

SEEING JESUS TODAY
MATTHEW 28: 1-10; COLOSSIANS 3: 1-4
EASTER
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Matthew 28: 1-10

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 lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, 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."

How good it is to spend Easter with our young disciples. I hope each of us experiences Easter with the hope and happiness we see in their faces. Jesus said that we need to be like little children to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Last Sunday one of our brave young disciples thought he would be bathed naked in his baptism, in front of the whole congregation. His worst fears did not happen, but something awesome did occur. Christians believe that when we are baptized, we are raised to a new life as surely as Christ was raised to new life in the resurrection.

Because we remain in the world, our challenge is staying focused on the new life we are given. It is easier to see the world as society sees it, which the writer of Colossians identifies as things that are on earth. It is harder to see things as Christ sees them.

In our reading from the Letter to the Colossians, we are asked to seek the things that are above, which the writer identifies as the place where God is. CBS may have a solution. They are live streaming the March Madness NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. People watching the games at work can hit the boss button. Immediately spread sheets appear to make the boss believe they are working. Maybe what Christians need is a boss button that displays the world as God sees it whenever our minds begin to wander.

Christ is risen, my friends! This is the greatest news we will ever hear; but the news is both simple and complex, both clear and mysterious. We do not have a boss button to help us, but we have something better: We have the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, let us focus our minds on things that are above as we listen to God's Word in the Letter to the Colossians 3: 1-4.

Colossians 3: 1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Let us pray...

In his novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving has the narrator say: *I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished – I am terrified that, this year, it won't happen; that, that year, it didn't happen. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you are not a believer (p. 278).*

The Apostle Paul said something similar in 1 Corinthians 15: 14: *If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.*

The resurrection of Christ is God's truth, but some of us may find it hard to comprehend. Fortunately, the Good News of Christ's resurrection and his offer of new life do not depend upon our believing. The first disciples did not believe. The first disciples betrayed and denied Jesus. They ran away in fear. They saw Jesus die, and they assumed his ministry was over. The same disciples who listened to Christ's teachings and saw the miracles he performed also watched Jesus die a horrible death on the cross.

Sometimes the harsh reality of earthly things shatters our belief about things that are above, things that are of God. Illness, suffering, betrayal, and loss or the death of a loved one are only a few of the earthly realities that may lead us to question our faith.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the earth shook when Jesus died. Even non-believers said, *"Truly, this man was God's Son"* (Mt. 27: 54). "Was" is the operative word. The disciples loved Jesus, but he was dead. If we have trouble believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, if we have trouble believing in the living presence of our Lord, we are in good company.

When the sun came up on the first Easter morning, only a few women went to see the tomb. It was the tomb they expected to see, not the risen Lord. Thanks be to God, what we expect to see may not be what we see. That was true in the first century, and it is true today.

It is ironic that women were the first to see Jesus after his resurrection. If the early Christians wanted to fabricate a story to convince non-believers, they would not have sent women. In those days women were not allowed to serve as witnesses in court because their testimonies were considered unreliable.

Why on earth would the Risen Jesus first appear to women? Why not to the Chief Priests? Ah, but we are not speaking of earthly things, but of things that are from above, where God is. In the scriptures God often uses unlikely people to accomplish God's purposes.

The actions of the women on that first Easter morning may teach us more than we realize. The women took action to address the primary obstacle to their faith. They went to the tomb of death. They faced their greatest fear, and Jesus met them there.

What about us? What is our greatest fear? What is the primary obstacle to increasing or deepening our faith right now? Do we think death is the end? At our Good Friday service, Bev Holland read Psalm 22, which may be what Jesus quoted as he died: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Surely, if Jesus said such words to God, we can, too. Do we have the courage of the women on that first Easter morning? Do we have the courage to see the things from above?

One woman struggled with her faith when her daughter was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. The mother was angry for a year as she waited for the killer's prosecution. Just a few weeks before the trial, her husband died from an unexpected heart attack. The guilt was overwhelming. She had been so consumed with anger that she neglected to love her husband. She told her pastor that she felt dead

herself. Then it happened. It was an experience only she could explain. One Sunday she told her pastor that she knew her husband and her daughter were OK. She knew she was forgiven. It happened at Niagara Falls, where she had spent her honeymoon. She visited there on her way back from a business trip. There was a sign. The pastor did not remember what it said, but he remembered the effect. The woman experienced the promise of the Risen Christ that day. She received new life.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph did not go alone to the tomb. We do not have to go alone to face the tombs of our faith either. Other believers will walk with us and support us. Stephen Ministers are trained to be confidential Christian friends to accompany people during challenging times in life. Stephen Ministers, Shepherds and pastors are available when we come to grips with the earthly things and the things that are above, but so are others. We are called into a community of faith. It is a gift from God.

Some of us may need to see Jesus at tombs of personal tragedy or despair. Others may come to the tomb with intellectual or existential questions. Dr. Timothy Johnson, medical editor for ABC news, a Presbyterian Minister and a physician holding joint positions at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital of Boston, suggests that we first clarify what the New Testament accounts say about the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus was not a resuscitation of the body, *that is, the restoration of his body from a "clinical death" to its previous physical state* (Finding God in the Questions, 127). It is clear that the "new" Jesus the women and the disciples *report seeing and even touching is significantly different from the old one. Exactly what kind of new body is not clear, but it definitely is not just a resuscitated traditional body* (127-128).

Nor is the resurrected Jesus a disembodied soul flying around in the mist as Plato and other Greek philosophers imagined. The Gospel accounts describe a different Jesus, a Jesus with a body the disciples do not recognize at first, but it is a body. The resurrected Jesus talks with the disciples and eats with them.

The former body of Jesus is not described nor is it found. The tomb is empty, but the death of Jesus was real. No reading of the scriptures supports our brothers and sisters who adopt theories of reincarnation and crossing over. Jesus died an earthly death. Our loved ones die an earthly death. We will die an earthly death, but we also live eternally in Christ, now and forever. Easter is a divine mystery of life and death.

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary approached the tomb, the earth shook. The Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that Christ's death and resurrection are earth shaking events. The world is not the same. God rolled away the stone to the tomb of death so that we might see.

In our baptism we symbolically die with Christ. In our baptisms, we are raised to live in Christ. If we seek Christ and the things that are from God, we live a new life that never ends.

Peter Gomes (The Good Book), a professor and minister at Harvard, suggests that when we read the scriptures, Christians enter the mystery that is God in Jesus Christ. His colleague, Princeton theologian Diogenes Allen (Gomes 328) contends that the deeper we enter into the mystery of our faith, *the more illumination we will receive. Still greater depths are revealed to us the further we go... a mystery once recognized is something we are never finished with. It is never exhausted...we live in a universe permeated by a divine reality whose hem we touch ...*

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary encountered a mystery at the tomb, they left with fear and great joy. We, too, may feel fear when our earthly understandings are shaken, but what joy there is in the Good News. Jesus is alive! Jesus is God Emmanuel, God with us. In a mysterious way known only to the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present to us and will be present to the generations that come after us. God offers new life in Christ today as surely as we see signs of new life breaking out all around us.

The Good News of Easter does not depend upon perfect disciples or perfect churches, but the irony is that God wants to use imperfect disciples and churches to spread the gospel. God wants to use you and me, but first we may need to learn another lesson from the women who went to the tomb: When the women saw Jesus, they worshipped him.

William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, described worship as *the submission of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by God's holiness; the nourishment of the mind with God's truth; the purifying of the imagination by God's beauty; the opening of the heart to God's love; the surrender of the will to God's purpose* (The Oxford Book of Prayer, edited by George Appleton, p. 3).

The Risen Jesus said, *Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me.* We will see Jesus where we worship today and where we go tomorrow. We need not be afraid of what life and death will bring. Christ has risen!

Winston Churchill once said, "History can be a great teacher. Yet most of the time, we simply get up, brush ourselves off, and learn nothing at all" ((William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, March 31, 2002, p. 60). I pray we do not brush Easter off this morning. Easter is an earth shaking event. God is in our midst. Christ has risen! We will see him and live in him. God is good. Hallelujah! Amen.