

Go! Tell My Brothers!

We've come together this morning as Good Shepherd Baptist Church to celebrate our holiest most joyful festival of the year, Easter Sunday, the day on which we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, revealed as God's Son, bringing with him the promise of abundant life and freedom from death for all who believe on him. We've come this morning pretty secure in our expectations: that we would have a great pancake breakfast, made by Jim and Dale and Jack and crew; that we would say "Alleluia" a few times; that we would sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and a couple of other Easter songs; that the choir would sing an anthem. We already know the story that we've heard this morning, although you may not have known which version of it I would read. You may have remembered that the Bloombergs were going to put up banners for this morning, that there would be a new candle and Easter lilies decorating the sanctuary. You may have even picked up the title of this sermon from the weekly newsletter. In short, there's nothing really too surprising about our celebration this morning.

But it's worth remembering that would hardly have been the case on that first Easter morning, nearly 2000 years ago. Nothing that happened that morning was expected. None of those who experienced those events would have been sure that what was happening was going to be good news for them; indeed, for a few, it was not, at least at first. Far from our comfortable, happy tradition of Easter morning, the events of that original Easter shook up people's lives and left them in turmoil, even if Jesus' resurrection did end up being good news for the women at the tomb, the men to whom they were sent, and to a whole world of people far beyond the limits of their little group or even their country.

The author of the Gospel according to Matthew wanted to be sure that his audience knew that the resurrection of Jesus was, as we might put it, an earth-shaking event. On that morning of that first day of the week, something happened that changed everything. Matthew reports that there was an earthquake, something that he also writes happened at the time of Jesus' death. Earthquakes are certainly not unknown along the Dead Sea Rift and quakes are often followed by aftershocks, so there is no reason to dismiss Matthew's story as poetic license. But even if you choose to be skeptical about the literal nature of Matthew's earthquakes, the metaphorical truth cannot be argued. The death and resurrection of Jesus changed the spiritual landscape for humankind just as surely as an earthquake can change the physical landscape. Until the Christ event, all religions had at their core the concept of sacrificial propitiation; that is, the necessity of paying off an annoyed deity or bribing an uncaring god to either escape punishment or to achieve a desired goal, like appropriate rainfall and good crops. Even Judaism, unique in its insistent monotheism, their belief in one True God, and its rigorous morality, was based on a sacrifice system. But Jesus' death and resurrection changed all that. One sacrifice had been made for all and the willing victim had been revealed as God Godself. Human beings were no longer shackled to a fearful servanthood. Now the call was to become full participants in the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community.

Still, none of this was yet clear to those present at the tomb on Easter morning and they might have been troubled even if it had been. Change is never easy, especially when it involves our core beliefs, even if there is a promise that the change will be for the better. And the events in and of themselves were deeply unsettling at best: an earthquake, the appearance of an angel, an empty tomb. I've only ever experienced the first of those and that was quite terrifying enough, thank you. Little wonder that the guards fainted. Little wonder that the angel's first words, as

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usual, were “Do not be afraid.” But necessary as they might have been, the angel’s words also lay at the heart of the Gospel, the Good News. Do not be afraid; the time for fear is over. The resurrection marks the end of the reign of fear and death in the world, even if you can’t see it yet. The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated and things will never be the same, only better. This was good news indeed!

It was good news then and it is good news now, even if it doesn’t always look like it. I read an Easter sermon this week by a fellow Baptist preacher, The Rev. Dr. George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. It was a good sermon but it wasn’t headed where I’m headed this morning, so I’m not going to quote any of it except the title: “Christ on the Loose.” It’s a wonderful, evocative phrase that calls to mind the escape of some fearsome zoo animal, perhaps. It’s a good reminder to us that Jesus continues to rock the world, that the Gospel will call our cherished presuppositions and beliefs into question, if we allow it. It’s a good reminder that we are not in control of Jesus and how his Spirit changes our lives once we commit them to him. It’s a good reminder that, as C.S. Lewis wrote, “Aslan is not a tame lion;” that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will call us into what looks like danger, that we will be required to stand against our society, our friends, even our family from time to time. Our wild, untamable God and God’s Christ will lead us in ways that do not always make sense to our earth-bound minds but those ways will always be attended with love and will always end with life. The resurrection is still Good News for you and for me.

The angel sent the women on their way with a message for Jesus’ disciples. “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” But would the disciples have heard this as good news? After all, the last time they were with Jesus was at Gethsemane when the soldiers came to arrest him. He had reprimanded one of them for attempting to defend him with violence, then they had all scattered in fear. Peter had even denied knowing him; not once, but three times, with an oath. Were they being summoned to Galilee for a reckoning of their faithlessness? Even the women, who actually had braved the authorities to attend their Master at the cross, must have been nervous about taking the angel’s message back to their friends.

But then Jesus himself came to them and his words echoed the angels: “Do not be afraid.” But Jesus had a different word from the angel as well. Not, “tell my disciples” but “tell my brothers.” It is a significant change, that one word. It is a word of grace and of forgiveness. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter 12, we read the story of Jesus’ mother and brothers coming to where he is teaching in hopes of a word with him, perhaps to dissuade him from his course and bring him home. “Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”” Jesus’ implicit message to the disciples via the women is that all is forgiven. He thinks of them as his brothers, those who do the will of his Father in heaven. Even what some would consider the ultimate betrayal, their flight, Peter’s denial, even these are forgiven. There is nothing that can separate them from Jesus’ love.

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Nor is there anything that can separate us from the love of God through Christ. As Paul would write to the Christians in Rome, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing that is external to us can come between us and God's love. Neither can our actions turn God from us. No betrayal is bad enough, no cowardice is deep enough, no denial is thorough enough that God cannot and will not forgive it. The Risen Christ comes to us just as he came to the disciples, with a message of forgiveness and life. Anthony Robinson writes on this passage, "Relationship is restored by grace. Every act of true forgiveness is a resurrection, a rising from the dead. Every resurrection story speaks of the intrusion of grace and forgiveness into our stuck world and lives." No matter what we may have done, said, thought, Jesus is ready to call us sisters and brothers. God claims us as beloved children. The Gospel according to John repeats the phraseology of Matthew in Jesus' words to the women on their way home and adds to it: "go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

It's significant, by the way, that the gospel writers cannot agree on how many women heard this good news from the risen Jesus. Matthew says it was two, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Mark says it was three; Luke, a whole bunch; John thinks it was just Mary Magdalene. It wouldn't have been worth recording at that time and place, after all, because the word of a woman or even a group of women was considered an unreliable witness; evidence inadmissible in a court of law. But for Jesus, gender was never a measure of a person's worth in the Kingdom of God. He accepted women as disciples, spoke to them when another rabbi wouldn't have dreamed of doing so, touched them to heal them, defended them against the mob. Even if the Gospel writers were slow to apply the lesson he taught on gender equity, the message still shines through. Even the apostle Paul, who is so often characterized as a male chauvinist, understood this about the Gospel. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," he wrote to the churches in Galatia.

There are at least a couple of lessons here for us. In making some number of women the first messengers of the Good News, the first evangelists, if you will, Jesus did something that his culture was not ready for and that human culture at large has continued to resist for most of the last two thousand years. He showed that men and women are equal in the sight of God. But there is still a wage gap between men and women in our society; gender discrimination is still a fact, 2000 years after Jesus and Paul pointed Christians away from it. Nor is the Body of Christ immune to this societal ill. The Church of England reported late last year that 213 women and 210 men had been ordained to the priesthood during the year. However, more men than women were placed in paid posts with most women continuing to pastor for no pay. Even here in Evergreen Association, three churches formerly pastored by women have called men to those posts in the past three years. I'm delighted to be your pastor, but concerned about being part of that trend.

There is a more positive, more general and perhaps more significant lesson to be learned from the commissioning of the women as the first messengers of the Good News. Just as none of us can be separated from the love of God, none of us can claim that we are not qualified to tell others about that love and the abundant life that goes with it. When Jesus said to those

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societally-disqualified women, “Go and tell,” he said it to all of us as well. Just as the women were sent to men crushed by seeming defeat, fear and guilt, so are each of us called to relieve those in our circles from the fear and guilt they may be living under. There is no one who does not need to hear the Good News of Christ Jesus; that God loves all of us, that there is no need to fear, that life can be experienced as full of blessing. There is no one who is too small, too frail, too unimportant to carry that Good News. Not then and not now.

Both the angel and Jesus send the message to the men through the women that their new adventure with the Risen Christ will begin in Galilee. That would have been good news for them and it is for us as well. For the Twelve, after all, Galilee was where it had all begun; it was home. It must have been an incredible relief to them to be given the freedom to go home, away from the unfamiliar south, away from the unaccustomed city, away from Jerusalem which had seen their darkest days and their bleakest nights. Of course, we know the rest of the story, that they would come back to Jerusalem and receive there the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that Jerusalem would become the original headquarters of the young Church until, as Jesus predicted, the city was destroyed and its inhabitants slaughtered or scattered. But on that day of resurrection, “go on back home and meet me there,” would have been a welcome word.

The message is the same for us. Jesus will meet us where we are comfortable, in our safe place. Only after we have experienced his risen presence and power will we be commissioned to go out and become the active Body of Christ in the world. Woven into the invitation to return to Galilee is Jesus’ assurance that he will not call us to do more than we can do, that whatever God has for us to do, there will be preparation. To follow in the way of Jesus may require all the strength and heart that we possess but it will not require more than that. The gate may be strait and the way narrow that lead to life, but the burden is light and the yoke is easy.

The invitation to Galilee contains another aspect of Good News as well. Earlier in the Gospel, Matthew, quoting Isaiah, calls Galilee, “Galilee of the Gentiles,” “Galilee of the Nations.” Galilee may have been home for the disciples but it was also a place where they lived cheek by jowl with communities of people not like them at all. It was a cosmopolitan place, where invading armies and commerce had deposited an array of nationalities and beliefs. Galilee was, as one scholar puts it, “the doorway to the world,” for the disciples. Once they had received their commission to go to all the world with Jesus’ story and the power to embark on that endeavor, Galilee, their home, was the perfect launching spot. To see this aspect of Galilee, as Jesus’ disciples saw it and acted on it, is to know that the Good News of Jesus and abundant life were not meant only for the Jews, God’s original Chosen People, but for the rest of the world as well, for the Gentiles, for us. As a group with mixed heritages of native Europeans and Americans, we are physically the heirs of marvelous cultures that have enriched the world we live in. But thanks to the gift of Christ, we are also spiritual heirs of the promises of God to the Children of Israel. The Beloved Community is open to all.

In Matthew’s telling of it, the post-resurrection words of Jesus are words of comfort and of challenge, to the disciples and to us. There are words of peace and wholeness, forgiveness and homecoming: “Do not be afraid... tell my brothers... go to Galilee, there you will see me.” There are words of calling and commission: “Go and tell.” We have gathered in this place this morning, here in “Seattle of the Nations” to hear an old and familiar story. But this story is new

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every day, for it cannot become old. It is played out in our lives every morning, every time we accept the forgiving, healing, empowering love of God. It is new again every time someone hears it for the first time, or hears it again with new ears. Our Savior died but once, 2000 years ago on Calvary's hill, but he rises again and again, living in our hearts, living through our lives. Proclaim again with me the Good News of Easter: Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia, alleluia! For this Good News, for this best news of all, thanks be to God! Amen and amen.