

Where Will We See Jesus?
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Matthew 28.1-10 (NRSV)

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; for 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 his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Introduction

According to John’s Gospel, the last words of Jesus before he died on the cross were “It is finished.”¹

Perhaps “it is finished” are words we all want to apply to Easter. I confess that I am a little tired right now. Ten worship services in eight days take a bit of energy. Our musicians and singers are a little tired right now too. So are others who helped make these worship services happen. So when the handshakes are done today and the parking lot empty, a lot of us will sigh, “it is finished.” Truth be told, you’re probably tired too even if you haven’t come to any other worship service this week. For Easter means family gatherings, traveling, cleaning, cooking, shopping, and all kinds of energy-draining activities. We’re all a little exhausted and a part of each of us will be happy to say today, “it is finished.”

But the scripture doesn’t let us walk away from Easter quite so easily. Reading Matthew’s version of the resurrection we realize things are not finished at all. An Easter poem puts it this way:

Between the fragrance of the lilies
and the left-over aroma of Easter Sunrise breakfast ...
Between the rustling of new clothes
and the bustle of baskets with candy and eggs ...
Between the glorious greeting
and exuberant Amen ...
there’s some unfinished business.²

There is some unfinished business. Jesus is going to Galilee and if disciples want to see him, they’re

¹ “When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” John 19.30.

² Heather Murray-Elkins, “The Beginning of the End,” *Abingdon Preacher’s Annual 1994*, John K. Bergland, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 108.

going to have to see him there in Galilee.

We hear this twice in the text. The angel told the women eyewitnesses and then Jesus himself repeated it. In fact, Jesus told this to his disciples even before he was crucified: “but after I am raised up,” he said, “I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” (26.32) Repetition is one way the Bible tells us that something is important. This message is repeated three times. Perhaps we ought to pay attention. Where will we see Jesus? We will see him in Galilee or we won’t see him at all. Let’s think about what this means for us today.

ONE: It means that sometimes we look in the wrong places.

The old African-American spiritual asks “were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? Were you there when they pierced Him in the side? Sometimes it causes me to tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

These questions deserve an honest answer and the honest answer is *No*. No, we can’t be counted on to be there when ungodly power slaughters innocents. No, we weren’t there. We don’t like the pain and the suffering and the obedience required. In spite of Jesus saying we must pick up our crosses and follow him, we avoid the cross like it might kill us.³

You know, it just might kill us but we may never know because we tend to turn the cross into a piece of jewelry instead of a way of life. We say we believe in God. But are we getting ourselves to Galilee so we can see where Jesus really is? He told us he would meet us in there. Are we getting ourselves there? Or are we looking in the wrong places?

Where is Galilee? Matthew makes it quite clear. Galilee is wherever Jesus is at work.⁴ Galilee is where he did much of his ministry (4.12, 15). It is where he called his disciples to follow him (4.18). Galilee is where Jesus taught and healed and claimed people’s lives (4.23). Galilee is where the people first flocked to him (4.25). Galilee is where we see Jesus. It’s that simple.

³ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10.37-39)

⁴ There are 16 mentions of Galilee in Matthew, 5 in chapters 26-28. (2.22) But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. (3.13) Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. (4.12) Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. (4.15) “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — (4.18) As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. (4.23) Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (4.25) And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (15.29) After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. (17.22) As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, (19.1) When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. (21.11) The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (26.32) But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” (27.55) Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. (28.7) 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.” (28.10) Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (28.16) Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

Remember that in Matthew, the final teaching of Jesus is about the last judgment when he separates the sheep and the goats, the righteous and the unrighteous. He tells the righteous, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25.34-36)

Then the righteous want to know when they saw Jesus this way and did those things: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” (25.37-39)

We all know Jesus’ answer: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (25.40) Who is Jesus’ family? Those for whom he died. Jesus died for the world.

If our lives are not centered in helping and caring for the “least of these,” then we’re not looking in the right place for Jesus. We’re not in Galilee and we’re not going to see him. Sometimes we look in the wrong places.

TWO: But Easter is about being able to start over. Maybe we can still look in some right places.

But maybe we can keep trying to show up in Galilee. Better late than never. So let’s learn to travel light, look for the signs of Jesus, and track the Way of the One who is Truth and Life. Easter is about being able to start over again and our hope lies in the One who has promised to meet us — not in the tomb, not even in church, but in any place where love’s redeeming work is done.⁵

I have read Matthew’s account of the resurrection many times. But until I was preparing this sermon I never really noticed something. The women eyewitnesses — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary — went to the tomb at dawn on Sunday. They got there before the earthquake, before the angel descended from heaven, before the stone was rolled away. In other words, the women saw the same thing that the soldiers who were guarding the tomb saw. And when the stone was rolled away, the risen Jesus was already gone from the tomb. Jesus was resurrected to a spiritual body that somehow could leave the tomb even before the stone was rolled away. Yet it was a real body because a few verses later the women took hold of his feet and worshiped him. And Matthew doesn’t explain any of this. He doesn’t answer any of the questions our rational, scientific minds want answered. How could this be? Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t say and neither can I.

My friend, I cannot prove the resurrection to you today. If you came here for proof, you will be disappointed. A lot of Easter sermons try to prove what in my opinion cannot be proved. Matthew didn’t prove it either. He just describes two differing reactions to something that can be neither proved nor explained. The soldiers and the women saw the very same things. The soldiers were afraid and decided to lie and conspire. The women were also afraid but they ran away rejoicing and then they saw Jesus and worshiped. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is not about *how*. The resurrection is a gift offered to those who seek out the risen Christ.⁶ The resurrection is about

⁵ Murray-Elkins, 110.

⁶ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., Holly Hearon, Hank J. Langknecht, Beverly A. Zink-Sawyer, *New Proclamation Year A, 2008: Easter to Christ the King*, David B. Lott, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 12.

faith and that's what I'm calling for today. I offer no proof but I call forth your faith. Look for Jesus. In Galilee. You will see him.

I don't know how many of you puzzled a bit over the picture on the front of your bulletins this morning. Traditionally Easter bulletin covers have flowers, sunshine, happy themes. But all week we've been looking at scripture through the lenses of contemporary religious art and I particularly like this painting called "Easter Morning" by Bernard Deschler. Mr. Deschler is a Catholic priest, a architect, a sculptor, and a painter living in Breezy Point, New York.

Who do you think the bright white figure is? Is it the risen Christ? Or is it a joyous disciple who sees the risen Christ and lives his life in Christ? I think it's both. And I think the painting calls forth faith just like Matthew's Gospel calls forth faith. We have a choice. We can continue to mope about like the dark figures in the painting, consumed within our own selves. Or we can look up to Jesus in faith and joyously live our lives in him. Easter gives us that choice.

Conclusion

In Basel, Switzerland at St. Martin's Church there is an impressive sculpture on the front wall depicting St. Martin of Tours (316-397). Before becoming a Christian, Martin was a fourth-century Roman soldier.

The inspiration for the sculpture originated in a story about a bitterly cold winter's day when Martin was entering a city and was approached by a beggar pleading for alms. Having no money, Martin removed his soldier's coat, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream that he had died and gone to heaven. There he saw Jesus, and on the back of Christ was half of a Roman soldier's coat. An angel asked the King of heaven and earth, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old coat?" Jesus answered, "My servant Martin gave it to me."⁷

You may be thinking *that's a nice story but it's probably half legend*. I think you're probably right. But the point is not whether Martin really gave half his coat to a beggar. The point is, what will we do with our coats? The Easter message is that Jesus is not *here*. Let's take that quite literally. Jesus isn't a stained glass god. He is not stuck in this sanctuary or any sanctuary. Don't get me wrong. Worship is important. The eyewitnesses fell at Jesus' feet and worshiped him. We should all be in worship. But Jesus said I'll meet you in Galilee and he's saying the same thing to us today. If we want to see him, it will be out there in the Galilees of our lives. In other words, Jesus will meet us in our homes, in our schools, and in our workplaces. Indeed, he will meet us wherever we will look for him in faith. And don't ever think he isn't with you when you face trouble and suffering. Jesus meets us out there, in the real world. He promised he would and he keeps his promises.

It is finished? No. It's just getting started because Jesus is alive. He empowers us to be alive and says he'll meet us along the way. That's where we will see him. Thanks be to God.

⁷ Derl G. Keefer, "Not Yet Finished," *Abingdon Preacher's Annual 1996*, Michael Dudit, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 378.