

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. 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.”

One of the ways that we know Easter time is approaching is that things around us are blooming - itchy eyes and difficulty breathing is a sure sign Easter is upon us. Easter coincides with the greening of the earth, Christ is risen and the whole world comes to life. Sap rises in dormant trees, spring blooms start their blooming, and lilies spill their sweet smell into the air.¹ In some ways, spring helps us renew our faith in the creative power of God - that no matter how long or cold the winter, spring shoots forth every year.

In our culture another sure sign that Easter is upon us happens as we are waiting in line to purchase our groceries, we notice Jesus' face starting to pop-up in the magazine racks; in place of where you are used to seeing Kim Kardashian or reading a headline about a new celebrity baby named something like Tangerine, you see Jesus looking back at you! Special additions by Time or Newsweek or National Geographic, exploring the latest archaeological science in the Holy Land or new Christian thought trends as related to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Similarly, if you are still one who flips through channels on your television, you're likely to know it is Easter time by coming across programs in search or archaeological proof of Jesus on the History or National Geographic channels.

And even more, it seems that often around this time of year, someone announces some new Jesus related piece of history or archaeology - some new discovery that seeks to prove the story. In 2011, for instance, someone claimed to have found the nails that they believed were used to nail Jesus on the cross. People use these discoveries to try and prove their point of view: You see it's true, and we have the doodads to prove it (the nails; the burial cloth; the correct tomb identified).

And those who don't believe in the resurrection, say something like, "you faith people are really grasping at straws if you think that doodad is real. Even if those were the actual nails, that doesn't make him the Son of God; that doesn't mean he rose from the dead."²

¹ These lines are from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "The Unnatural Truth", in *Home By Another Way*.

² MaryAnn McKibben Dana alerts us to the story about the nails being discovered in her sermon from A21: Easter Sunday, Year A at A Sermon For Every Sunday, <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/a21-easter-sunday-year/>

At the heart of the search for all these discoveries and arguments - at the heart of why we purchase these special edition magazine ads and watch these television programs - at the heart of our even being here today is one simple and profound question, *is it true*. Is it true.

-is it true that the body was resurrected and not just taken by grave robbers

-is it true that the pile of clothes were signs that Jesus was alive

-is it true that the man who Mary thought be a gardner was actually the resurrected Christ

-is it true that the authorities spread a rumor that the body was stolen

-is it true, they asked on that first Easter

-is it true, we ask all these years later

-is it true, we ask, with the skepticism of our age - is it factually true, or just metaphorically true

-is it true, we ask *with all the hope we can muster*, because of loved ones we have just lost

-is it true, we ask, because we feel despair over the suffering of our planet as it aches under the destruction we are inflicting upon it;

-is it true, we ask, because we are beaten down by the suffering we witness happening to people all across this globe that seems to know no limitations

-is it true, does life not end here; is death really not the end?

-is it true, does the fate of this tiny blue planet in the middle of Milky Way really matter? Because today is Easter, but it still feels like Good Friday most places we look...so we wonder together, *is it true?*³

The account of the resurrection we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is quite different from the three other versions. In Mark, Luke, and John's accounts, when the women come to the tomb in the morning with spices to anoint Jesus' body, it is over - everything has happened and what is left is any empty tomb.

³ This line of questions also comes from MaryAnn McKibben Dana

According to Mark and Luke's account, there is someone (or two someones) sitting there in the empty tomb, dressed in dazzling white clothing, waiting to tell them Jesus has been raised; according to John, there is no messenger, just grave clothes folded up nicely in the empty tomb.

But what we read today from Matthew's gospel is a bit more dramatic than this, in this account Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive just in time to see it all go down. They are there just in time to experience an earthquake; to see an angel of the Lord, who looks similar to what can only be described as lightning, descend from heaven, roll the stone away and then, sit victoriously upon the stone. They see the same thing as Roman centurions who guard Jesus' tomb, though the soldiers pass out after witnessing all of this.

Matthew gives us a much more cinematic experience - many more special effects - not just an empty tomb with an angel waiting around to tell anyone who might happen upon the grave that Jesus is risen. Here the earth shakes; an angel descends; the enemy goes down.

But despite all these special effects, the thing that I noticed for this first time this year reading Matthew's version of the resurrection is that the women are simply coming to see. They are not portrayed as sad and grieving women carrying spices to care for the body of one they loved who is now dead; they are not anxiously talking as they go about how they will get in to the body, worried about who will help them roll the stone away. There is no mention of spices. No mention of grief. Only that they went to see.⁴

These two women, along with many other women, had followed Jesus from Galilee to Golgotha saw him teach and heal; saw him cause fear in those with power; they saw him beaten and put to death. And because of all of that, at least two of them came to see the tomb. They came to see if it was empty—just as he had told them it would be. Perhaps these women came in their hope; perhaps they came in their grief.

We are told in earlier in the gospel that these women, and many other women, have followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem; we are told that they “provided” for Jesus, likely in caloric nourishment and financial support. If they have been following him, hearing him teach, seeing him heal - if they have been providing for

⁴ From Holly Hearon's commentary on the passage, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2409

some of his needs as they went - then they have surely also heard him say that he will die, and that he will be raised on the third day (16:21; compare 20:17-19 where he speaks these same words but only to the twelve).⁵

Yes, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary left the tomb quickly, with fear but also with great joy. And as they quickly leave the tomb, going to tell the disciples as per the instructions of the lightning angel - they turn the corner and run into Jesus. They know who he is: their risen friend; but more, the risen Lord. Perhaps this moment is unanticipated, perhaps they have gone to see an empty tomb. Or perhaps it shows what can happen when you anticipate on the basis of what you have seen and heard, what can happen when we venture out in hope, when we go and see, just in case it might be true; when we venture from the safety of our homes just in case it may be so. We may just meet the Risen Lord

Perhaps this is a word to us on this particular Easter Sunday, to go where Jesus has said he will be in anticipation - to go and see, to go just in case - perhaps, we will witness resurrection. To venture from the safety of our homes to where Jesus has said he will be, just for the slightest possibility that he might appear to us. To, in anticipation, step out from behind whatever doors we want to stay locked behind, in the chance that we might experience new life. Perhaps simply in pursuit of our own understanding, we might venture forth to “go and see.”

This is the example that these two women named Mary have left for us, that in venturing forth in anticipation - that in stepping out because of their belief in Jesus’ words that he would rise again - they were there at just the right time; that in going to see, they experienced resurrection.

And Jesus has told us where he will be:

With the hungry and thirsty
With the prisoners
With those who are lonely
With the poor
With the stranger
In the pages of scripture

⁵ Also from Holly Hearon’s commentary.

Perhaps, like Mary and Mary, when we seek Jesus where he has said he will be - when we anticipate that Jesus will be there - when we go and see just in case, just in case it might be true - we just might experience resurrection; we just might catch a glimpse of new life; we just might turn the corner and see Jesus face to face.

We don't know their level of anticipation; we don't know how confident they were in their belief. It may be they went in great confidence that the tomb would be empty. It may be that, as they went, they were discussing the odds: "what are the chances he is actually risen? 50-50? 70-30? 90-10? It may be that they mostly doubted, but they went just in case - just in case it would be so. I guess that is part of the good news here, they didn't have to feel certain, they only had to be curious enough to go...to just go and see, just in case.

And so, *Is it true?* We ask.

Perhaps we don't have to really know the answer to this recurring question - perhaps we only have to be curious enough to go and see for ourselves. Perhaps we only have to be certain enough to venture out from our places of safety to see if Jesus might be in the places he said he would be; to see if new life can be found, where others only believe only death resides.

Is it true? Let us go and see...just in case it may be so - just in case new life may be found.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of Resurrection go with you -
Emboldening us once again by the power of this Easter story, remembering
That stones do not stop God's will
That guards do not stop God's will
That even death does not stop God's will⁶ -
May we be a people shaped by this story,
That healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.
Go in Peace. Amen.*

⁶ The main substance of this blessing comes from the Narrative Lectionary podcast, No: 360: Easter.