

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Faith and doubt at Easter.

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Steve Filyk

Opening Hymn: Jesus Christ is risen today 243

Choruses: What a beautiful name, This is Amazing Grace

Closing Hymn: Crown him with many 274 (diademata)

Today we hear the story of Easter

As it is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew;  
That is we are looking at the resurrection  
through Matthew's eyes.

This is something to be aware of.

We tend to look at the stories of Jesus's birth, life,  
Death and resurrection as a composite sketch.  
That is, we merge the accounts of the various witnesses.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this.  
But in doing so we can overlook the unique perspective,  
The details and nuance of each Gospel writer  
That make their accounts so rich.

When it comes to Easter,  
"Each Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection  
presents the event differently,  
as though each of the evangelists  
is struggling to capture an event  
that they cannot [entirely] put their arms around..."

One of the striking features of Matthew's account  
is the contrast between the cosmic and the intimate."<sup>i</sup>

We hear that in today's reading.  
We are told that early on the first day of the week,  
Two women, two Marys,  
walk to Jesus' tomb.

Matthew doesn't tell us why.  
It is up to us to infer the reason for their visit.

"Perhaps they returned to his tomb to grieve over his death—  
a common practice among the Jewish people,  
who would return several times to the grave  
during their weeklong mourning."<sup>ii</sup>

When I asked our Bible Study group  
About the last time they visited a cemetery  
As well as the reason for their visit,  
Someone commented: "I go to visit old friends."

In the Gospel of Matthew maybe the two Mary's are doing what people  
 always do when someone they loved has died.  
 They go back to where the body has been buried:  
 to remember, to mourn, to feel close.

But as they do so "all heaven [breaks] loose.  
 An earthquake [rocks the ground],  
 not as the means of opening the tomb  
 but as a result of the Angel of the Lord  
 breaking in on the scene...

[After rolling back the stone  
 the angel then sits on it]  
 in [a clear] sign of divine triumph.<sup>iii</sup>

This angel matches the description of the prophet Daniel.  
 "His appearance was like lightening,  
 And his clothes were white as snow."<sup>iv</sup>

In all the commotion and wonder of the angelic arrival  
 the guards that the chief priests  
 had posted at the tomb, faint in fear:  
 They become like dead men.

But the wide-eyed Marys remain standing.

The angel admonishes them not to be afraid  
 And then delivers this astounding message:

"I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.  
 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.  
 Come and see the place where he lay.

Then go quickly and tell his disciples:  
 'He has risen from the dead  
 and is going ahead of you into Galilee.  
 There you will see him.'<sup>v</sup>

[An interesting aside:  
 Matthew has angels announcing  
 both Jesus' birth and his resurrection.]

Matthew tells us that the Mary's run to tell the other disciples,  
 "afraid yet filled with joy".  
 Mixed emotions seem apt, quite reasonable.

But as they are running something even more astounding occurs.  
 The risen Jesus meets them and greets them.  
 They respond by grabbing hold of his feet and worshipping him.

And then they are sent off again,  
 With the same message the angel had given them:  
 They are to share this Good News with Jesus' disciples.  
 And tell them he will be meeting them in Galilee.

PAUSE

This is quite the account.  
 Two women doing what people have done for generations.  
 They go to visit a gravesite.

But there they encounter wonders:  
 They are greeted by angel.  
 They find the tomb empty.  
 They meet a resurrection Jesus as they leave.

Now I'm sure the two Mary's had lots of questions  
 About what was happening.  
 That was a lot to process in a very short time.

Nevertheless they respond with faith and obedience.

I like what the Presbyterian Church has to say about faith:  
 It is a "response to God's presence in the midst of life.  
 It says 'yes' to the God who is here."<sup>vi</sup>

Of course, this is not the only response to Easter  
 That we find in Matthew's Gospel.  
 Consider those soldiers who fainted with fear.

When the soldiers came to their senses  
 They reported to the Chief Priests everything that had happened.  
 The Chief Priests reported this to the other leaders  
 And together these leaders decided  
 to pay off those soldiers.

The soldier were given, "a large amount of money  
 and told them to say that Jesus' disciples  
 had come at night and had stolen his body  
 while they were sleeping."<sup>vii</sup>

That's interesting.

What would you do if someone offered you a suitcase of money  
 To keep quiet about an extraordinary experience?

If we move further to the end of Matthew,  
 Where Jesus meets his disciples in Galilee,  
 We are told that:

“When they saw him, they bowed down in worship,  
though some had doubts.”<sup>viii</sup>

Again this is rather interesting.

When the resurrected Jesus appears to followers  
he had spent the last few years with,  
eating together, travelling together,

Some are unable to accept the crucified one is now alive.

All to say that people when people are shown extraordinary things,  
some will trust this disclosure,  
while others remain unwilling to believe.

Two people can have the same astonishing experience.  
For one this gives root to faith.  
And yet another doubts.

This causes me to wonder...

Why would the soldiers who had seen an angel  
Be content to forget about it  
And enjoy a little money?

Why would people who have  
Witnessed Jesus' miracles be happier  
To believe that he was dead?

I wonder if it less about the signs or evidence  
And more about the implications of belief.

Maybe those paid-off soldiers were worried  
about being seen by their peers as unreliable?  
Maybe those doubting disciples had already decided  
To opt for a more conventional life?

And yet implications of the resurrection are much more significant  
That any concerns about personal reputation  
or ease of living.

By bringing Jesus out of the tomb,  
God has accomplished something new.  
Into a world plagued by sin and sickness  
Jesus' resurrection shouts the beginning of a new era  
Where death no longer reigns.

I wonder if this is something worth leaning into,  
Even for the skeptical,  
Even for the doubters among us.

Could it be that there is more to life  
 Than a never-ending cycle of birth and death?  
 Could it be that there is a Power in existence  
 that can upend the laws of nature

or as CS Lewis describes it “a deeper magic”  
 permeating the universe  
 beyond what the wisest of us know.

This is maybe too hard for many of us to fathom or judge.  
 In the end it requires a sort of leap, trust, faith.

French theologian and philosopher Blaise Pascal  
 “proposes that [we] should bet, or wager, on God  
 [and by extension the resurrection  
 Not just because of what we can understand  
 Or prove but] because of what’s at stake.”<sup>x</sup>

Think of all that you have to gain  
 In trusting that testimony of Easter.

As for faith you don’t need much.  
 God honors our faith, and steps of obedience.

The Presbyterian church reminds us that  
 “by faith we receive the very life of God into our lives  
 And joyfully discover that God knows,  
 Loves, and pardons us.”<sup>x</sup>

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "Commentary on Matthew 28:1-10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary." Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, 27 Feb. 2023, [www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/easter-matthew-2/commentary-on-matthew-281-10-10](http://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/easter-matthew-2/commentary-on-matthew-281-10-10).

<sup>ii</sup> Reeves, Rodney. *Matthew: 1 (The Story of God Bible Commentary)* (pp. 557-558). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> D. Cameron Murchison, “Theological Perspective on Matthew 28:1–10,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 346.

<sup>iv</sup> See Daniel 10, Matthew 28:3 NIV

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 28:5-7 NIV

<sup>vi</sup> Living Faith 6.1.3

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 28:12-13 NIV

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 28:17

<sup>ix</sup> "Pascal's Wager: A Pragmatic Argument for Belief in God." *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, 19 Mar. 2023, [1000wordphilosophy.com/2021/01/04/pascals-wager](http://1000wordphilosophy.com/2021/01/04/pascals-wager).

<sup>x</sup> Living Faith 6.1.1