

“Angels & The Empty Tomb”

Text: Matthew 28: 1-10

Dawn is breaking in Jerusalem. The sun is about to spill its golden rays over the horizon. Maybe there was fog in the air that day - that hanged over the city and countryside like a shroud. Mary Magdalene and her friends had the bleakest and the saddest Sabbath they ever had. Their friend and Rabbi, Jesus, had been arrested, beaten, humiliated and crucified. His body had been anointed for burial and placed in a cave. When it was still dark, two Marys made their way there, not knowing what they would find. A huge stone greeted them – that sealed the mouth of that cave with all the finality and silence of the whole world. And as if the large stone were not enough, there were Roman soldiers guarding the tomb. The poor women can't even grieve in privacy, they have to deal with these agents of Rome. The women didn't come to anoint the body—that's already been done. They didn't come to bring flowers or light a candle. They just come to Jesus' grave, for the same reason that we visit our loved ones in cemeteries. Because that's what love and grief require from us. But the two women don't have any expectation that something unexpected will happen. They know what they'll find there. The smell of death. Jesus is dead and there's no bringing him back. As the two Marys approach the tomb, the final resting place of Jesus, the last sad chapter in his once promising story, the earth quaked and an angel, a messenger in dazzling light appears to them.

I am a big fan of angels. I have a modest collection of angel trinkets, candleholders, willow tree statues, Sarah's angels and books about angels. Angels have names and characteristics like us and they have a special role to play. Angels abound in the gospel stories. The gospel writers present angels as agents of Good News or spiritual messengers. The Good News the angels deliver is preceded by one short, preliminary sentence: "Fear not!"

"Fear not, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

"Fear not, Mary, you will bear a son and name him Jesus."

"Fear not, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

"Fear not, Joseph, take Mary as your wife."

And in today's resurrection parable, Matthew presents us with another unique angel. I like this angel in Matthew's version of the Resurrection. This is an angel who knows how to make an

entrance. For the sake of the writer of Matthew, I will use the male pronoun to refer to the angel. This angel comes in with a flourish! This is a strong, buff angel. Susan Young imagines him as a sumo wrestler! He rolls back the large stone that sealed the tomb. This is an angel with an attitude. After rolling back the stone, he sits on it, and crosses those angelic arms, glances over at the guards who are displaying certain physical symptoms of extreme terror, but he doesn't tell them to fear not. That message is being reserved for someone else. The guards at the tomb were scared into submission, and became like dead men. In Matthew's imagination, the living become dead, just as the dead rise again. Then, the angel turns his bright angelic eyes toward Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (whom in Matthew is probably the mother of Jesus) and says: *"Fear not. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. This is my message to you."*

Gradually, as the shock of their loss began to loosen its grip, the women began to realize that the tomb was indeed empty; for it could not contain Jesus any more than death could take Jesus from them. Jesus lived in, with, through and beyond them; they could not explain it. For the two Marys, their experience of Jesus was so real; his impact on who and what they were continued to change and mold them into a new reality. This resurrection story of Jesus, like any version of the resurrection account, is a mystery. I don't have any explanation of how it happened. But it has to be more than just the miracle of spring. It has to be more than tulips and daffodils stretching their green stalks into the air, and baby birds in nests, and caterpillars turning into butterflies. It has to be more than that. It is more than the presence of buffed angels telling us not to fear. Otherwise there's no reason for us to be here celebrating Easter.

The stories that have been handed down to us don't always satisfy our need to know exactly what, when, and how it all transpired. We live in an age that demands proof and the proof that Jesus is bodily risen cannot be found in the empty tomb alone. The Easter faith has nothing to fear from hard-nosed scientists or biblical literalists. It emerges from that deep dimension of human experience that only makes sense when we dare to go to those places of death and destruction in our lives, those awful places of despair and distress in the world, where we learn again and again that, in the most profound darkness, death and resurrection are joined in ways

that transcend our understanding. Easter reminds us that the only way out of darkness and confusion is to move ahead. Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. They left the tomb and told the others of the good news. They too became angels of good news that Jesus who leads us is not in the tomb any longer. At Easter, we discover a new vision of God, who rises out of our brokenness, our losses and our disappointments to lead us into a new life.

The scholar Donald Juel, reflecting on the resurrection account, once wrote that: "*[N]one of the Gospels can really end the story of Jesus. The whole point is that it continues--and that its significance continues.*" *The resurrection story means that the story of Jesus is "to be continued" in you, and in me, and in every life that is touched by the power of the good news that, "He is risen in us."* Resurrection happens over and over again. Resurrection happens in the transformed lives of people who have made their way to the darkness of the tomb and come away not with proof that Jesus rose from the dead, but with hearts transformed by the emptiness of the tomb. Albert Schweitzer once said that Jesus, and the movement he inspired, is about more than our political, social, economic, or even theological and religious agendas. Jesus cannot be held down, defined or controlled. It's as if Jesus is saying, "*Don't try to confine me. This is good news for everyone; this hope extends beyond our tradition and practices. Let me go!*" Resurrection happens when we hear God's voice – the voice of new life – amid the deathful realities of our lives and the world. And because it did, we look at every other death and grief and dead end and heartache and illness and loss and struggle and say, *This is not the end. This is not over, not near over. There is hope. There is life.*

It took an earthquake, an angel sitting atop a stone and a missing body to send the 2 Marys fleeing not with fear but with a grand purpose - to tell others the good news. They found a way to move forward from Good Friday to Easter Sunday and into the world. Dear friends, the voice of the angel rings in our ears today: "*Fear not, my dear friends- new life can be frightening when you have become accustomed to death in your personal and social lives. Fear not whatever is taking place in your life, whatever you are dealing with, worried about, struggling with, because there is a greater power at work in the world and in our lives that will hold us up. Fear not BCUC folks! This faith community, both past and present, is risen with Christ. The Risen Christ lives in us - this body of believers through love -- and love is victorious over all, even over death itself.*

Fear not! Be angels of good news and tell others by your words and by your actions that Jesus is no longer confined in the Good Friday world but lives in the Easter hearts of every follower. Fear not!”

So, we gather here this morning, a human community in the midst of a broken world with a renewed sense of purpose. The empty tomb is a symbol of transformation, of new life, for you and I. Today, we celebrate the power of life over death, the strength of love over hate, but also immense beauty and brokenness too. We experience the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread and in the sharing of the cup. Fear not angels! Christ is risen with us and through us. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

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