

“Eyes to See”

Matthew 28:1-10

First Presbyterian Church

April 16, 2017

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

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

Sermon

Awhile back I heard about a pastor who was invited to bring the sermon one Sunday afternoon at a nursing home. This was not one of the NICE retirement communities; with antique furniture and Oriental rugs in the day room. This was a small nursing home in a dying town... some of you may know places like this. Well, after struggling through a couple of hymns, the pastor rose to speak... and looking out over her congregation, she was stunned to see two or three people had already fallen asleep... that a man toward the back was murmuring under his breath... there was a woman calling for the help of a nurse... and several folks were just staring blankly into space. Immediately she knew that the message she had prepared was not going to be relevant to this congregation... and not knowing what else to do, she asked them: “My friends, what do you want me to say?” And after a bit of silence, someone responded: “Tell us about the resurrection.”¹ Tell us about the resurrection.

Though today we sit in a beautiful sanctuary and not the dining room of a nursing home... though we are mostly able-bodied and have our faculties about us... there is this one thing we all share in common: we are hungry for good news. We are thirsty for hope.

So, preacher, tell us about the resurrection. Tell us again how those sad women went to the tomb carrying spices... and how they were all worried about how they were going to deal with that huge stone... and tell us how SURPRISED they were by an angel and even more surprised

¹ This story may have been told by Barbara Brown Taylor.

by an empty tomb and a risen Lord. Tell us how they ran away to tell those eleven scared men... and how those men thought the women were as crazy as the story they told... And tell us how... even when they saw him for themselves... they were STILL SCARED... thinking that they were seeing some sort of ghost.

Well, this is the story I was prepared to tell this Easter Day – the story of how... at the tomb that morning... everybody expected to find death and was surprised and scared to find life. But then... late in the week I was reading a little reflection piece which pointed out how unique Matthew's telling of this story is.² And particularly, what Matthew says about WHY these two Mary's went to the tomb that first Easter morning. It's right there at the beginning in verse 1: "After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." They went to see the tomb. Unlike the other Gospels, there's no mention of tearful grieving... no mention of spices for a dead body... not the slightest worry about the heavy stone. Simply, "They went TO SEE the tomb." And what the writer takes from this is a question: Could it be that the two Mary's went that morning NOT to grieve their Lord's death, but to witness his life... NOT to prepare a corpse, but to see him alive again? THAT'S what he had promised. He had promised that after three days he will be raised... and could it be that they went to SEE the tomb because they BELIEVED him?

You see, one of the things you notice when you read Matthew's Gospel front to back is how he is always working on our vision... how he is always training our eyes to "see" God at work in this world. Starting with Abraham and proceeding through the generations to Joseph and Mary and Jesus³... to "see" God's way through Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and Daniel to Jesus. And because these two women had listened carefully in Sunday school... over time their eyes were trained. They SAW him teach and preach... they SAW him heal and cast out demons... they SAW how he loved both his Father and his neighbor... and finally, they SAW his suffering and death. And because of all he had shown them, they came that morning to SEE the tomb... empty... just as he promised.

My friends, would that our eyesight were as keen as theirs! Even after all these years of hearing this story and the sermons that follow... even after all these years of being his disciples, would that we could "see" him through all the deathliness that surrounds us? And this world is full of deathliness... SO MUCH deathliness there's little wonder we have trouble seeing through it.

Well, it's there in Matthew's story as well – this deathliness: official reports that death was intact... voices telling not of resurrection, but of sneaky disciples stealing a corpse. During the night while the guards were asleep, some of his disciples came and stole his body, that's all.

² I was pointed to Stanley Hauerwas' work by Kimberly L. Clayton in a sermon "When Death No Longer Determines Our Living," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2008, p. 28-30.

³ The "begats" of Matthew, ch. 1.

There was no earthquake... no angel rolling away the stone. Fake news! Nothing had happened... nothing had changed... the world was still the same deathly place it was the day before.

But it was NOT the same deathly place it was the day before... and the question that haunts me each Easter... the question that dogs me every year as I try to preach this great, glad news... is how can we “people of the resurrection” get to the place where fear no longer drives us... get to the place where death no longer determines our living? I’m not talking about the afterlife... not talking about after we die. I’m talking about NOW... how can we live in a way that shows the world we are not afraid... that we have hope... that we believe in resurrection? Because what’s so remarkable about how Matthew tells this story... what’s so striking about these two Mary’s is that they are understandably awestruck, but are not afraid. Even after all they had seen that week... with the brutal, deathly power of the Roman and Jewish authorities... after all that, still they do not act afraid. And I can’t help but think that it has to do with their VISION... and that throughout Jesus’ short time with them, he had been teaching them to “see” the world differently.

He showed them the world of the Beatitudes, where the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, the hungry and persecuted (those you least expect) turn out to be the most blessed ones. He showed them a world where people did not exchange an eye for an eye, but offered a cloak to the one who just stole your coat. He showed them a world where loving your neighbor was right... and loving your enemy is necessary. He showed them a world where diseases are healed and storms do not sink boats. And perhaps most of all, he showed them a world where swords and high priests and false witnesses and denials do not have the last word.⁴ So that by the time Easter morning rolled around, maybe the women had seen enough... and heard enough... maybe they had experienced enough that they could go to the tomb NOT IN FEAR, but fully expecting to see it was true.

Of course, there are some people in this story who ARE AFRAID. Not everyone is so fearless. But in Matthew’s Easter these fearful ones are the governor, the guards at the tomb, the chief priests... the ones who had placed their bets on the old world where might makes right and the rich get richer and dead people stay dead.⁵ This was the world they had mastered and were masters of... but Easter changed all that... making clear that though they had power enough to kill Jesus, they could not keep him dead and buried. And it’s terrifying when the idols you have trusted to keep you secure and comfortable and safe are suddenly rolled away.

As for the two Mary’s... it seems that somewhere along the path that morning something happened... and they left the one world and entered another. Having been so very close to Jesus for so long, it may have happened without them even knowing it. But somewhere along their path with Jesus they crossed the border... they left the old world of fear and death

⁴ Clayton, p. 29.

⁵ Thomas G. Long in his commentary on Matthew (Westminster Bible Companion-WJK, 1997), p. 322.

and entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life... and because of this they have become our mentors in “resurrection living”.

Well, friends it’s true that in *other* years when we read the ***other*** Gospel accounts of Easter, we hear of fear... and doubt... and disciples who run away and hide. But this year Matthew puts before us a bold Easter message: “Do not fear! This Jesus – this one whom you follow... this one who has taught you how to see the world - he is risen! He lives! And because he lives, death need no longer determine your living. Now, step over those guards and run to Galilee. He will see you there.