

Easter Angel

Matthew 28:1-10

April 9, 2023

First Presbyterian Luling

As you can surmise from the title, the angel has caught my eye again. After we talked about the angels in the Christmas story during Advent, and then we talked again about the angels ministering to Jesus during the temptation in the wilderness, which we read as we entered Lent, here again the angels accompany us this Easter morning. Or more properly, just one angel.

Even more than the Christmas stories, I think it's easy for us to smush together the different gospels' versions of the Easter morning story. Sure, there are commonalities. Obviously, the empty tomb is in all four. That it is a woman or women who first discover that the tomb is empty—that's in all four. Beyond that, the gospel writers all tell the surprising, joyous news of the first Easter morning a bit differently. Mark leaves lots of blank space. John has the touching encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, where she mistakes him for the gardener, and when he calls her by name, she realizes who he is. Luke has two men or angels at the empty tomb, and disciples who don't believe the women and have to go see for themselves.

Matthew has all kinds of extras, though. An earthquake, guards, an angel in dazzling white clothing. Two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who almost certainly has to be Mary the mother of Jesus.

Matthew leaves no doubt in our minds that the resurrection was the work of God. He sets it up so the Roman authorities and guards—the most powerful institutions of his day—look foolish. It's supposed to be funny. After Joseph of Arimathea lets Jesus's body be put into his own personal tomb, he rolls a big stone in front. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are watching. They see this. Pilate, meanwhile, sends soldiers to guard the tomb and make it secure. The temple authorities are worried about the disciples faking a resurrection by stealing the body, so they request these guards. The tomb is sealed, by all possible human efforts.

And then that Easter morning, the same two Marys go to the tomb, where they had witnessed Jesus's body be laid. There's a great earthquake, the same as there had been at the crucifixion, the same as several times in the Old Testament where God's presence is especially immediate and noticeable. In some ways, we want to say, of course there's an earthquake. The world has been turned upside

down. Death no longer has the last word. There needs to be some sign that everything is different, that the whole world was shaken up.

And then the angel descends. He is as bright as lightning, and how handy that we had lightning this week, so that image is fresh in our minds. Daisy the schnauzer will tell you that lightning is so bright that it's scary. The angel's clothing is as white as snow. This should all make us remember the Transfiguration, where Jesus's face shone like the sun and his clothes are dazzling white. There is just absolutely no way to misunderstand who this angel is or where he came from. He has been sent from God. Signs of divinity are unmistakable.

And those guards? They were so afraid of the whole thing that they shook much like Daisy does in a thunderstorm and became like dead men. Presumably, they fainted dead away. They were supposed to have been ensuring that Jesus remained dead, and instead, Jesus is alive and they might as well be dead. They certainly aren't very effective as guards. This is worth a giggle. The supposedly most powerful empire in the world, with the most powerful army, and the guards faint from fright.

Several things we learned before about angels apply here. This angel has the required angel first line down pat: don't be afraid, he says to the Marys. And, we learned before that angels are messengers. This one is probably the clearest example of that. He says to the two Marys: "Go quickly and tell his disciples, he has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And then, in case we've missed all the clues about who he is and what his purpose is, he says, "This is my message for you." This is an angel, a messenger from God, sent to the empty tomb for a number of purposes, all wrapped up together.

He's sent to mock the imperial power of Rome. He's sent to comfort the Marys. He's sent to encourage the women and commission them as evangelists—the first to witness to the good news of the resurrection. He's sent to deliver a message, and in turn to make the Marys into messengers themselves. In short, the angel is acting exactly like angels do, fulfilling the job description precisely. And it's a way to tie the pieces of the story together. The angel appears in the beginning of Matthew, to Joseph. And appears to Jesus at the temptation. And appears here, at the end, to the Marys.

The Marys set out immediately and eagerly to do exactly as the angel instructed, both fearful and joyful. And right away they encounter Jesus himself, who says "Howdy." Well, he says "Greetings," but it's not anything special, just an

ordinary hello, a standard greeting to someone you would pass on the sidewalk. Casual, offhand, as if it's nothing unusual to meet the risen Lord walking along the road. They know exactly who he is and worship him. And Jesus tells them exactly the same thing the angel did, again reinforcing that the angel was a messenger of the divine. "Go and tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see me."

The Easter angel isn't here with us, earthquakes and lightning storms notwithstanding. But the Easter message that the angel brought is the same as it was that morning on the first day of the week. The message of Easter morning mocks the powers that we think are supreme—political powers, corporate powers, economic powers. Those powers are as good as dead when compared to the power of resurrection. The message of Easter morning comforts and encourages us. What Jesus said was true, all true. You can trust it. You can trust him. That's what the angel tells the Marys: he has been raised, as he said. But the angel doesn't stop there. The message doesn't end with the good news of resurrection. It continues through us. The angel's message is: now, go. Go and tell, go and share, help others to see. When you're still afraid and busting with joy at good news, go and tell and show the good news. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.