

A Quiet Easter Morning
Matthew 28:1-10
April 12, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

On Thursday evening, we talked about how the ordinary stuff: water, bread, and wine, became extraordinary because of the one who used them and the love he embodied. Easter morning, in Matthew, starts off being ordinary, too. The women—Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who may have been Jesus’s mother—the women head to the cemetery to see the tomb where they had personally seen the body of Jesus laid, and the stone rolled in front of the tomb. Unlike in the other gospels, where the women go to prepare the body for burial, because there hadn’t been time to do so before the sabbath, in Matthew, they just go to witness, to see, to somehow connect with the last place they saw Jesus’s body.

This is a perfectly ordinary, human thing to do. We know, because we do it too. When I was little, my grandmother and mom would drag me and my brother to the cemetery several times a year: Christmas, and now I can’t remember the other times, likely a birthday or the anniversary of a death, to put flowers on the graves of my grandfather, my grandmother’s brother and my mom’s brother, my uncle. I had never known any of them, so to me it was mostly meaningless. I could tell it was important to my mom and especially to my grandmother, so I didn’t complain, at least that I remember. I remember thinking to myself that I would never go visit a cemetery, unless someone was making me.

But the summer after I graduated from high school, a girl who was a close friend was killed in a horrible car accident, between her church’s van, filled with the youth group, and an 18 wheeler. It was as awful as you might imagine. Her parents had immigrated to the United States from China, and hers was the first funeral that I ever saw videotaped, because they needed to include the family who still lived in China. She was buried in a cemetery just down the road from where we had attended high school together. For at least a couple of years, every time I was home from college, without telling anyone, I would go to the cemetery and sit next to her grave. I don’t know why. I didn’t have any flowers. I didn’t ever say anything, nor feel anything, nor do anything in particular. But I needed to be there.

So we understand the impulse of the women to go to the tomb, and they arrive in time to see it, just as they left it, but with the addition of the two guards that Pilate had posted, so that no one would steal Jesus’s body and claim resurrection. As soon as they see the tomb, still closed with the rock, with the guards watching it, there’s an earthquake and an angel who rolls the stone away and then sits on it for some reason, and the guards get so scared by the whole thing that they faint and look for all the world like *they’re* dead. Whew. It went from being a quiet morning at the cemetery to being quite a spectacle, of the frightening sort, in an instant.

The angel attempts to reassure them and then hurries them off, to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen, and that they’re to head for Galilee, and that Jesus is going ahead of them. They apparently don’t question the angel, nor his message, and head to the rest of the disciples, with “fear and great joy,” Matthew tells us.

Then, as they’re on their way back to the disciples, Jesus appears to them. There is no fanfare. No trumpets. No earthquake. No nothing. Just Jesus, standing there, with an understated “Greetings.” Like you’re walking down the sidewalk, of course more than six feet

away from your neighbor who is on the other side of the street, and the neighbor says, “howdy.” It’s like Jesus doesn’t think this is a big deal, that he was dead on Friday and then this morning he’s alive again.

The two Marys, on the other hand, know that it’s a big deal, rush toward Jesus, fall at his feet, and worship him. He tells them to get up, reassures them, and sends them on their way again, with the same message for the disciples: Go to Galilee. I’ll see you there.

We’ve heard the story before. But it sounds different this year, I think. We hear some things more loudly and clearly. Both the angel and Jesus have to tell the women not to be afraid. Their fear was a normal response to the trauma they had been through in the days leading up to that Sunday morning. Their fear was a normal response to an earthquake, for heaven’s sake, and an angel. It would have been normal for them to faint like the guards. Our fear is a normal human reaction to a frightening or unusual circumstance or happening. Our fear right now in the face of a pandemic is a normal human response. And yet. And yet the consistent message throughout Scripture, from heavenly messengers of various kinds, and from Jesus himself is: Don’t be afraid. Or, stop being afraid. It’s hard. It’s hard to set aside our human response of fear and put our trust in the one who tells us to stop being afraid.

But the Marys manage to do so, and manage to carry out the command they hear from the angel and from Jesus: Go tell the disciples, and then go to Galilee; I’ll meet you there. I’ll go ahead of you. There’s no place we can go, there’s no fear we can feel, there’s no grief that we mourn, there’s no road that we walk, that Jesus hasn’t been. Jesus goes ahead of us. Jesus knows the way that is ahead of us, and Jesus does not leave us to walk it alone.

And the final thing that stands out to me this year, well it always stands out to me when I read Matthew’s Easter story, is that the women were filled with fear and great joy at the news of the resurrection. The great joy did not erase their fear. And their fear did not prevent the great joy. Some of you have heard this story from our Helen. From her room at the nursing home, she has a view of the pasture that surrounds the building. There is a small herd of cows there; she could tell you exactly how many, just a few really. She watches them closely and has alerted their owner several times when one of them had a calf or was injured. She jokes that she should be on the payroll. Well, this week she had to go to the hospital for treatment of an infection. When she returned back to the nursing home, she counted the cows and quickly realized that a new calf had been born in her absence. She told me that, regardless of gender, that calf’s name was going to be joy. Joy because of the joy of Easter. Joy because we all need a little extra joy right now. She’s a wise woman.

May the joy of Easter, the joy of a new calf kicking and jumping around a pasture, the joy of new life, the joy of resurrection, the assurance that Jesus goes before us, and the constant reminder to not be afraid, be with us this day and throughout the Easter season.