

Looking For Jesus
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Matthew 28:1-10
April 16, 2017 – Easter Sunday
Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC

Matthew 28

1 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."

When I hear the resurrection story from Matthew's gospel I think I should be wearing a crash helmet and safety goggles. Of the four gospel resurrection accounts, Matthew's version is the loudest, most bombastic and dangerous, with its earthquakes, lightening fast and dazzling white angel and guards quaking till they faint dead away. It explodes into our imaginations. Matthew narrates his version of the Jesus story with wondrous signs in amazing Technicolor, 3-D and Surround Sound because he wants us to grasp the cosmic implications of Jesus's life, death and resurrection. A new star appears in the heavens to announce his birth and mysterious Gentile visitors, wise wizards from the far east, come to pay this special baby homage. At the moment Jesus dies, Matthew tells us that not only is the curtain of the temple torn in two but the earth shakes, rocks are split in two, tombs are opened and saints of God spill out of them to go walking around Jerusalem even before Jesus' resurrection! A Roman centurion, one of those least likely to heed the signs, cries out "Truly this man was God's Son!" Matthew is making sure we get that Jesus brings God's change for a world in desperate need of change! Change not just for the children of Israel, but for the entire world, the cosmos! Jesus is the Messiah fulfilling the ancient prophesies ushering in God's Kingdom of love and justice for all people. All is changed irrevocably because Jesus ! All is made new! And we are left breathless with the very dramatic revelation of the good news! Christ is Risen! And you say....Christ is Risen Indeed! Amen!

While the special effects are magnificent and not to taken lightly, I have to admit that there are some subtler moments in Matthew's story that shake me to the core. There are the moments in the opening lines when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, possibly Jesus' mom, get up in the dark before sunrise and quietly journey to the tomb looking for their beloved Jesus. They come to anoint his dead

body in the proper ritual way. Imagine that journey....the foundation of their world has crumbled....the cornerstone of their lives has been pulled from its place and smashed. My guess is that they are too tired, too numb, too sad to even think about the future of this movement Jesus has started. Nothing matters anymore except to be with him one last time. I have been on such journeys of grief and I bet you have too.

The women reach the tomb just as the all heaven breaks loose with signs and wonders. Then there is the moment of silence after the flash of lightening, the crash of the rolling stone and the thump of the guards slumping to the ground unconscious. I imagine that even the birds are startled into silence. Perhaps the women cough and sputter as the earthquake dust settles and clears, sparkling in the morning light but making no sound. It is utterly still except for the pounding of hearts pounding. And into the stillness, out of the darkness of the tomb, the angel says, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus...."

"Looking for Jesus..." In the midst of all the noise of proclamation the angel speaks the simple truth, "I know you are looking for Jesus..." The phrase haunts me. I have been looking for Jesus all of my life. What about you? In fact I would call my search a habit. Something I do repeatedly time and again, particularly at Easter. I can only think of one Easter in my life when I missed church. Even during the years when regular church-going was not my thing, I was in church on Easter looking for Jesus. We may love the Easter egg hunts and new clothes and big dinners with family and friends, but the real habit of Easter is looking for Jesus. Matthew would tell us in all his signs and wonders that's because we are looking for God and the life of God's Kingdom, God's realm. Isn't that the place of our deepest curiosity....what is this mysterious thing called Life? Isn't that why we return habitually to Easter year after year? Looking for new life....looking for Jesus?

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." Jesus, the man of Nazareth that they knew, crucified because he non-violently confronted the political and religious powers of his time with the love, compassion and distributive, restorative justice of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified," says the angel. Crucified because he never shied away from Life. Crucified because he lived and preached the wholeness of the Kingdom of God in the very midst of life...with family and strangers, eating and drinking, healing the sick and telling stories to enemies as well as friends, in the midst of controversy with the faith community he loved and conflict with the death-dealing empire of his day.

And the angel continues, "He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.... indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; *there* you will see him." He is not here in the halls of the dead, in the dark and moldering confines of a tomb. Jesus is alive and going ahead of you to Galilee, the place where you lived and traveled with him all those years. Galilee, where *you* live! Jesus is raised and going ahead of you back into life! Go to Galilee, *where you live* and *there* you will see him!"

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So we make it a habit each Easter to leave our everyday lives and come to church looking for Jesus. But the angel tells us...."He has risen! Go back to your lives...there you will find Jesus, the proclaimer of God's realm on earth!" The

interesting thing about the word “habit” is that it’s original meaning from the Latin was not repetitive action, but was “a place where one dwells, lives, inhabits.” Our habit must be to look for Jesus in all places we inhabit. He is there hiding in plain sight. In ALL that life brings us: family, friends, learning and work, times of challenge, times of celebration, journeys of grief. And in the confrontation with death-dealing empire power, for we, too, live in times when peace is sought by the world’s powers through warfare rather than the sharing of resources, when the fear of scarcity is used as an excuse to make the richer richer and the poor poorer, when human beings seek dominion over the gifts of creation rather than stewardship of creation’s gifts.

My friends, God’s resurrection of Jesus was and still is the resounding NO to empire’s attempt to control through death and scarcity, to create peace through violence. God’s resurrection of Jesus is the resounding YES to Life and to us as co-creators of God’s realm on earth. Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Christ, is with us in all the beauty and the mess: at the egg hunt and the family dinner; in caves obliterated by bombs and in the hospitals where people suffer needlessly from chemical warfare. Children, Jesus is on the playground with you at school. Grown-ups, Jesus is at work with you. Jesus is in the complicated corridors of our nation’s congress. Jesus walks with us here in Fort Collins in the conversation and the conflict of community building. Wherever life takes us the Risen One goes before leading the way because of the power of the living God. We are called to shout NO with God to death and YES with God in Christ to abundant life!

Now that is worth celebrating with a few special effects! Amen.

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