

THE HEART OF THE MATTER - "YOU WILL SEE HIM THERE"

Easter Sunday

Jeremiah 31:3-4
Matthew 28:1-8

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Catherine Foote
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Old Testament, Jeremiah 31:3-4¹

[W]hen Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to Israel from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O Israel!
Again you shall take your tambourines
and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

New Testament, Matthew 28:1-8²

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples.

Pastor Catherine Foote

Prayer:

God,
May the words of my mouth
The meditations of our hearts
All draw us to the reality of Your love
That nothing can stand in the way of.
May we all come to know the story of Easter together.
- Amen.

Well for me and maybe for you, this year it has felt like a long slog to Easter. The weather in the Pacific Northwest has just closed in around us and rained and rained and rained. And even on my

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989

² Ibid.

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farm, though my shearer arrived early last month to do his good work, he had to wait until the first of April until he could actually get the wool off the sheep because of the rain and the freezing weather and the cold. Maybe this year more than any year I *need* a Resurrection Story.

And, you know, as it has been a "rainy night" in Seattle, so hasn't it seemed like it's raining all over the world? We began Holy Week with news on Palm Sunday of an attack on Christians in Egypt at two places of worship where folks had gathered to begin their Easter journey, attacks that left over 40 people dead.³

And we also heard even earlier of the bombing and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. And then we heard of our own retaliation strikes. On Tuesday of Holy Week, our President's press secretary stood in front of the Press and framed the chemical attack in Syria in a way –on the eve of Passover as our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world prepared to remember – he framed that attack that at least minimized and probably more accurately denied the Holocaust.⁴

Our hearts have been breaking.
It has been a long journey to Easter.
And doesn't the world need our Resurrection Story?
– Amen

You know, even here, in this congregation, we spent Lent in the "dark wood". We talked about fear, lostness, denial. We talked about those places in our lives where we barely know how to take the next step. And last Sunday Amy reminded us that many folks are in the dark wood so long, it turns out they actually live there; we actually have a home there.

And so in all that journeying we come this morning longing for an Easter story. There are four stories to choose from in our Gospel narratives, and each of those stories has common elements and unique elements. This morning our story was the story of Matthew. So let's step into that story.

You know all four stories tell us it was women who went first to the tomb. They got together early that Sunday morning and, in spite of the fact that it might not make any difference, they organized a march – right to the tomb. You know, I imagine they were warned, "There might be Roman guards there." I imagine that they were given an explanation, "There will be a stone too big to roll away." Nevertheless, they persisted. They took that journey of faith to the tomb and there they discovered ahead of them a way had indeed been made. The guard had fallen asleep. The stone had been rolled away. The tomb – except that it was full of good news – was absolutely empty.

Now it may be that we have four stories of this Resurrection appearance in our Gospels –four stories of this Easter narrative – because Resurrection is such a mystery, isn't it?

For some of us here this morning resurrection is a very personal story. It is our own sense of God's presence with us now and with us through eternity. It is a story of love that does not die and of

³ For more information see: www.nytimes.com/2017/04/09/world/middleeast/explosion-egypt-coptic-christian-church.

⁴ For more information see: www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/us/politics/sean-spicer-hitler-gas-holocaust-center.html

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Reunion someday and reconnection. Well, it's a mystery; and for some of us that is a piece of the mystery.

For others of us today, this story of Resurrection paints a broader picture of God who will not abandon us, of justice's arc throughout history that cannot be denied, of that sense that there is a power greater than the power of the most powerful bomb – outside of a nuclear bomb – that's ever been built. And *that* power is where we can put our trust. *That's* the Resurrection Story we come to celebrate.

And whatever resurrection story you come to celebrate today, this morning, here's what we know. From the very earliest time that this story was told, from that moment when the women ran from the tomb with good news, the Church has focused and drawn its strength from a Resurrection Story. They gathered on the *first* day of the week because that's Resurrection Day. It wasn't a once-a-year celebration; it was and every week reminder that God is with you and you will see God's presence and that power of resurrection everywhere you go.

You know, the gospel stories agree the women went there. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty. And then the stories diverge a little bit. Two of them tell us to meet Jesus in Jerusalem, but two of them tell us to meet Jesus in Galilee. And since Matthew is one of the two that says meet Jesus in Galilee, let's go with Matthew this morning and see what we might find in Galilee – because here's the reality of *that* Resurrection Story. The Angel did not send the apostles, the disciples, the women, the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem where the power was but to Galilee where the whole story began, where ordinary everyday life encounters demand a “kindly light”. And even in the darkest times the early church told us there will be a Kindly Light there will be Jesus right there to meet. And that Kindly Light you carry might even be you.

So here's the good news of the Resurrection: you know will meet him there in Galilee. You will meet that Resurrection story every day. You can trust that Resurrection story to carry you through whatever dark wood life calls you to. And even in whatever dark wood you might have found a home the Resurrection story holds. Do you believe it?

You know my friend Mark Davis, who is a pastor down in Southern California, this week published an op-ed in the LA Times and he quoted a philosopher theologian writer Irish poet, a fella named Peter ... (I remembered his name was Peter.) His last name is ... Rollins. So my friend Mark quoted Peter Rollins who took up the question whether he affirms or denies the Resurrection. And his answer was, without equivocation or hesitation, this religious leader, poet, theologian said. "I fully and completely admit that I deny the Resurrection of Christ. It's something anyone who knows me could tell you about me. I'm not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what people may think. I deny the Resurrection." I was kind of shocked when I read that quote.

But then Rollins goes on to say, "I deny it every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed. I deny the Resurrection every day I turn my back on the poor. I deny the Resurrection when I close my eyes to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system." [I might add, "I deny the Resurrection of Jesus every time I turn to some other power that encourages me to find my safety by closing down and walling off and finding my own little place.] Rollins goes on to say, however, "There are moments when I affirm the Resurrection. They are few and far between, but I

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affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak up for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears to shed." How when that Angel invites us to meet Jesus in Galilee, it is as if that Angel is saying, "You will see Jesus every day. And every day you will be invited to affirm the Resurrection." You know, you'll probably be warned, you will probably be given an explanation, but the Resurrection Story invitation is to step boldly into Grace every day.⁵

The story of the Resurrection gives us a lens through which to see Jesus. And you know every one of us carries around our lenses of life. This alternate story that Matthew tells us a little bit later in the gospel is that they spread a rumor that the disciples had come and taken Jesus' body away. "There is no need to trust any other story than the story the Empire gives you that we will keep you safe and therefore do not rock the boat."

But, O, the Resurrection Story has not been rocking the boat for 2000 years! And won't we be those people who believe that Resurrection Story, refuse to deny it, and take *that* lens out into the world: seeing love, seeing justice, and meeting the risen Christ ... everywhere we look. – Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/4/26/2017

⁵ Mark Davis, 2017. "Commentary: Easter Is the Time to Give Consideration to the Resurrection," Los Angeles Times, 4/13/2017. <http://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/opinion/tn-dpt-me-commentary-saturday-20170413-story.html>
For more information on Peter Rollins see: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1182097-without-equivocation-or-hesitation-i-fully-and-completely-admit-that>. (Accessed 5/10/2017)