

28:1-10

Today's two gospel readings present two contrasting scenes. The first tells us of the events immediately following Jesus' death on Good Friday. It's the aftermath of Jesus' death. Dying on a cross was horrible. Crucifixion was a bitter death, an ugly, excruciating death. It was not something people spoke of if they didn't have to. It meant shame, agony, and defeat. That grim reality has made some churches today abandon it and have no visible cross in sight. There is enough pain and suffering in the world and stress in our lives. Who needs a symbol of that? Writer Ann Lamott has said, *"I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the open tomb: everlasting life and basket full of chocolates. Now you're talking."* (Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, p. 160). Maybe some of us sympathize with that feeling.

Yet, of course, we--and she does, too--know the death of Jesus is crucial to our faith. It is *"Christ crucified"* the church proclaims, and the death of Jesus is much more than just about pain and suffering. It is supremely and finally the act of God's holy love for us all. And we must take this death for real--for all of its powerful reality-- if we are to understand the rest of the story, and appreciate the second scene we read in Matthew's Gospel. In fact we need to have some clear details of the first scene to really get and understand the second scene.

As Matthew tells us--and each of the Gospel writers tell it somewhat differently--there are three significant details to observe in this first scene. First, there

were women present. “*Many women*” (27:55) Matthew says were watching Jesus on the cross when he died the men--the disciples--are nowhere nearby. All the gospel writers say this.

The women do not seem as threatened to be identified with Jesus when he is on the cross. True, the consequences of identification with Jesus were more severe for men, they being his official followers. But that the men flee and the women remain, is clear. This corps of women are there when he died. They’re there when Jesus’ body is taken down and put in the tomb. They’ll be there at the tomb early Sunday morning. It’s not they are not afraid. But their love overrules their fears. And so with love and fear they act. And those with Jesus to the last will have the honor of seeing him first.

A second detail concerns Joseph of Arimathea. OK, so here is a man who steps up. After Jesus is dead, Joseph musters his courage to go to the governor Pontius Pilate and ask to bury the body of Jesus. Pilate orders the body be given to him, and Joseph--wealthy enough to own a garden with a private tomb--puts Jesus’ body into it. That Jesus had been put to death officially as a threat to Roman law and rule meant that what Joseph did was not only kind on his part, but courageous. It identified him with Jesus. This part of the story also affirms Jesus died-- “*dead and buried*,” we say in the creeds. The body is entombed, and the tomb is closed with a stone door that rolls into place.

The third thing--and most provocative--is the Saturday morning visit by a delegation of authorities calling on the Roman governor. It’s a quiet Saturday morning. It is still the Jewish Sabbath. The streets are empty. The crowds are gone. The Roman execution squad has finished its work the day before. And the victim is dead and buried.

These establishment men--so persistent for Jesus to die--are not done yet though. These men we know. They are the chief priests and Pharisees. And they are there to do every-thing they can to keep things as they have been. It is their compelling goal to keep their religion as it has been, to keep themselves in their authoritative places, and to preserve the political and religious status quo. So they ask a Roman guard be placed at the tomb of Jesus. They say they are afraid that Jesus' friends will steal the body, announce a resurrection, and thereby upset their political and social/religious positions--their lives as they are, and as they want them. They address Pilate as "lord." Maybe Matthew is saying by this, *"Those who refuse Jesus' lordship, make other lords."* Maybe at some level, they are afraid that what Jesus said to them--what he predicted--would happen--that he would walk out of the tomb and nothing--nothing--would ever be the same again. So Pilate orders the tomb guarded, as if saying, *"Keep Christ in the tomb--if you can."* There is irony here, as someone observed: *"the laughter of God roars through this [part of the story]."* All this, then, is the setting for the next scene. Consider it closely: See the watchful women, the courageous undertaker, and the fearful protectors of the status quo. That sets the stage for what is to come. So now what does Matthew say came?

First, only Matthew among the gospels tells us how the tomb was opened. In the other Gospels, the stone's already been rolled away by the time the women arrive. Here, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive just in time for an earthquake! The other gospels say the women went to finish preparing Jesus' body with spices for burial. But Matthew just says that they *"went to see the tomb"* (vs. 1). As he tells it, it would seem that the women were--with good reason--simply mourners, just wanting to be near

Jesus again, and to pour out their sorrow at the tomb in as much peace and quiet as possible.

Well, peace and quiet was the last thing they got! Matthew's tomb-side scene is easily the most dramatic gospel telling: an earthquake, an angel rolling back the stone, Roman guards shaking in their boots, an angelic message about Jesus going on ahead to Galilee; and most importantly, the interpretive word of the Event: "*[Jesus] is not here; he has been raised...go quickly and tell his disciples.*" Though they were thunderstruck with amazement, these women for sure remembered for the rest of their lives what had happened that morning. The resurrection narratives go back to these genuine memories, told over and over to incredulous friends in the tone of voice of someone saying, "*I know, I know--I could hardly believe it myself! But that's really how it was!*" There is funny thing here, too. Those soldiers there to guard the dead one--says Matthew--themselves became "as dead men," while the dead one is now very much alive! As one scholar wrote, "*Not everyone we think is alive is; not everyone we think is dead is.*" -- Ernst Lohmeyer.

Secondly, these women--these now joy-filled women--who are the first witnesses to both the empty tomb and the Risen Jesus--to see him and to touch him. Mark's Gospel says that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, but no one believed her (Mk 16:11). Luke says that two of the women received instructions from the "*two men in dazzling clothes*" at the tomb that Jesus was risen, and go tell the disciples. When they did, the disciples thought the women--being women--were hysterical--and the disciples--being men--dismissed them (Lk 24:1-11). In John's Gospel, a tearful Mary Magdalene is the first to see and speak to Jesus, when he speaks her name. She tries to touch him--really

*“hold him down”*--and he instructs her not to do so (Jn 20:11-18). But in Matthew, *“Suddenly Jesus met the [women], and said, ‘Greetings!’ -- really “Hi, there!” They came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him,”* (vs. 9). The women want to touch him, and here he allows them to do so. *“Is it really you? Are you really alive? What all has happened?”* were what these moments were certainly about then and there. But there is more.

Look at it! It isn't difficult to understand the mixture of fear and excitement that gripped the women in these events. Of course, we cannot meet Jesus in the same way the women did that morning--as much as we might want. But it is a vital part of Christian belief and experience that we can and should meet Jesus by His Spirit, and know him as we worship him and seek him. That vital relationship with the living Lord is central to what being a Christian in practice means. As an older hymn puts it, *“He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with along life's narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart; You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart.”* Or, if you want it more theologically, the apostle Paul: *“God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us,”* (Rom 5:5).

But we would be misreading the Gospels if we thought the story here is about personal experiences only. The Gospels tell us of the Resurrection as this world--our world, yours, mine--has changed at a profound level. It not only changed the women's and the disciples' lives, but it has--as one writer put it--*“torn a hole in history.”* Or, if you want it this way, the earthquake at the tomb has shaken the whole world forever--it's a world-quake! With wonder, C. S. Lewis says, *“[Jesus] has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the*

*King of Death. Everything is different because he has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation--a new chapter in cosmic history has opened," (Miracles, p. 173).*

Has that door opened for you?

But thirdly, as it pertains to this Gospel Resurrection telling, only Matthew mentions the Roman guards at the tomb. Because we read the last verses of ch. 27, we know why they are there. From the Roman point of view, the guards are there to keep Jesus' disciples from stealing the body--as though those "brave" men were in a mood to do so!--and then proclaim Jesus' resurrection falsely. The Romans are there to prevent fraud. The fact that Matthew tells this part of the story indicates that such charges were made later (Mt 28:11-15). And as Matthew tells it, while the Roman guards at the tomb "*shook and became like dead men*" (vs. 4), the women--being devout Jews with a different way of looking at reality from the pagan soldiers--were not overwhelmed by the angelic appearance. Now likely they had not seen anything like this before, but they had seen Jesus. They had come to know and trust Jesus. They had listened to him. With him, they had been witnesses to the powerful and life-changing events of Jesus. And they had attained a certain spiritual muscularity that enabled them to receive something wonderful and new. Their developing look at the new world dawning around them enabled them to hear the angel's words, "*Don't be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.*" And no wonder they "*left the tomb quickly and with fear and great joy... ran to tell his disciples,*" (vss. 5-8). Here is the new world! They could own that. Do we own that?

But the question for us all, that we must deal with, is this: Do we own it, too? That new reality burst into the world? We must decide if this is the truth in which we

want to live. Is the Risen Jesus my world? Have we received his word to us, even in the simplicity of, “Hi, there!”? I dare say there may be some comfort for some in what the chief priests and Pharisees tried to do. Perhaps keeping Jesus in the tomb, keeping Jesus just a crucified Jesus, having Jesus “just a dying for my sins so I can go to heaven”-Jesus is a nice, safe, controlled religion. It doesn’t require me to change my way of thinking about the world. It doesn’t--or at least maybe we’ve made it such--require me to take seriously the things Jesus taught.

Have we allowed ourselves to collapse into the fears and ways of the world and life we know so well? Are we hold up like the scared disciples, or even the chief priests and Pharisees who just want the religious, political, and social status quo? Or are we really open to what happened that first Easter Morn? Does our world-view allow us--like it did the women--to see new realities and possibilities that only a Risen Reigning Jesus Christ can make happen? Can it be that there has been let loose into the world a power stronger than death, more powerful than Caesar’s legions? A power greater than even our own betrayals and compromises of the full truth of the Gospel of Christ as Lord?

You see, we really have to get out of ourselves to understand this story. In fact, that is what salvation is really about. Getting out of ourselves, getting unlocked from the prisons that are ourselves, and letting the power of the Resurrection unlock all those prison doors. But that won’t happen until we see this story is not about us--at least, not about us first. It is about God and God’s love for us, love in action--love that takes us on, and our battles with sin and death and doubt that takes on the religious status quo we often make for ourselves. This is the story of God who does for us what we can’t do for

ourselves. Therefore the most interesting character in the Easter drama is not the angel at the tomb or scared soldiers. It's not the women who bravely testify and are the first to believe. The most interesting actor is God--who raises the dead and makes a way--a way for us all, if we will have it--when we thought there was no way for us. This is the God, who by raising his Son as Lord and Savior, creates with world-quaking power of a new way, a new "normal," which compared to what we know is anything but.

The point is that God has decisively acted in our--in your--world of reality! What God has done--as Lewis says--is started something new. He has begun a new world and a new kind of human existence promised long ago. It confronted the women then and there and they told the disciples. The disciples were confronted with it--and once they got it--were instructed to tell the good news to the whole world--that "Jesus Christ is Lord."

As Matthew tells it, trumpets are blowing, the earth is quaking, crowds of people are shouting, evil agents--the soldiers and unbelieving priests--are in disarray, and the excitement of it all can hardly be contained. The claim here is NOT that the world is already completely as the Lord Jesus intends it to be. The claim is that he is working to take it from where it was--under the rule not only of death but of corruption, greed, and every kind of evil--and to bring it--by slow means and quick--under the rule of his life-giving love. And how is Jesus doing this? And here is the both the shock and the challenge: He is doing this through us, his followers--you and I, and all who claim to follow Jesus. There is a real and important sense in which Jesus' project of complete rule only goes forward insofar as Jesus' followers, the people he has commissioned, are take it forward. But how well we follow or not, Christ Rules and his way of love will



win.

And so it all comes down to this: The Crucifixion put it up to the Father: Would he stand for this alleged Son of God, Jesus? Would he stand for this man be his clear Word to the world? Would he be a God who, for example, welcomes sinners and failures, and who justifies the ungodly? Would he validate the world challenging ethic of love to love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who persecute you? Would he vindicate him who taught the *“love your neighbor as yourself”* ethic-- that means the Muslim neighbor, the gay neighbor, the non-English-speaking neighbor, and anyone-else neighbor.

The Crucifixion settled Who and What God is, and is like. The Resurrection settled THAT this God is! And both then settled who and what we are, and are to be about. The angel's words to the women were, *“Don't be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.”* And they *“left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...and they ran to tell...”* (vss. 5-8). Will you? Will I? Will we? Amen.