

Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
Matthew 28: 1-10 & Jeremiah 31:1-6
“Go and Tell”
4-9-2023 – Easter Sunday – Year A
Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 31:1-6

¹At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. ²Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, ³the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. ⁴Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. ⁵Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. ⁶For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: “Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.”

This ends our first reading

A LOT has happened since last Sunday when the crowds gathered to rip branches off of trees and cloaks off their shoulders to line the streets for Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. The joyful “Hosannas” that shook the city quickly turned into angry shouts of “Crucify Him!” The crowds that could not get close enough to Jesus, to learn from him and experience his healing disappeared and deserted him when the powers of the world stood unified against his message.

The Gospel of Matthew, so rich in detail, makes it clear that the worst has happened. Jesus, the promised Messiah, was taunted, tortured, and endured death on the cross – one of the worst ways to die. It was a death that literally shook the world to its core – with the earth shaking and stones breaking apart. The Gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus is not pretending – he died. The story tells us that he was wrapped in a clean linen cloth and placed in a brand-new tomb cut into the rock and then a great stone was rolled over the entrance. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there to witness the whole thing. But death wasn’t enough for the powers that be. Taking this man’s life wasn’t enough *finality* for the Roman and Religious leaders. They demanded that Roman soldiers secure the tomb by standing guard until the third day to really make sure this man of peace stayed dead and that no one could steal his body. Matthew tells us the Romans were so adamant that Jesus stays dead that they sealed the stone. While we aren’t exactly sure what this might mean, we do know the Romans were experts at concrete – they made such high-quality concrete that structures they built still stand today. I imagine that sealing the stone means they secured the stone in place with concrete.

The days passed and by all accounts Rome and the ways of sin and disconnection had won, and the promises of God had lost – they were literally sealed in stone. The disciples, Jesus’ faithful followers, were scattered and in hiding – fearful of what this meant for them and for the world.

This is where our story picks up this morning.

It appeared that all hope was lost. But, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who had witnessed Jesus being wrapped in linen and watched as the Great stone had been rolled over the entrance of the tomb HAVE to go back – they can’t stay away.

Let us listen for God’s Word of Hope for us this day, from

Matthew 28:1-10

¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then 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.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

“Go and Tell”

It has been three days – Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and all the other disciples are in hiding. They are grieving for their lost friend, they are mourning for the love that walked in the world but they are also scared. They are terrified and waiting for the people in power to decide that Jesus’ death was not enough – that his closest followers have to be next. But this fear isn’t enough to keep the Marys away from their savior’s tomb. Matthew doesn’t tell us WHY the Marys return. The authors of Mark and Luke tell us that the women return with oils so they can properly anoint his body for burial. But as detailed as Matthew is, he doesn’t tell us why they return to Jesus’ tomb that day. Scholars say that mourners would routinely return to loved one’s tombs in the days following a burial because they wanted to make sure the person was truly dead and that by the third day it was pretty certain someone was truly dead. If they didn’t come and the person wasn’t truly dead, they might be trapped in their tomb and then truly die. So loved ones returned to see the tomb and listen for signs of life.

The Marys knew the tomb was being guarded, they knew it was a risk to return to the tomb because it would mark them as followers of Jesus and potentially call unwanted attention to themselves, but they had to see the tomb. I BET they weren’t expecting to see what they saw that day.

As I picture it, with each step toward the tomb in the quiet of the morning, the Marys’ hopes are rising – hoping and praying that Jesus’ words have come true – that he will have risen again. But as they emerge into the clearing from between some hedges, they catch sight of the tomb and they see the great stone still in place guarded by Roman soldiers and their hopes plummet. But the text tells us that an emotional journey that started quietly soon becomes raucous.

As they draw near, they see an ANGEL of the Lord descending from heaven. As one commentary suggests: This angel knows how to make an appearance, and comes in with a flourish, rolling his eyes, as if to say, “Take that, Caiaphus. Take that, Pilate. That’s what God thinks of your effort to put the Messiah in the tomb. Imprison the Prince of Peace? Forget about it. A tomb for his final resting place? I don’t think so¹.” It was the angel, not the earthquakes that opened the tomb. This angel, just to show how truly ripped he is, rolls that stone that had been sealed in place away. He rolls back the stone and then sits on it – as if bored by the effort.

Matthew’s use of the angel for this action can’t be more clear – the work of resurrection cannot be explained by human action – the work of resurrection, the work of love expressed in this moment is

¹ Alyce McKenzie, “My Favorite Angel: Reflections on Matthew 28, Patheos.com, 4/20/14.

God's action breaking into the world. As much as the powers of the world have tried to control this tomb, God's loving power is greater – breaking through all human effort to entomb God's love so that once again Israel, like in the words of Jeremiah, "can take their tambourines and go forth in the dance of merrymakers!"

The poor soldiers, I honestly feel sorta bad for them. They have NO idea what is happening – they feel the ground moving, they see this brilliant angel descending and breaking through their protection without a second thought. And they keel over, pass out from their fear – the text tells us they "become like dead men" – they better be careful or they will end up in a tomb. The women, like most women I know, are made of stronger stuff. Are they scared, I'm sure they are but they remain steadfast there at the tomb because they have come for a reason, and they are not leaving until they see. Turning his angelic gaze to the Marys, the angel says, "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." Knowing what they need, the angel even invites them into the tomb saying, "Come, see the place where he lay." Notice the past tense, "where he lay" - the angel is making it clear from his first words to the women that Jesus is alive and loose in the world again.

The angel does not stop there though. He says, "come and see and then go quickly to 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.'" The angel know what they need – to see the empty tomb, but he also knows our human tendency to become rooted in place in the face of our awe, fear, and wonder. This angel doesn't have time for that – he wants these brave women to keep going – to carry the story out into the world so Jesus' followers can start looking for him where he lived out his ministry – in Galilee. The text tells us the women ran to find the other disciples with fear and great joy. Isn't that the way we all experience new things – amazing news – life changing moments?

A few weeks ago, my friend, Brad, sent me an amazing update about Jose, a young man who was 11 when we first met him in the Dominican Republic. I met Brad when I was the Associate Pastor at Fairmount Presbyterian. Brad grew up in the church and was shaped by the longtime mission partnership in the Dominican Republic. During my ministry there, Brad and I worked to restructure that mission partnership to focus on systemic change. The first priority identified by leaders in the batey was English lessons which would allow people to get out of the sugar cane fields and secure safer and better paying jobs in the resorts. Jose was the one of the first children to really benefit from the lessons. We eventually provided a way for him to attend school in La Romana where his English advanced enough for him to start working as an interpreter for the hospital. He has been working with other mission groups as they come to share in the work in the bateys.

Brad wrote me a few weeks ago because Jose has been accepted to Tri-C here in Cleveland. He is going to come here to further his education. Brad told me that Jose is terrified and excited at the same time. Jose has this new opportunity open before him – an opportunity he has dreamed about, and he is thrilled, but at the same time he is terrified. The questions flood his brain? What does this mean? What will happen?

The women were running to the disciples and their brains were probably flooded with the same questions! What does this mean? Where can we find Jesus? What will happen when the religious leaders find out what has happened? What will happen when Roman leaders find out? Jesus has risen... As they are making their way to the other disciples with the news Jesus is suddenly there, greeting them. If he had been in SC, he would have said, "Hey y'all!" The word translated as "Greetings" is probably better translated as "REJOICE!" Again, the women are told, "Do not be afraid." Keep going – go and tell everyone to meet me in Galilee. Don't stay here holding onto me...Don't cling to my feet. Go

and tell them where to find me. Tell them to go to Galilee. “Galilee is not only the place where Jesus had promised to gather his scattered sheep again. It is also the place where his ministry, which embodied the dawning reign of God, had been lived out – where he gathered community, taught, healed the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and generally tended to the forgotten and lonely.²”

We gather this day, so many generations later to receive the message from the women at the tomb. We are invited to go to Galilee to find Jesus. I would guess that most of us might find that daunting – not all of us can pick up and go to Galilee like his disciples that day. We are a world away. But to misquote Marvel – “Galilee is not a place, never was. Galilee is where God’s people stand.” The angel and Jesus tell the disciples to go to Galilee because the risen Christ meets us in all those places of grace-full endeavor, those places where healing, feeding, teaching, and even suffering are undertaken in his company.

The earth itself which previously spun under the exhausting power of Pilate and his soldiers, under the weight of death by violence, greed, poverty and disease now quakes with new life. Matthew’s proclamation of resurrection is huge, earth-changing and global good news. This was not simply a personal spiritual awakening, not an isolated, local event. It occurred in and for the world. So, in the midst of all the world’s grief and fear this day – we celebrate the Lord of Life walks forth from the grave. In Jesus Christ God cannot be defeated by death. And we will not be defeated by death. The Risen Christ is already ahead of us in Galilee, which is, of course, the place where God’s children live. In our world, in our time, in our life together, this is joyful good news. And we, like those first Easter witnesses, are called to go and tell this news with others in great joy.

² D. Cameron Murchison – Theological Perspective on Matthew 28:1-10 from Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 2 – pg. 350