

“There You Will See Him”

An Easter Sunday Message

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 21, 2019

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Matthew 28:1-10

People the world over have been shaken this past week by the images of flames raging atop the Cathedral of Notre Dame. After standing over eight centuries, threatened by peril during the French Revolution and two World Wars, its wooden roof and spire are now gone, with embers and ash covering what has, since the middle ages, been a sanctuary of worship and iconic cultural monument.

As millions do each year, I visited Notre Dame as a tourist during my college years; sat in the pews, climbed its towers, and gazed at the rose windows. So, I know there is a difference between what it looks like, and what it feels like to actually be there. Maybe this helps account for the strong emotional response the fire has generated in France and beyond; and the equally strong promises and commitments that have been made regarding Notre Dame’s rebuilding.

But there was probably something to the timing of this fire as well; the fact that it took place during Holy Week, when Christians around the world are already thinking about life and death; of Jesus’ Easter resurrection coming after the gruesome horror of the crucifixion. In spite of the extensive fire damage, the cross in Notre Dame’s sanctuary remained standing; lending to a narrative of hope that not all was lost; that God was still there in that holy place.

Throughout the span of Matthew’s gospel, which with today’s reading finally reaches its culmination, there have been hints and outright pronouncements that Jesus, God’s Son, the long-awaited Messiah, must die, but that God would not allow death would not have the final word; that the grave would not be able to hold him.

It was tradition among ancient Jews that the dead would be buried in caves, unlike our underground tombs; and not in a casket, but wrapped in a cloth with oils and spices. The body would be placed on a ledge inside the cave and remain there until it had decomposed. At that point, the bones would be gathered and placed in

a box, called an *ossuary*. It would not be uncommon, then, for there to be several bodies on different ledges in the same tomb.¹

Matthew makes it clear in his story of Jesus' burial that the cave where Jesus was laid was a new tomb, there would be no confusion because of other bodies there; and that it was to be made secure by a large stone that was rolled across the entrance. We are also told that Pilate ordered security to guard the tomb; just to make sure nothing got in, and nothing came out.

Two women – the two Marys – who had seen the crucifixion take place from afar, and watch as Jesus was placed into the tomb, arrive as the first day of the week is dawning in order to see the tomb. In the gospel accounts of Mark and Luke, women come to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus for burial, but here, in Matthew, they have no job to do; they only come to see. When they approach the tomb, then, it is with a sense of anticipation, even expectation. If they have followed him from Galilee, surely they heard Jesus say that in Jerusalem he would die and be raised on the third day. So, they come to see...*something*.

As readers of the gospel story, we also have heard these words. When we approach the tomb, we come with a sense of expectation that we are about to see something; and not only see, but also feel something about what it would have been to be there ourselves, like the two women were; and at our core experience something significant, meaningful, maybe even earth-shaking about life and death.

Matthew is the lone gospel writer to include the Earth's shaking – a seismic event – when then two women arrive at the tomb. This is the second quake to take place in the narrative of the Passion; we are told that the earth also shook as Jesus breathed his last on Good Friday; just a few verses prior to where we began this morning's reading. Matthew makes sure that we don't miss the significance of the death and new rising of Jesus. It's not normal event, but something that is meant to shake us to our core.

We all have these earth-shaking moments in our lives. Some of them are experiences of joy: whether at the birth of a child or witnessing awesome beauty or experiencing unexpected grace. Other times, our core is shaken by tragedy, loss or fear: whether because of fire or flood, when the car crash couldn't be avoided or the test results come back.

The women feel the earth's quaking and, ironically, while the one who was dead and buried comes back to life, those who were sent to provide security become frozen like corpses. Just like at Jesus' birth, when the angels came to

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*. Part Two

deliver the message, “Do not fear;” so at his rising to new life, an angel bears the same message for the women. They have come to the tomb that morning, full of anticipation, waiting to see *something*; and now having seen, having been shaken to their core, they need not fear. Having arrived with no job to do, they now are given by the angel something to do: to go and tell the others that “Jesus has been raised, as he said.”

Matthew wants to make sure that we notice these last three little words, “as he said;” because in this gospel, Jesus said so. Three times, he tried to share with his disciples the good news that he would die only to rise again; but they did not pay attention to it, instead betraying and denying him. But the women, the two Marys, had listened, and went to the grave that morning to see, well...we don’t know exactly what they expected to see, but *something*.²

And they are given a job to do by the angel; to go and tell the disciples what they have seen; that what they had heard from Jesus – that after dying he would rise again – has come to pass. As they go to share what they have seen, to do the job they are given to do, that is when they encounter the risen Jesus; the one who is no longer dead in the tomb, but alive and on the road ahead of us as walk our own earthly paths.

I can’t say for you what job you have been given to do. Most likely, it is more than just one job, and they have something to do with those particular times when the earth shook beneath you; whether in a moment of amazing joy or painful loss. It might involve being a care-giver or advocate for another; it may mean striving for justice or reconciliation; it might include some type of self-sacrifice where you realize you gain much more than you gave. For, when the earth quakes, we can either be paralyzed by fear – like the soldiers sent to guard the tomb – or we can anticipate that *something* will come; that God will help us to see what we are meant to see; and to go from there where we are supposed to go.

This, I believe, is the good news of Easter: that the living Jesus can and will meet each of us in the midst of doing what we have been called to do. In those encounters, whether they take place in cathedrals or graveyards, homes, schools or hospitals, Christ awaits us to meet what might seem like defeat with victory, disappointment with hope, death with life. And so often, it is on the way to where we are going that we finally see – both with our eyes and at the core of our being – who and whose we were created to be. AMEN.

² Alyce McKensie, “My Favorite Angel” from *Patheos.com*