

Easter Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston. TX
9 April 2023

Matthew 28:1-10

There was a church where the preacher and the Director of Music were not getting along. Soon, this spirit of animosity affected the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we should dedicate ourselves to God, the Director of Music led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week he preached on tithing and how we should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The Director of Music played, "Jesus Paid it All." The third week he preached on gossiping and how we should watch our tongues. The Director played, "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became totally disgusted over the situation. The next Sunday he told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The Music Director played, "Oh, Why Not Tonight." As it came to pass, the preacher did resign. The next Sunday he informed the congregation that it was Jesus who led him to that parish, and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The Director of Music played, "What a Friend we Have in Jesus."

There are a few remarkable details in the story Matthew gives us today that unique to him. Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb. He does not tell us why the women are here as the other Gospels tell us. Remember that Mark tells us that there were three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, and that they brought spices to anoint the body. Last year Luke told us that "these were women who came with him from Galilee" and gives us several names, "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the mother of James and the other women." He tells us they are there to anoint the body for burial. Lastly, John only mentions Mary Magdalene, who then runs to call Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and they run to see the empty tomb.

In Matthew, the two women come not to anoint the body for burial, but rather to weep. Remember that in Matthew, the anointing happens way before the arrest, trial, killing, and burial of Jesus. It happens in chapter 26:6-13. While Jesus is having supper at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, a mysterious woman anoints Jesus with costly ointment. Jesus says, "By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial" (v. 12). Matthew also give us more specifics about the cosmic phenomena that took place at the time of the resurrection. There was a great earthquake, which was caused by an angel rolling away the stone. His appearance is like lightening and his clothing white as snow. Of course this Angel reminds us of Ezekiel and Daniel. In fact, the description of the Angel in such similar language from the Jewish Scripture is no accident. Matthew had been very concerned with proving that in Jesus all the promises of the Jewish Scriptures are fulfilled. He often tells us that an event took place, "To fulfill the prophets..." or "In accordance to the book of the law", or "to fulfill the Scripture, etc."

Mark, Luke and John do not mention an earthquake on the day of resurrection. The women simply find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. For Matthew, the death of Jesus and his Resurrection cause great cosmic events. At his death “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” (Matthew 27: 51-54). At these terrible events the officials exclaim, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (v. 54). Now, at his resurrection, we have this earthquake. For Matthew it is very apparent that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the most extraordinary events in human history. The whole universe is affected by these events. There is no doubt that the person who died and rose again was God’s own Son. He is the fulfillment of all the Jewish Scriptures. Everything points to him!

In Matthew, the Angel directs the women to Galilee, as he does in Mark. But here, after the women obey the Angel, Jesus himself appears to them and they recognize him. This is pretty unique of Matthew. The women fall on his feet and worship him. Then Jesus repeats his command. Other than the apparition to Mary in the Gospel of John, only Matthew tells us that Jesus appeared to the women. This is impressive because women are considered second class citizens in first century Palestine. They are not allowed to give testimony in court, they are not educated outside of the home, and they don’t become disciples of Rabbis. Yet, here we see the women’s faithfulness. When the male disciples run away and Peter denies Jesus, the women remain with Jesus at the crucifixion (27:55-56). The women provided for Jesus, which means they served him. The word used is *diakoneo*, used for Deacon. Women are important to the ministry of Jesus, and Matthew makes it clear today when he recalls how Jesus appeared to them.

What do we make of the differences in the resurrection narratives? Each Gospel gives us a different cast of characters, sequence of events, and versions of Jesus’ apparition. To me, the fact that we have different versions is actually very encouraging. It basically tells me that each Evangelist had a different experience of the Risen Lord that was unique to them. Likewise, we all have different experiences of Jesus, both as the Jewish Rabbi who came to us two thousand years ago, and as the Christian Messiah whom we believe rose from the dead. Not everyone’s experience of God will ever be the same. Some of us have a more intellectual understanding of our faith. Some of us have a more emotional understanding, and some a more “sacramental” understanding.

Some say, “I know Christ is risen because it makes sense to me rationally. Why would so many throughout the centuries sacrifice their lives; be willing to be killed by beasts in the coliseums; be willing to be beaten, abused, incarcerated and despised... if they had not actually seen or had a deep experience of the Risen Lord? It makes sense that only an experience of the Risen Lord would have turned a group of cowardly disciples into the strongest, most effective, evangelistic force the world has ever seen. It might be possible for a few people to fall for the same deception, but how can billions of people throughout twenty centuries fall for the same deception? People as smart as popes, theologians, professors of big name universities, scientists, and countless saints. The fact

that the church exists today is conclusive proof that Jesus rose from the dead. Few people are willing to die for a lie, yet countless Christians throughout the ages have been willing to die for their faith. The resurrection makes sense.”

Others say, “Whether things happened this way or that way is not important to me. I have a personal faith in my Redeemer. I know my Lord is risen because I can feel him in my heart. He gives me a sense of acceptance and love when I pray to him. I know that he is always with me as he said in Scriptures. Since I accepted Jesus in my heart I have become more loving, more optimistic, more willing to forgive others, more in touch with God. At an emotional level I know that my Redeemer lives and this gives me a sense of belonging. I know that when I die I too will be with God because I have accepted him in faith. I can feel it in my heart. My salvation is guaranteed and this brings me great joy.”

Others may say, “I know that my redeemer lives because I experience him daily in the sacraments of the Church. My life is different since I accepted him. I have experienced his forgiveness through the sacrament of Confession, his abundant grace in the Holy Eucharist... I once was lost, but now I am found. Through the liturgies of the Church and its Church members, Christ rescued me from addiction, he made me a better husband or wife, he helped me realize what’s truly important. I am a better father or mother. I am less bitter and angry. I have experienced this resurrection in my own life. Now I know that I am important to God. I experience God’s sacraments through the life of the Church, and I feel the Church’s embrace and love.”

Whether your faith is more intellectual, more emotional, or more sacramental, or a combination of the three, resurrection means continued presence. Christ is among us; he walks among us and he suffers still among us. When apathy fills the human heart with selfish detachment, Christ suffers still. When hatred blinds the human heart to the dignity of others, Christ suffers still. When arrogance convinces the human heart that we have no need of God, Christ suffers still. Resurrection means that Christ is on the side of humanity. He is not appalled by us. We are not orphaned children, but children of the Most High.

Through Christ we are inheritors of God’s kingdom. We are forgiven and redeemed, not because we are perfect but because he loves us perfectly. Today, we will re-affirm our baptismal vows and we will pledge to treat others with dignity, love and respect. This is what happens when the Risen Christ enters our life. Where Christ is light and radiance can be found and darkness is driven away. Where Christ reigns there is dignity, respect, and compassion. Where Christ is allowed to be king, humans live by a different set of rules, and love becomes our guiding principle.

Today I welcome all of you to rekindle your hope and your faith. Look at the Risen One and vow today to affirm life, truth, and love in all you do and in all you say. Vow today to make the Risen Christ known in your homes and communities. For only in Christ can we live in hope. Only in Christ can our lives find Joy. Only in Christ can we find salvation. Amen!