

April 12, 2020, Easter

Matthew 28:1-10

*28:1After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And 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. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then 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." 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

Many years ago, while preparing for a Lenten sermon series, I came to the realization that the central symbol of our faith should not be a cross or a crucifix, rather an empty tomb. I also realized the marketing difficulties around this. It is very easy to create a small gold cross and hang it on a chain around one's neck. How do you create, visually, an empty tomb? And then, how to miniaturize it, to hang on a chain?

As a church, historically, we get around this by claiming the crucifix (Jesus on the cross) is Jesus' suffering, Good Friday, and the empty cross is the resurrection hope, Easter. Both miss the agony of Holy Saturday and the feelings of entombment, quarantine, isolation. That is why the empty

tomb is so perfect. It reminds us of death and loss, while presenting the defeat of both.

One of the basic truths of my faith is how often I am stuck in Holy Saturday, somewhere between the horror of the crucifixion, which is still a part of the human experience, and the full-throated hope of the resurrection, also a part of the human experience. I want to believe in Easter.

Intellectually I accept the truth of our faith. But my heart struggles. There are days when I have no doubts; none whatsoever. And then, there are those days when Good Friday is just too powerful and the hope of Easter just so elusive.

As I have said, repeatedly in the last few weeks, never have I felt so strongly the feelings that accompany the Great Vigil of Easter as I have in this season of locked-down, locked-up, physical distance isolation. It literally feels as if we have been entombed in our homes. Kept, unnaturally, against our nature, apart; apart from family and friends and community; and therefore, apart, separated from, God.

Once again, I found myself stuck in Holy Saturday, entombed, and challenged to share with you Easter's hope. Like so many of you, if not all of you, I am immobilized by the feelings of not only entombment, but the not knowing what the near future holds. What is life going to be like when we are allowed to leave the tomb? Will we ever again be able to greet our family and friends with a holy hug and a holy kiss?

For over a week now I have sat with the questions of our entombment, looking for the hope of Easter. I read the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. I meditated over the given Gospel account from Matthew, read in this worship

service. And in my search two things of importance showed up, which I share with you now.

The first has to do with the angel's message to Mary and Mary: "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.'" Jesus has left the room. He is no longer entombed. It seems Jesus is still planning on going about doing God's work. He is, after all, headed back to Galilee where it all began. But here is the kicker: the angel tells the women to tell the others to follow Jesus to Galilee. And, in case we might have misunderstood the angel's message, as the women "with fear and great joy" ran to tell the others, they were met by Jesus, who told them to tell the others to follow him to Galilee.

Now, we know from the stories yet to come, Jesus' followers did not have an immediate change of heart. They remained in grief, disbelief, and fear, still entombed. Jesus may have left the tomb and moved on, but they, filled with uncertainty and fear, weren't ready.

In our tradition it was 50 days later, on Pentecost, that they were filled with the Spirit and willing to try to leave the locked rooms of entombment. We are told that Jesus' followers, filled with the Spirit, began to tell the story of Jesus. But their telling wasn't a simple story of crucifixion and resurrection; of being beaten down and rising from the dead. They lived the story of Jesus; lived life as Jesus had taught; following where he had led, and was still leading. Their following Jesus to Galilee in this manner is what made the story real and relevant.

So, the first Easter lesson of 2020 is this: "he is going ahead of you." In these difficult days of isolation and fearful future after the isolation you must keep your focus on the teachings

of Jesus, for he is going ahead of us, leading the way, still today. Both in our entombment now and when the stone is rolled away in the not too distant future, trust in the teachings of Jesus and follow. You don't need to be a biblical scholar for that.

- Don't hoard. Our God is a God of abundance.
- Don't hate. Only love can shine a light in the darkness of the tomb.
- Don't fear. Ours is an awesome God, who walks with us and will see us through all difficulties.
- Share, Serve, Love.

Jesus has left the tomb. He is going before us. Trusting in God and Easter, plan to follow.

There was a second revelation for me in the Easter story. While I truly believe the central symbol of our faith is the empty tomb, it is important to remember the tomb is not completely empty. True, Jesus has left, but the place where he lay, the burial cloth, the angel, not to forget God, are all still there.

So, on this Easter Sunday, when you are feeling especially strong the entombment of isolation and the fear of the coming future, if you find yourself stuck in a Holy Saturday faith, remember God is with you, even in the tomb. When you are ready to follow Jesus, who is going ahead of us, God and the people of God will be with you. And, you will meet Jesus there, for he is risen; risen indeed! Amen.