

Matthew 28

The Resurrection of Jesus

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

The Report of the Guard

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² After the priests^[c] had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

The Commissioning of the Disciples

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”^[d]

Easter – April 16, 2017

Matthew 28:1-20

“Earthquakes and Lightning, and Whispers of Doubt”

Kerra Becker English

In my 20 years of preaching Easter messages, I think this is the first time I paid close attention to the guards stationed at Jesus’ tomb in Matthew’s gospel. What exactly is the purpose in guarding a dead body? Jesus wasn’t a rich guy being buried with his multitude of treasures like King Tut. He was a traveling rabbi, with nothing but a bunch of students to carry on his name. Were they expecting protests? Most of his followers had scattered already. I suspect that they got the message loud and clear from their leader’s public execution on a cross that being associated with Jesus could make for a similar punishment. No disciples were going to come around any time soon. But there they are, tomb-watching guards, and I find this addition to the story to be a fascinating one.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early in the morning, like she always does, in every resurrection account, this time accompanied by the “other” Mary. They get to the front of the tomb, and SUDDENLY there was an earthquake, caused by none other than an angel from heaven. That angel, dressed in white, and whose appearance was shocking as lightning, rolls the stone away from the tomb and sits on top of it to have a conversation with the women. This is when we first hear about the guards. The women seem relatively unfazed by this stunning show of heavenly power, but the guards start shaking and pass out like they’re dead. Some guards, right?

Then we hear the standard angel appearance speech, the one that assures that you are indeed talking to an angel. The angel says to the two Marys, ***Don’t be afraid!*** – and then the angel tells them about what has happened to Jesus. “He’s not here. He has been raised from the dead. He’s going ahead of you to Galilee where you are going to see him. End message.”

So the women leave the tomb, and as Matthew tells it, they leave quickly with fear and great joy, and run to tell the disciples all that they've seen and heard. Jesus meets them on the way, and peculiarly, says, "Greetings!" which sounds more like a sci-fi alien encounter movie to me, and on the spot, they worship him – and set up a meeting place where they can all gather together to hear from the resurrected Jesus.

And here's where we get to the "meanwhile" part of the story. An amazing thing has just happened. Jesus, whom his followers thought was dead, has come back to life. The story is about to get told among his disciples and closest friends so they can announce this miracle of miracles, and proclaim that Jesus is absolutely everything everyone thought he was.

And *meanwhile*, the guards wake up. They go directly to the chief priests to tell them what has happened. The priests tell the elders of the church, and they call a meeting to plan out their course of action. And their course of action is to come up with some hush money for these guards who obviously saw way too much. They pay off the guards to admit that they are some pretty lousy guards. They are supposed to tell people that they fell asleep on the job, and that while they were sleeping, really really soundly, that Jesus' disciples came to the tomb, rolled back the heavy stone, and stole the body. And then, if the governor hears about what a terrible job the guards had done, the church, the priests and the elders, promised to protect them and keep them out of trouble. So the guards took the money, did as they were told, and started the rumor, successfully, according to Matthew, that that's exactly what happened. They fell asleep, and Jesus' body was stolen.

What a weird part of the story! It's a part that a lot of pastors are unlikely to tell even if they do take notice. If you read only the designated lectionary part of the Matthew text and stop at verse 10, it wouldn't come up. Those rascally guards, and the priests who pay them off would remain in obscurity. My hunch is that's a rather intentional omission. We don't want to hint that the church –

any part of it – past or future – would try to cover up spiritual truth now would we? Which takes me directly to the question: what makes this such a dangerous story that it would be worth a lot of money to have it buried? It's a radical enough notion as it is that we believe Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Does it really require a cover up to keep people from paying attention?

Before I attempt to answer that question, let's at least finish out the story. The eleven disciples (minus Judas) meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee just as had been planned. But it is verse 17 that is an amazing inclusion in all of scripture. Here they are, with Jesus back from the dead and standing right in front of them, and Matthew tells us, "When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted." I learned even more about this verse at the Massanetta Springs Bible conference last summer from New Testament scholar Frances Taylor Gench. As we were sitting in the sweltering heat of that conference center's outdoor auditorium, she taught us that the "some" embedded in that sentence is only put there in the English to make us feel more comfortable. It should read, according to the direct Greek translation, "they worshipped him but doubted." If we say "some: doubted, then maybe "some" truly believed, but in this case worship and doubt are presented together, entwined even. Matthew without hesitation tells us that this story is so very strange and powerful and difficult to believe that it was hushed up, covered up, and doubted even by those closest to Jesus. What in the world was going on? And why would Matthew dare to tell us these details? But it is Matthew after all, and he is the one who routinely describes the disciples as the ones of "little faith."

Maybe by design, or maybe not, I think this text is meant to help us take courage in proclaiming such an unbelievable twist in this story as we follow Jesus these many, many lifetimes later. Believe the unbelievable! And have your doubts as well. Take whatever little faith you have knowing that it is enough faith to follow Jesus. And then carry out his final words... "Go, make

disciples of all nations, baptize, teach, and be obedient to the commandments I have given you. Remember, that I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

That proclamation Jesus makes as his final push to his disciples is indeed a dangerous message. It is, perhaps, more frightening than an earthquake, more striking than lightning, purer than freshly falling snow. The angel tells us, “Don’t be afraid,” but Jesus calls us to do the very things that could strike fear into our hearts. He sends us out across tribal lines to make disciples of every nation, every ethnic group, of every kind of people. He calls us to welcome those same people into our communities of faith through baptism, so that we become equals as brothers and sisters in his name. He calls us to teach as he taught – those very same teachings that got him cross-wise with the authorities who had him executed. He calls us to be obedient to HIS commandments – yeah those commandment - that talk about loving enemies, forgiving those who have hurt us, and praying for our persecutors. Then he promises us his presence, not just as the apparition who appeared on that day, but he promises to be with us all day, every day – to the very end of time.

If the authorities couldn’t silence Jesus by mocking him... If they couldn’t silence him by arguing with him... If they couldn’t silence him by whipping him... If they couldn’t silence him by putting him on trial... If they couldn’t silence him by killing him on a cross... If they couldn’t silence his rising from the dead... If they couldn’t silence his disciples with whispers of their doubt... then how would they ever stop his message? So far - even in the most persecuted places - and under the most oppressed circumstances – people still follow the Christ who proclaims this message of inclusion, love, and forgiveness.

They hire guards. They start rumors. They pay big money for lies both big and small. But most successfully, they, whoever they are, continue to black out parts of the narrative, or edit the text to make it seem more palatable in a world that wants to hold on to hierarchies, and claim some

sort of special status in the kingdom. Erase the doubt, and you can get people to believe anything you want them to believe. All you have to do is say that faith requires full obedience and unflinching belief, and you can manufacture your own religious truth cleverly disguised as Christianity.

I say this because I see this. Jesus' words get so twisted up by those who would use him for their own purposes that people don't even recognize the Jesus of scripture anymore, and then they don't have a sense for the living Christ either who promises to be with us always – to the end of the age. Just last week, I went to a seminar called Writing Wrongs – and it was about understanding memory, resistance, and resilience in the context of considering how the practice of racially-based slavery has had a far-reaching impact even on generations living now. It was an eye-opening experience. The only reason, the only reason, the professor said, that slavery lasted so long in this country was that the church kept on saying that “God ordained it.” It doesn't take so much scripture reading about Jesus to realize that saying God ordained slavery just can't be right. And that's not the only message that we have to work to undo as those who are serious about following the Jesus that we learn about directly from scripture.

We must make the effort to look harder in the stories of today to see where the guards have been stationed and to notice which institutions are bankrolling rumors and lies under the guise of religious truth. Reading the Bible critically and with a hint of human skepticism doesn't undo God's love for us, actually, it makes the message stronger and more real for us. The women were afraid, and they encountered the living Christ along the road. The disciples worshipped and doubted, and they made more disciples anyway, baptizing, teaching, and being true to Jesus' commandments to love, foolishly love, both God and neighbor, stranger and friend and enemy without limit.

On this Easter Sunday... Believe the unbelievable. Jesus rose from the dead. Believe the truth. The spirit of Jesus' message cannot be destroyed through betrayal, lies, or even death. Believe

the promise. Jesus will be with us always, until the end of the age Believe in love. And the message of love will spread to all nations, and it will unite us with all our sisters and brothers, and it will allow us to teach and demonstrate the kind of love Jesus showed in his life. Amen.