

April 24, 2011
Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of the Lord

The National Presbyterian Church

What's Your Story?

Matthew 28:1-17

Rev. Patrick Willson

We come to worship on Easter Sunday expecting to hear the Easter story, but did you notice that Matthew tells two stories of Easter? At the end of the Gospel of Matthew two stories stand side by side.

We do not expect two stories.

On Easter Sunday morning we expect the familiar story of women coming to the tomb to be greeted by an angelic visitor: "Do not be afraid, you seek Jesus who was crucified; he is not here; he is risen." The women dash off to tell others the astonishing news. That's the story we know; that's the story we expect Easter Sunday morning. That's the story Matthew wants to tell but Matthew knows it's not the only story going around.

There's another story, a simple explanation, really, and perhaps more convincing than tales of angels and

messages at the tomb. This story simply says that Jesus' disciples came by night and stole the body away while the soldiers were asleep. That's all. No resurrection. No mystery. Nothing difficult to believe. Just ordinary, believable things like duplicity and fraud, as plausible as anything in morning paper.

It's a reasonable story and Matthew admits its popularity: It is told and believed "among some to this day." It is not the story Matthew believes, and it is not the story Matthew wants to tell, but some people tell that story.

The question is, which story will you tell?

Perhaps you were expecting me to ask, which story do you believe? Which story to you find credible? For Matthew, that's not the half of it. Matthew wonders which story you will be willing tell out loud. What you believe is important, certainly, but what you are willing to tell—what you are willing to let on about—is vastly more important.

Will it be Matthew's story that you tell? Don't answer too quickly. After all, Matthew's is a wild and improbable tale. Easter Sunday in the gospel of Matthew is a stormy time. Matthew doesn't decorate his story with pretty lilies and dogwood blossoms. Instead an earthquake shakes the ground. An angel rolls back the stone at the tomb and the appearance of the angel is horrifying. This is not one of those tame creatures decorating greeting cards, no cheerful cherub with eyes turned pensively to heaven. This angel has work to do and has the muscles to haul rocks. Matthew doesn't dare describe the angel but says the guards who did see it were so horrified that they shook as if they had palsy and the blood drained from their faces until they looked like death itself. When women arrive the first thing the angel must do is calm their fear: "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."

To tell Matthew's story we straddle a fault line in an earthquake zone. The ground shudders under our feet. Everything trembles with aftershocks of resurrection. There is no firm place to stand, nothing is certain. Even if we tell this story we are by no means confident we understand what it means, but this much seems clear: something new and unpredictable is happening. If this be true, anything is possible. All the best hopes are possible, all the best dreams may come true. God shakes the earth to let loose a future where all things may be made new. The future is open—wide open. Or so the story Matthew tells would have it.

The Official Story tells it differently. A news release from the highest authorities bears the marks and seals of officialdom. “Nothing shaking here,” the authorities reassure us. “Yes, of course, there have been reports of earth tremors and rumors of resurrection, but these are, well, not to be believed. The sources are not reliable, a few gullible Galilean yokels and some women who travel with them, not credible witnesses at all. Nothing is shaken, everything is as it always has been, give praise to the Emperor for the peace of Rome which endures forever. Those who have been made to be dead (more specifically, this Jesus of Nazareth) remain dead though the corpse has evidently been misappropriated by unauthorized persons. Investigations are underway, arrests are expected by nightfall. There is nothing, repeat, nothing to be upset about. Go back to whatever you were doing before.”

The Official Story is impressive, complete and convincing, as we might expect. No earthquake. No resurrection. Everything as it always has been. Everything in its place. Death is in its place. The only sure things, they say, are death and taxes, and that saying is probably as old as the Roman Empire. Death is sure. Death is as final and unchallengeable as the Official Story. The Official Story is

reassuring. The earth remains firm under our feet, as dependable and unchanging as time itself. Nothing can upset it, overturn it.

Matthew tells two stories of Easter: you can read them for yourself in the Bible; you're welcome to take that Bible with you if you wish. It's our gift to you; actually it is God's gift to all of us.

Two stories: if you were to pick up this morning's newspaper and read these two accounts, which would you find the more believable? Disturbing thought, but Matthew is concerned not simply for what you find believable, but what story will you tell?

All through Matthew's last chapter we hear summons to "go and tell" and "say." The angel at the tomb doesn't just *say* something to the women, the angel gives them something to *say* to the others: "***Go quickly and tell*** his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead.'" When the women meet Jesus on the road they are ready to hold on to him and worship him, but Jesus has things to do and places to go. He tells them, "***Go and tell*** my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem the authorities are bribing the soldiers to make sure what they will *say*: "***Tell people***, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"

When his disciples finally find Jesus atop a mountain they also worship him, but in the same way as he responded to the women, he gives them something to *say*: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them...all I have commanded you."

Christians have spoken of those words as "The Great Commission" but in this final chapter of Matthew's gospel there are all kinds of commissionings going on.

The angel says, "Go quickly and tell...that he has risen from the dead."

The authorities say, “Tell people, ‘His disciples... stole him away.’”

Matthew lays these alternatives side by side: “What story will you tell?”

Matthew is insightful. As long as the only question we are asked is “What do you believe?” we can postpone commitments indefinitely: “I’d like to give the matter more study before coming to a decision.” There is always another book to read, another test to run, more to think about. We have all the time in the world to figure out what we believe—until circumstances demand we *say something*.

Matthew understands we can believe all manner of things we would never say and or tell anyone else. We clutch old hurts and terrible despair, we contain within us aching hopelessness we would never speak. We feed this melancholy with silence. Were we to dredge it out of our inner darkness and speak it aloud, the light would illumine it as sham and the greater wisdom we have been given would show our worst fears false. So Matthew invites us, “Go quickly and tell.”

What story will you tell? Your child wakes screaming in the early hours of the morning.¹ The disorientation of not being entirely awake magnifies the dream's terror. Horrible monsters have invaded the bedroom you try to make safe. You hold the child to yourself as mothers and fathers have held frightened children from time unremembered. You rock the child into sobbing calm. And what do you say? You could say many things about terrors lurking in darkness because you know them well; they are not strangers to you. You have been touched by them, but you do not speak of that now. What do you say? “Shhh—don't be afraid—everything is okay—everything will be all right.”

“Everything is okay?” I didn’t turn on the television this morning but I’m pretty sure the morning news did not come on with the report, “Everything is okay.” By what authority do you say that? Are you simply stuffing the child’s mouth with pretty words the way you used to slip in a pacifier, offering a moment’s comfort but no real nourishment? Or are you bearing witness to the greatest truth you know, that in spite of all the terrors of the dark, indeed, overcoming all the terrors of the dark, Jesus Christ is alive, vitally alive, vastly alive, and in ways we can scarcely imagine and only barely believe, everything will be all right.

As Matthew tells the story of Easter, it is not a story about what we will believe so much as what we will say.

My friend Jon Walton is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York. He was visiting an elderly woman in the hospital a couple of years ago.

Jon says, “She told me that the doctor had... explained what her diagnosis was. Lymphoma,” he said, “rather advanced.” The bad news was it was terminal; the good news, she would not need surgery. She told Jon she hoped to go home. Then she smiled and said,

“I wish you’d been here earlier, the doctor came to see me with three handsome young interns in tow. They told me their names and each one checked me over, and then the doctor said to me, ‘Maybe you would like to share with these young men something that they should know as doctors, especially in light of your faith, and what I’ve just told you.’”

She said, “I hardly knew what to say. It seemed like it was so important. Here I was in this bed and I was supposed to say something that these young doctors could remember. I didn’t think I had anything to say, so I just said, ‘Somehow I trust that

whatever happens to me I will be in God's hands, and that gives me hope. Whatever happens, I will be all right.”

And then she looked at [Jon] and said, ” I wish you'd been here. You would have said it so much better than I could.”

Jon looked at her and I said, “No, I couldn't. I couldn't have said it any better at all.”ⁱⁱ

Matthew understands that faith is not just what we think in our minds or have in our hearts or listen to with our ears, faith is what we say with our lips. We live faith by speaking faith. Doubts are not resolved just by pondering them through but by speaking them.

Furthermore, Matthew wouldn't for an instant have us believe that doubts and fears and uncertainty should shush us into silence.

The most remarkable thing about Matthew's Easter story is a small comment he tosses in. I hope you noticed it. The disciples gather on the mountain just as Jesus had told them, and Matthew says, “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Even on Easter Sunday morning uncertainty gathers like clouds around the mountain where Jesus is fully present. On Easter we don't diminish doubts by raising the volume on our “Alleluias.” We don't conceal uncertainty with a forest of Easter lilies. Matthew understands doubt as well as faith. The important thing is not what we come here believing, it's what we leave saying.

If I read this rightly the first Easter sermon was the angel's message, “Go quickly and tell...he has risen from the dead.” Twenty centuries of Easter preaching has not improved that. Go and tell. Go and tell what you have heard. Go and tell you friends. Go and tell your children. Go and tell people you love. Go and tell strangers that the earth is shaking with the presence of God and the whole

creation trembles with resurrection life breaking through.
Go and tell what you have found. Go and tell what you
have heard.

“They worshipped him; but some doubted,” and to
those who worshipped him and to those who doubted, and
to those who worshipped him and doubted at the very same
instant, Jesus said, “Go and tell.”

Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, alleluia!

ⁱThis image gratefully borrowed from Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of
Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*,
Doubleday, 1970, 54-55.

ⁱⁱJon Walton, “Thanks at All Times,” sermon preached at The First
Presbyterian Church of the City of New York, November 23, 2008.

Worship on Sundays at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.

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