

It's quite a story that gathers us today. Mary Magdalene and Mary go to the tomb. Suddenly there is an earthquake. An angel descends from heaven and rolls back the stone in front of the tomb and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning and his clothing as white as snow.

Typical of the angels in this Gospel, this angel is also sent to deliver a message – Jesus has been raised. The angel who announces life at the tomb makes the guards stationed at the tomb act “like dead men.” Those who thought they were in power, who thought that they were keeping the dead entombed, are now relegated to be as dead. Those who thought that Jesus was dead are told that he is alive.

While the guards shake with fear, the angel tells the women not to be afraid. “I know 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 to you.”

“Do not be afraid.” The soldiers whose job it is to strike fear in anyone who would challenge the empire...they are fearful. The women are told not to fear. Mary Magdalene and Mary left the tomb quickly with a mixture of “fear and great joy.”

They still have some fear, but their fear is now mixed with joy. Those who once feared death and the power represented by the soldiers now don't fear death; they fear the amazing truth that is contained in the words, “He is risen!” They are fearful because it all sounds too good to be true.

Still, it is important to be reminded at this point that they have not seen the resurrection. They've only seen an empty tomb. They saw the crucifixion and concluded that this was the end, the death of Jesus. Now they are shown the empty tomb by the angel with the possibility of another outcome. Matthew means for us to join the women in seeing, drawing appropriate conclusions, and believing.

The resurrection itself can't be seen. We couldn't see the world begin in Genesis 1; we can't see the new world beginning in Matthew 28. All we can see is the empty tomb and Jesus raised from the dead. The result of this seeing is enough to set in motion a proclamation: Mary Magdalene and Mary rush from the tomb to tell the disciples.

At this point they are interrupted by Jesus himself. Jesus greets them, they see, and they recognize him. They take hold of his feet and worship. The resurrected Jesus can be touched. Jesus' resurrection is a full, bodily resurrection – the women are not having some vague, ethereal, spiritual experience. They are touching his resurrected body.

Then the women worship him. They give to Jesus (worship) that which we only give to God. These are Jewish women who know that Israel is commanded...in the very first of the Ten Commandments...to worship nothing and no one who is not the true and living God.

Jesus tells them not to be afraid, but to go tell his brothers they must go to Galilee where they will see him. The disciples will fully "see" him only as these women obey him, only as they go and tell others the truth.

The women are not told to go to the temple, to Jerusalem, the capital city. They are told to go to where Jesus began his ministry: Galilee. The disciples are being reassembled in Galilee; later, it will be from Galilee that they are sent forth.

Meanwhile the guards get themselves together, go to the city, and tell the chief priests what had happened. The authorities move into action and bribe the soldiers to lie.

Sometimes people say that in order to believe in the resurrection you must suspend your normal understanding of how things work. There is much truth to that. We live in a world in which what's dead stays dead... and what Caesar and his legions declare...is the order of the day.

Our problem is that we have difficulty seeing the resurrection because it is so far beyond the scope of our understanding of the way the world works...or doesn't work, We can't see that what the angel is trying to show us... is right before our eyes. In a sense, we have to "see" the resurrection before we can "see" what is really going on in the world...now that God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead.

You can't really "see" the resurrection but you must believe the resurrection before you can really see.

The women show us that it's only as we venture forth – dare to come out to the tomb in our darkness, willing to be surprised, willing to obey the messenger of God, willing to obey the risen Christ, willing to go back to Galilee expecting to meet him there – that we will "see."

Matthew, who from the beginning stresses the necessity of not only loving Jesus, but also obeying Jesus...of not only admiring Jesus but also following Jesus. Matthew seems to be saying that here is a truth that requires active engagement, obedience, discipleship.

Only as we are willing to venture forth, risk, obey, be surprised, mix up the fear and the joy...only then will we be able fully to see and believe.

The truth of Easter is a truth that is not to be debated with arguments, detached with measured reflection or consideration. It is truth that is known only as we act, only when we go out to obey and to tell.

Some of you here this morning can testify that in those moments when you have launched out, obeyed Jesus, and done what he commanded you – even when you had doubts, even when you couldn't fully understand what he was doing through you – you discovered the risen Christ there to meet you.

So be it for all of us!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, on this day you conquered death, rose to new life, and returned to us. You overturned our expectations for what can and can't be done. You offered to us a new story of our lives in the world, a future that we could not have had without your triumph.

Keep returning to us, Lord. Continue to reveal yourself to us in all your resurrected glory. Give us what we need to see you, and then, give us the courage and the determination to obey you that we might be brought to a sure and living faith in your ultimate victory. Amen.