

“Resurrected From False Security”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Jeremiah 31:1-6; Matthew (27:57-66); 28:1-10 (15-20)

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Easter

One fact on which all four Gospel writers agree is that a man named Joseph buried Jesus in a tomb on Friday. In Matthew, the two women who will go to the tomb on Easter morning, are watching the entombment on Friday evening. Let us recall the burial of Jesus in Matthew 27:

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

[hymn 171, verses 1-2 by praise team]

Jesus, the imposter. So, is he regarded by the religious rulers who want to end a movement that threatens their own security. So, they check in with what today we would call the head Homeland Security. Those here last Sunday recall Homeland Security was Pontius Pilate, who would prefer to be at his seaside palace but had to be in Jerusalem at Passover to keep order, in order to keep Caesar happy, and keeping Caesar happy meant his keeping his position as governor. Here's the plan to keep Jesus in the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate⁶³ and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.”⁶⁴ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ ⁶⁶So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

[hymn 171, verse 3 by praise team; 4 with congregation]

Conspiracy theories, fake news, rumors, alternative facts, baseless claims, lack of evidence – not today's headlines, but the reality of the accounts of the first Easter morning. While all four Gospel writers agree Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, in a rock-sealed tomb, their Easter morning stories have kept fact checkers in business. How many women were there, and what were their names? Did the disciples go to the tomb? Police reports are incomplete. Witnesses have different stories.

The batik image on the bulletin cover is not of the Matthew account we will hear this morning, but pictures Mark's Easter morning, with three women at the tomb. Luke also names three, but adds on “other women.” Matthew has just two women, and John's Gospel has only Mary Magdalene, which is how we understand the song, “I Come to the Garden Alone.”

Matthew is the lone account of an earthquake announcing an angel's arrival. I've always been intrigued it is not the earthquake but the shining bright angel who rolls back the stone from the tomb, and also scares the tar out of those guards for which the Pharisees have arranged with Pilate.

In spite of inconsistent facts, Christians gather in numbers on Easter to hear this story – we may be here by choice, or to please or appease family, or simply because Easter worship is a tradition, just as is the Red Sox playing a morning game tomorrow, Marathon Monday. Yet, there is something about this story, about resurrection, about new life, that draws even the most skeptical. One millennial “none” – spiritual but not religious – writes of being attracted to the idea of forgiveness, and starting anew, using the image of the “skin-shedding potential of spring.”

[<http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/14/opinions/nonreligious-millennials-celebrating-holidays-filipovic/index.html>]

Yet, resurrection is more than a caterpillar emerging from a chrysalis, as amazed as I am at viewing such a transformation. Allowing that the gospel accounts differ in terms of exactly what happened Sunday morning, at the heart of resurrection, we find a person, a lingering presence at the center of our Easter story, waiting to meet us. We call him the Risen Christ.

Let us hear Matthew’s account of Jesus’ Resurrection.

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.”

“We need to talk.” Perhaps those words come in a text, an email, or a message left on the phone. “We need to talk.” It could be a partner or spouse, a co-worker or boss, our child’s teacher or a friend. “We need to talk. We need to meet.” No detail is provided. You text, email or call back. “Okay, what is it about?” Then you wait – and all that comes back is, “I need to tell you when we meet face to face.” “Okay, when? I’m free this afternoon.” You wait – “I can’t do it for a couple days.”

Let’s stop there, because even if we may be assured, “Don’t worry about it,” or, “It’s nothing big, I just need to share it in person,” we are likely running all over the place in speculation. Is it something I did or said? Is it a major announcement I don’t want to hear – because good news rarely requires an appointment. You may even begin rehearsing different conversations before you even know the subject or issue or concern.

Now what's worse than such a scenario is when a third party brings the news, particularly if the message is "Jesus says he needs to see you!" Jesus' last words to the women who had come to the garden that first Easter morning are, "*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*" Now Galilee to Jerusalem is not a leisurely afternoon stroll, but the equivalent of walking from this church north to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. That would give the disciples plenty of time to speculate on what Jesus will say when he sees them; particularly since each disciple knows, while Judas betrayed Jesus for money, all of them had forsaken him and fled in the hours before his death. One can hear them rehearsing those conversations, whether to make excuses or offer apologies, or just remain stone silent and listen.

Once they arrive in Portsmouth, and Jesus meets them, Matthew tells us there are some who doubt, though it is not clear what they are doubting. It could be they could not believe it was really Jesus, but a part of me thinks that three days after the crucifixion, the disciples' grief process was focused at accepting the death, which takes a lot of emotion and energy. Now they need to shift gears and deal with resurrection, even though Jesus had told them it would happen!

Let's pause again and go back to the first phrase Jesus shared with the women. "Do not be afraid." It is the second time those words were spoken to them. The dazzling angel, who had scared the life out of those guards, immediately turned to the women and also said, "Do not be afraid."

In essence, the women were told, do not be afraid of resurrection. I expect those words were passed along to the disciples. "The angel told us, 'Do not be afraid.' Then Jesus met us and said, 'Do not be afraid.' Go to see him in Galilee, and do not be afraid" – or was it, do not be afraid to go see him?

A part of me thinks the latter, because when someone tells us, "We need to talk," or "I need to see you," even as much as we want to hear what the other will share, we may also fear it, resist it, hoping it will go away, or pass with time. Sometimes, we may even want it to be put in a tomb, covered by a rock and sealed.

We know when the disciples reach Jesus in Galilee he commissions them to go make disciples of all nations, to baptize in his name, and to teach all he has commanded them. Yet, while not recorded, I wonder if the first words might have been, "Do not be afraid." There's a connection between fear and resurrection?

After the 9/11 attacks, William Sloane Coffin wrote an essay entitled, "Despair is not an option." I find that essence in Jesus' words to previously grieving disciples, "Despair is not an option." In a different way, Paula Gooder echoes the thought in an article titled, "Hope is Absolute":

"It would be overly simplistic and downright untrue to say that despair no longer features in our world. Jesus' resurrection does not remove despair, but it does temper it. Jesus' resurrection means that despair is no longer absolute; hope is always present even if it feels far away." [<https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/hope-absolute?parent=50156>]

Despair and hope continue to see saw up and down in our day, and there are times it seems despair is gaining the upper hand, as language is geared toward divisions of us and them, if you are not with us you are against us, if you are not like us you must be our enemy. It is not new, but it is prevalent. And frankly, just as after the resurrection the authorities regathered and paid off the now unfrozen guards to tell the media they had fallen asleep and someone stole Jesus' body, hoping they can keep resurrection entombed. How that happens in our day is that Easter is simply seen as a festival of spring, and perhaps an Easter bunny emerging from a tomb with a basket of goodies, where we are more concerned with how long the Peeps will last than how many refugee children will die of hunger today.

Ah, but should I bring up concerns about the hungry on Easter, much less the seeming giddiness even the liberal media have had this week reporting on the 16 million dollar mother of all bombs? Should not such subjects of hunger and war be kept under cover, remain sealed in the tomb, at least on Easter Day?

I still think there is a fear of resurrection by those who offer the false security of a guarded tomb. The notion of "but what if..." rumbles beneath the surface, seeking for us to quell our imagination with reality, and stifle our creativity with fear. Yet, resurrection has its refrain, "Do not be afraid."

In a Lenten devotional I used this year, Walter Brueggemann imagines the interaction between God and Abraham at the time when Abraham and his wife Sarah are pushing 100 years old, and God gives them word it is time to have a baby. The interplay is God's saying, "Can you imagine?" and Abraham's response, "Yes, but." Yes, but we are very old. Yes, but I have a son, Ishmael. Yes, but, we are settled. [Brueggemann, Walter, A Way Other Than Our Own, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), p. 63]

I think about a resurrected Jesus still beckoning us to come meet him in Portsmouth, a quicker trip now that we have cars. I've received the message, "We need to talk," "I need to see you," and I think he might try to "Can you imagine?" me as we come face to face. Maybe it is just a one on one, but more likely he wants to gather the church, or the nations. He asks, "Can you imagine?" "Can you imagine I have given you:

- the ability to feed the world's hungry;
- the capability to provide health care for all;
- the strength to negotiate peace;
- the opportunity to care for the mentally ill and treat the addicted;
- the capacity to create affordable housing for all;
- the intelligence to understand your privilege;
- the words to speak against injustice;
- the wisdom to find your security in me.

And we say, "Yes, ... but..." "Yes, we can imagine all this, and it all sounds good, but we have our priorities, but it will take money, but the national interest is key, but the church building needs to be maintained. Yes, but..."

I have to think there is just so much “yes, butting” the Risen Christ can take before he might feel he is being crucified again, put back in the tomb, with the stone back in place. Sometimes it can seem safer to deal in the world of despair and even death than risk acting on the hope of “Can you imagine?”

Some of you are aware our mother died just over three months ago, at age 97. Yet, it was fourteen years ago tomorrow, that she had her first stroke, and it changed hers and my father’s life, and ours as well. In the end, she lived the last six years of her life in a nursing home. I appreciated those who shared the words, “I am sorry for your loss,” at the time, and I jotted this down on a piece of paper at the time: yes, the loss of presence, even of one who has not been able to be present for a number of years, is a loss that is grieved, though differently than death that comes either suddenly or, as we say, before its time.

I continued to write: ... yet to be honest, if someone had said, “I’m joyful for your gain,” I would not have been offended. After eleven years of intentional caregiving, I felt a sense of relief – and a part of that relief was tied to what I believe was our mother’s release from the earthly body and mind that had so deteriorated and was now made new.

There is a personal aspect of resurrection faith, which has to do with the afterlife promise, new life, in what is biblically envisioned to be a great banquet, where I can see our mother being sure good things are served well.

Yet, while we live with the promise of eternal life, the power of resurrection is not contained within the personal realm of our destiny in the sweet by and by. Nor is resurrection our northern hemispheric glee at the emergence of Spring, as wonderfully renewing that is.

As I have shared with some, a part of processing the grief of our mother’s death has been my joy at recapturing memories clouded by the years of dementia. Yet, resurrection is even more than memories of our loved ones, or of Jesus.

As Walter Brueggemann writes, “The core truth of our faith is this: the God of the gospel brings life out of death.... [a God who] can probe into our deepest negations and create new possibility, new space for life, new energy for obedience, new waves of joy”

“In the Christian tradition, the seal of the deal is Easter. On that dread Sunday morning the earliest church discovered that the Jesus who had been executed by the state was alive and on the loose; death had no power over God’s will for life.”

[Brueggemann, *op.cit.*, p. 72]

Resurrection is the “do not be afraid,” we can carry with us into and through the Good Fridays of life. Resurrection is our refusal to bow to or rely on the promise of empire to ease our despair or provide us security. Resurrection strengthens us to go to Galilee when we sense Christ calling, “We need to talk.” “I need to see you.” We do so recalling his final words, to the disciples, were, “I will be with you always.”

Let the resurrected Christ out of the tomb and we realize he will be around forever – an on-earth presence – still needling the religious to faithfulness and compassion, still calling nations to justice and peace, and still asking us, “Can you imagine?” and hoping we will not automatically say, “Yes, but.”