

## Easter

Those of us who were here last Sunday listened to three singers chant the story of Christ's passion, word for word, straight out of the Gospel according to Matthew. And what a wild, cruel story it is, with an arrest by torchlight, a hastily-convened kangaroo court, Peter pretending he never met Jesus, crowds shouting "Crucify," soldiers mocking, Judas trying to give back his blood money, three crosses on a hilltop, and a cry of utter despair from the mouth of Jesus himself: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

We left the sanctuary in silence (well, in more or less in silence), clutching the palm fronds we had been waving just a few minutes before. **"Hosanna,"** we had sung. **"Hosanna to the Son of David."** There was so much promise -- so much hope -- packed into that phrase. Jesus was going to be the savior we had been longing for, the Messiah who would put everything right, God's heaven-sent solution to the fine mess the world has gotten itself into. Jesus was going to fulfill all our hopes.

- Hope for an end to injustice and oppression;
- Hope for spears beaten into plowshares;
- Hope that tyrants who intentionally kill their own citizens would be toppled from their thrones;
- Hope that stockpiles of sarin gas would disappear and children would no longer die in agony.

Matthew doesn't pull any punches. He showed us very clearly what we could do with those hopes. We could leave them in that borrowed tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, because clearly, they weren't going to do us any good anymore.

We had pinned our hopes on Jesus, and Jesus had let us down. Or, even worse, God had let us down, just as God had let Jesus down. Matthew is emphatic: Jesus died on the cross. He is dead. Stone cold dead. Roman-soldier dead, you might say, and it doesn't get any deader than that.

We still had our palms, but those hopes -- those we had left behind. And the disciples of Jesus -- those who had pledged to be with him to the bitter end -- what did Matthew say became of them?

Well, they scattered like so many spooked sheep, like Florida cockroaches when you turn on the light. They talked a good game, those male disciples, but when push came to shove, they were nowhere to be seen.

Just as the last notes of the Gospel were being sung, we caught a glimpse of that tomb where Jesus' broken body lay beside our broken hopes. The **"great stone"** was rolled across the entrance, and just a few feet away were some women. No men, mind you. Just women. A great many had been watching all the while, but Matthew names only two of them: **"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary."**

There the women sat, watching, bearing witness, keeping vigil as the sun was going down, and the long night of tears and shattered hopes began. They were still sitting there when we left the sanctuary last Sunday.

I remember the night I got the news that my mother had died. I was a twenty-three-old student back then, attending a conference on the tiny island of Iona just off the west coast of Scotland. The phone call came on a Saturday evening, but there was no leaving the island the next day. Back then, no one traveled to or from Iona on Sunday except the preacher who came by boat from the mainland to conduct worship in the little church there.

So I spent Sunday night on Iona, listening to the rain pounding the roof of the WW II-era Quonset hut which served as sleeping quarters for visitors to the island.

I know what it's like to keep vigil – to sit across from the tomb – even if the tomb is an ocean's width away. Perhaps you do, too. Perhaps you have that in common with Mary Magdalen and the other Mary. Maybe you're here this morning to visit that tomb.

Today we pick up Matthew's story right where we left off last Sunday. Two nights have passed. It's the day after the Sabbath – Sunday as we call it these days. And whom do we see? **"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"** on their way to see the tomb of Jesus. (Still no men in sight. Maybe we should look under the bed.)

Suddenly all heaven breaks loose. A **"great earthquake"** turns the ground into a roller coaster, an **"angel of the Lord"** descends from above and flicks the stone away like a kid's marble. The angel takes a seat on the stone and looks around. The guards

who are posted by the tomb (all men, of course) shake and drop like corpses, but the women stand there solid as suffragettes at a town hall rally.

**“Don’t be afraid,”** the angel tells them. (These women might be afraid, but at least they’re still upright.) **“I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised. Come, see the place where he lay.”**

At this point in the story, I should remind you that women back then were not considered reliable witnesses. They couldn’t give testimony in court. Only men could do that. But, you’ll notice there aren’t any men left in this scene to bear witness. The male disciples are AWOL and the male soldiers have all fainted dead away. So it is to the women that this dazzling angel delivers the message of Easter.

**“He is not here, for he has been raised.”**

This is not the news that the women expect, nor is it the news any of us deserves to hear, but this is the message of Easter. Jesus Christ is risen, and with him have risen the hopes that you and I had buried in that redundant sepulcher.

**“Go quickly,”** the angel continues, *Get a move on. Drag his other disciples out of their hidey holes wherever they are, and tell them that Jesus is going on ahead of you, back up to Galilee. There you will see him.*

The women, says Matthew, hightailed it out of that cemetery, **“in fear and great joy,”** which is the only way any of us has any right to bear the Easter message. **Fear** because that message propels us back into the fray, back into the mess we have made of the world, and **great joy** because now we know we won’t be alone – ever.

**He is going ahead of you to Galilee.**

Galilee, you probably remember, was where it all began – where Jesus began proclaiming the coming reign of God, where he put flesh onto God’s promise -- where he called disciples, taught the crowds, healed the sick, fed the multitudes, challenged the rich, welcomed the outcast, blessed the children, and taught that the Messiah must suffer. Galilee is where the rubber hits the road, where the kingdom of God is made incarnate, where you and I are summoned to join the risen Christ.

Those hopes we had for a second chance to make the world better – we will meet them in Galilee where the risen Christ awaits. Those fears that all our work is in vain – we can bring them along with us to Galilee. You cannot live the Easter faith without fear, but with the fear comes great joy that we are not alone. Like the women, we carry the Easter message **with fear and great joy.**

Jesus summons us to Galilee this morning – and Galilee is not far from where you are sitting right now. It lies just outside those doors, where people who are hungry need food, people who are in prison need a visit, people who are on the margins need hospitality, and people who are afraid need to know that they do not have to bear their fear alone.

Galilee is a place fraught with danger because the last remnants of the former age are doing their best to make their country great again. But Galilee is also a place of great blessing, because the risen Christ is there, calling us to follow him.

You might have missed all the excitement last Sunday, but I'm glad you're here today. We all need to hear the angel's proclamation. **"He is not in the tomb, for he has been raised."** And we all need to receive the promise that the risen Christ will meet us in Galilee.