombs" in Afghanistan. Fearful leaders, Matthew seems to be telling us, are confident that military might will keep them safe. So, at least in the biblical narrative, they send soldiers to kill innocent children, and they post guards to try to keep a dead man locked up in a tomb.

And then there are the women. Mark and Luke and John all tell us that women are the first to go to the tomb that first Easter morning. Mark and Luke, in particular, tell us that they brought spices with them, to anoint Jesus' body and to complete the interrupted burial rites. They worry about how they're going to roll away the stone when they get there. And in all the other stories, they are alarmed to discover that the stone has already been rolled away when they arrive.

But the way Matthew tells it, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come empty-handed. There's no mention of spices, no concerns about the stone. No, the way Matthew tells it, they got up early just to go "see" the tomb. And when they get there, it's still sealed.

They go to "see" the tomb, but the Greek word used suggests something more than merely looking at it. The word is the root for our word for "theater"; it implies a sharply attentive kind of looking. Matthew seems to say that Mary and Mary go to observe, to pay attention.ⁱⁱ They go to see what there is for them to see.

It's what sets them apart from everyone else in Matthew's account. The religious leaders heard what Jesus had said about being raised again. They remembered those words. Apparently they even took them seriously. That's why they did everything they could to stave it off. And then there were the others, the male disciples who didn't get up early that morning. They, too, would have heard what Jesus had said. But if they remembered those words, they apparently didn't hold out much hope. But is it too much to think that maybe these two Marys would have heard the words of Jesus and remembered them and taken them seriously enough to go to the tomb that morning expecting to see what wondrous thing would happen?

If so, they certainly weren't disappointed. The way Matthew tells it, as soon as they arrive there is "suddenly ... a great earthquake," caused by an angel descending from heaven, an angel described as being like lightning! The angel rolls back the stone, showing it to be empty inside.

And then the angel says to them what angels always say in the Bible, "Do not be afraid ..."
The thing is, it seems like an unnecessary greeting for these women. The soldiers faint dead away, but these women never quake nor waver. There's never any indication these women are afraid. In contrast to the soldiers, they are exemplars of courage, in no way incapacitated by any fears they may have felt.

Maybe they were already practiced at leaning into their fears. Maybe they knew, for starters, that they didn't need to be afraid of their grief. That's why they were able to go to the tomb in the first place. Whatever the case, the way Matthew tells it, Mary and Mary were anything but paralyzed by fear. So when the angel tells them to tell the others that Jesus has been raised, they jump at the chance.

And it's only then that Matthew tells us they experienced a kind of fear. They leave the tomb, we're told, "with fear and great joy." Just what that means is never made clear to us, but clearly it's nothing like the fainting fear that struck down the soldiers. If the point is that their great joy energized them to go forward (their fears notwithstanding), then maybe that's why they immediately run into none other than the risen Jesus. They experience resurrection first-hand as soon as they leave the empty tomb behind them.

Well, that's the way Matthew tells it. It's a wonderful glimpse of that "something unimaginable" we call Easter. It's a cautionary tale about fears that bring out the worst in us, fears that breed violence and paralysis. But more than that, it's a story of vision and hope that opens us to new possibilities. And it's a story of the courage that leans into the hurts and pains common to everyone, in order to give birth to new life and renewed vitality, in order to lay claim to the hope beyond hope for a brand new world where love really is stronger than death.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, "Easter," in *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1988), p. 42.

ⁱⁱ Richard Swanson @ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/a-provocation-easter-sunday-april-16-2017-matthew-281-10/>. (Swanson says that θεωρησαι is related to "theory" - and that's probably true - but my recollection is that it's related to "theater" - which is another way of looking attentively, paying attention to details expectantly ... so I went with both of them!)