

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 9, 2023
Easter Sunday
Matthew 27:62-Matthew 28:15

Gracious God: We come rushing to the empty tomb, though we do not necessarily understand. We come looking, hoping, and praying for new life against all odds. We come wanting and needing to hear the real story, because we need it and so does the world. Help us to tell it; to go back to our Galilees in peace and courage; Holding to the good; honoring all of your children, and Loving and serving you, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Alleluia! Amen!

“Trying to Keep the Sun from Rising”

Alleluia! The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed.

Yes, that is the story we come expecting to hear on Easter. This is the story we need to hear and long to hear on Easter.

But is it the story we tell? Or do we tell the other story, the one Matthew tells us still lives on to this day?

Oh, you didn't notice the second Easter story Matthew tells, the one where the guards are paid a large sum of money to tell everyone it's all a hoax; that what really happened was that the disciples came and stole Jesus' body in the night so they could tell everyone that it's true, when it's really not?

Surely you know that story, don't you? It's a common, every day story about duplicity and fraud, as plausible as anything in the morning paper or on the evening news.

Surely you know that story, don't you? I read that story every day, and watch it on the evening news. It's the one where death has the final word; where destruction has the final word; where hope is gone, and might makes right; the one in which violence wins and injustice wins; is this all bringing a bell now? And love loses and so does peace.

Come on, you know that story, don't you?

If not, scroll through your phone, or pick up a paper on your way home; or turn on the news tonight. You'll read all about; see the images of war, violence, and injustice right in front of you.

Granted, it's not the story Matthew believes, and it's not the story Matthew wants us to tell, but some people tell that story.

The question is. Will you?

Before you answer that too quickly, let's remember how this whole story started, shall we? Because it's a pretty wild and improbable tale.

Jesus of Nazareth, whom some of his followers are calling Christ, the Messiah, is dead. After three years of teaching and healing, he came to Jerusalem for the Passover and was welcomed enthusiastically and noisily by a crowd of pilgrims who ripped branches from the trees and their cloaks from their backs and shouted, "Hosanna, hosanna, save us, Son of David!"

So what went wrong?

Well, as you can imagine, that didn't go over so well with those in authority. Rome had no more tolerance for public displays of political unhappiness than dictators and some politicians do these days. So on Thursday evening, Jesus was arrested under the cover of darkness, tried at midnight by a hastily assembled court, and the next morning brought to the governor's headquarters for sentencing. The governor, Pontius Pilate, had little interest in the whole matter and made a few attempts to persuade the angry mob that Jesus was not guilty of a capital offence, but eventually he gave in, imposed the death sentence, washed his hands of the whole nasty matter, and ordered the soldiers to carry out the execution, which they did. Jesus was nailed to a cross, Rome's favorite method of public execution, and after a few hours died. Only a few women remained with him at the end. (John Buchanan)

Joseph of Arimathea claims the body and buries it in his own tomb, and rolls a large stone in place over the opening. The women, two Marys, follow along and watch the proceedings.

Now it's Saturday morning, the Sabbath. Nothing is moving in Jerusalem; some of you – well, probably all of us – remember Easter three years ago when nothing was open, no one was moving, and there was nothing to do. Remember how eerily quiet that was? That's how Jerusalem would have felt. Friday's crowd is gone, the streets are empty, and the victim is dead and buried.

Governor Pilate is enjoying his day off. But in the distance – darn it – he can see those old men heading his way. Here they come again, the same ones who were so persistent that Jesus of Nazareth was not only committing the sin of blasphemy but was also a political threat to Rome. I doubt Pilate is pleased to see them.

“Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive” those old men tell Pilate. “After three days I will rise again,” he said. Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the 3rd day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’ And the last deception would be worse than the first.”

Pilate, fed up and not wanting to waste his day off, tells them to take care of it themselves. “You have a guard of soldiers. Go! Make it as secure as you can!” he tells them. So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Now I want to pause right here and talk about these old men, because only Matthew mentions them and they're essential to his story. These men are doing everything they can think of to preserve the autonomy of their temple, their religion, and their nation. It was their life's work to keep the temple, and all it meant to the nation, open for business. So from Caiaphas on down, they were prepared to make the compromises and do the deals that would serve their interests. So we shouldn't be too hard on them, because we've all done the same thing –served our own interests . . . even if it came at a price. And Pilate, too, only wanted to survive and keep the peace long enough to earn a positive review and promotion. So again . . . let's not be too hard on them because it's likely we've all done the same thing. But they're also, as Frederick Buechner says, “old men trying to keep the sun from rising,” and as we all know that's impossible to do. Who can keep the sun from rising? No one.

Now why would they try to do that? Because they fears that it all might be true, that Jesus might actually get up and walk out of that tomb! And that, they rightly understood was not only unthinkable, it would change everything. If Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, God's anointed, God incarnate, and if somehow in him the power of death was defeated, well we are living in a brand new world! And those men, and some women, I'm sure, didn't want to live in a brand new world. They preferred the old world, where hope was in constant danger, and might made right, and peace had little chance, and the rich got richer, and the weak all eventually suffered under some Pontius Pilate or another, and people hatched murderous plots, and dead people stayed dead.

They liked that world. They benefitted from that world. In that world if something troubling got in the way, like a call for justice or a worker for peace or an advocate for mercy, the world could just kill it and it would be done with. But in this new world that they are trying to prevent from dawning, but can't no matter how hard they try, mercy and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. In this new world the earth shakes and heaven breaks loose – heaven! – not hell – and guards faint in fear and angels sit on stones, and tell women “Do not be afraid!”

There it is again, the Bible's favorite phrase: do not be afraid. The angel said it to Joseph when he told him he was going to be a father and when Mary was going to be a mother, and here he is again at the end, reminding us once again to not be afraid.

God's angelic messengers love to tell us over and over again not to be afraid because they know something we know but don't readily admit, and that is that fearful people seek self-preservation at all costs. And that is not what Easter is about. Robert Frost once said, “The people I am most afraid of are the people who are scared. Why? Because fear not only causes us to hurt ourselves, but to hurt each other in unwitting, senseless, and often destructive ways.”

Folks, those men and Pilate and the people who stood with them were afraid, and so they sold the world a story where courage was in short supply, and the death of hope ran like a never ending obituary in the morning paper and on the evening news, and the world bought it.

And that story is alive; and people tell it daily.

The question is -- Do you?

I'll admit there are days when I tell it, but I'm not proud of myself. There are even more days when I believe it. And just like in Jesus' day, there are people who are heavily invested in that story in our day and making sure we believe it's true.

But it's not. And it's the Easter story.

The Easter story wants us to imagine and work for a world where God wipes away the tears from all eyes, and where people of different races, ethnicities, and religions sit down together at one banquet table. The Easter story wants us to imagine and work for a world a world where children are fed, and all the sick are cared for; a world where children are not gunned down, where the elderly are secure, and where precious resources are invested in life, not death.

Friends, God does not want us to live as captives to that other story. God wants us to tell the resurrection story because it's life changing. It has the power to change everything. In the resurrection we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient – real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word. Instead, the life changing message that the God who created us loves us and loves this world, too, is the last word.

That's the real story; the one Matthew wants us to tell. But will we tell it?

The women do. They go and tell that story to the disciples and they add one important instruction: go to Galilee.

Why Galilee? Because Galilee was real life. Galilee was the day-to-day reality of work and family. Galilee was jobs and bills to pay. Galilee was wives and children, husbands and fathers. And Galilee was the stuff of the morning paper and evening news.

Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, Jesus said because people need to hear the good news story. The Easter story.

Friends, when you get to your Galilee, what story will you tell?

When I get home to my Galilee this afternoon, I'm going to tell the story Matthew wants us to tell, the one where Christ is risen. And not only because I want to tell that story, but because I must tell that story. I have to tell that story. I need to tell that story.

I need to tell that story because I don't believe we live in a Good Friday world.

I need to tell that story because I want my children to live in an Easter world.

I need to tell that story because I refuse to believe that shootings at schools are the last word.

I need to tell that story because I refuse to believe that injustice, violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, hatred, and all the people who push that story get the final word.

I need to tell the Easter story, the one where guards faint and women run in fear *and great joy . . . and great joy . . . because* Christ is risen! He is risen indeed . . . and this changes everything. The world needs this story. You need this story. I need this story. We all need this story.

At the beginning of his life, while he was still in his mother's womb, the angel said to Mary: Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

At his resurrection, our Savior born to us reminds us of those very words. "Do not be afraid. Go ahead to Galilee. I will meet you there."

So go home this afternoon to your Galilee, living fearlessly as Christ would have lived. And do remember what Christ instructed us to do: extend a helping hand, welcome people who think and act and look differently than you; feed the poor, shelter the homeless, speak out against injustice, and show people by your words and actions that God's love know now boundaries. That the Easter is the real story. The true story. So let us make it so.

Because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Amen.

Sources:

For the take on Matthew's story I'm indebted to Rev. Patrick Wilson, The National Presbyterian Church.

And to Rev. John Buchanan, for his take on the old men in Matthew, I'm grateful.

Feasting on the Word and Feasting on the Gospel commentaries, Year A, commentary on Easter vigil and Matthew 27.