

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 9, 2023

Luke 4:11-21
Matthew 28:1-10

Yesterday afternoon I came into the sanctuary here and saw the lilies placed as beautifully as they are this day. It reminded me of a story that Fred Craddock—he's a renowned preacher and professor—used to tell the church where he served for about 15 years before making his way to Atlanta to teach at a seminary there. They had a tradition of lilies on Easter Sunday as well—500 of them. Every single year 500 folks would give five dollars per lily to honor or remember someone that they loved, and the tradition lasted for exactly 15 years and not one day more, because on the 15th Easter Sunday, when the lilies were up front, all 500 of them adorning not only the chancel but also across, one of the parishioners came forward after worship and asked the pastor, “Hey, I have a friend who really is in need of some cheer. Can I take one of these lilies with me and take them to her so she can know that she's connected to the church?” And before the pastor could reply, she kind of walked around him and went and grabbed a lily. It was really light in her hand, and she touched the petal of it, and she turned around to the congregation and exclaimed loudly, “They’re plastic, y'all.” And there began to be a murmur through the congregation. Um, how long had they been plastic? Why did we give you five dollars per lily if they were plastic? Over 15 years, if you do the math, that is 37,500 dollars.

“Preacher, where'd the money go?” “Went to a good cause,” he said. He said, “It went to serve many different people in our community.” But he said, “A while ago we decided plastic lilies were better, actually more appropriate, for the day, because, um, because they endure; they don't pass away after about a week or so; or if neglected they don't go away. They're always in bloom,” he said. “Of course, we don't want to waste the Easter story.” And indeed this day we come once again to this story that's familiar to us. And it is as vital and as important for us to hear anew this day as it has ever been. So my hope is that as we read from the Gospel of Matthew, we might have fresh ears to hear the good news that Christ is sharing with us this day. The Gospel of Matthew, the 28th chapter, beginning in the first verse.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that 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 for you.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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So this is my third Easter here at Idlewild. On February 1st of this year, I celebrated two years service here of ministry in this place. Made me reflect a little bit on what that time has meant and what it's looked like for me personally, but also for us as a church. I remembered that three weeks after I arrived in Memphis, the Lord saw fit to drop eight inches of snow on our Fair City. I called up one of the members of my search committee. I said, "What's this?" He said, "Don't worry; this never happens."

A few months later the alarm started going off at Crosstown where I live, and a voice came over the loudspeaker and told us to...to shelter in place. There were tornadoes in the area. We were all afraid, as our children reminded us this morning. Fortunately, the tornadoes passed, and no one was injured; but I called up that search committee member again, and I said, "What's this?" He said, "Yeah, that...those actually happen more often." And, as if to try to comfort me, he said, "Just be grateful we haven't had an earthquake in a while." I said, "A what?" He said, "Oh, yeah, we're on a fault line actually." I said, "That wasn't in the MIF; that was not in the job description; that was not in what y'all told me." It's not what I imagined when I was moving to the banks of the Mississippi, but I thought about those words, attempted words of comfort this week, as I read this gospel text from Matthew. This is the very end of the Gospel, the last chapter, these final few verses of the story of Jesus through Matthew's voice. Matthew's story differs in a lot of ways from the other accounts of the gospels. Matthew focuses our attention in a couple of particular ways, actually with a couple of small groups of people—the women and the guards.

In the gospel Matthew is telling, the women rose early in the morning. They rose at dawn and made their way to the tomb. But unique to this gospel, they...they didn't go with any particular purpose. They didn't carry with them ointment or fragrances to adorn the body of Jesus Christ there. They weren't going to accomplish a task of any kind. They didn't have that on their minds that day. They were going instead to simply witness, to sit in their grief near the tomb of their friend.

Sometimes we draw close to God not with any particular purpose but because it just feels like it's the right thing to do in the moment.

And then all of a sudden, the Earth begins to move under their feet. Everything begins to shift back and forth, and an angel descends and rolls away a stone. For the Gospel of Matthew the resurrection is a seismic event. The resurrection is an earthquake.

Maybe you know what it feels like for the earth to move under your feet. Minding your business early one morning and the plates of creation begin to rub against each other, unsettling every bit of our foundation.

We'll come back to the women in a bit.

Peculiar and unique in the gospel is...is the appearance of guards, two guards, it seems, that are keeping watch. They're keeping watch over the tomb of a dead man, and they experience the

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same earthquake, the same shifting and turning that the women do, but they react differently. Scripture says that they shook and then they became like dead men. Another way we could imagine it is that they froze in fear.

The quaking Earth scares the seemingly strong and powerful. The quaking Earth scares those for whom the status quo is profitable. They were making money for being there that morning. The quaking Earth under their feet scares those who are privileged as the guards were, protected as they were; and through the guards Matthew does this unique thing in the gospels. Matthew draws our attention to the power of Resurrection over and against the imperial and political powers of the world. That's what the guards represented in the Gospel of Matthew. And why were they there? Jesus is dead after all, isn't he? Their very presence in this gospel betrays their belief in the power of love at work in the world.

They knew of Jesus and his power. To paraphrase Justin Jones, if Christ was not powerful they would not have guarded the tomb. Powers and principalities fear Resurrection because they know that it exposes their own power as false. It exposes the impotence of the empire. The Resurrection makes the powerful freeze and shrug their shoulders and say something like we're not going to fix it.

The women and the guards that are presented in this gospel account, they ask a question of us. The gospel focuses our attention on them in order that we might ask, "What do we do with our fear?"

Frederick Buechner helped us center ourselves this morning, and it's one of my favorite quotes of his. He says, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

It's a good response to...to fear, acknowledging it and then hearing the words of first the angel and then Jesus. "Do not be afraid." And I've heard this quote a hundred times, but I hadn't heard the last sentence of it. "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things have happened. Don't be afraid. I am with you." That is what Buechner wrote.

There's something about the very presence of the Divine in our midst that is supposed to unlock something within us so that when we ask ourselves "What do we do with our fear," we can pay attention, first to the guards who freeze with the quaking and then to the women, who scripture does not say don't fear. They do, but what they also do is they wrap that fear in great joy, and they continue moving forward. That's what the women do. The women are still expectant, even in their fear, of the God of all creation being at work in them and in the world.

And the angel speaks to these women. "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised." Just like he said he was going to be raised. Come, you don't believe me? Take a look. This is where they laid him, but after you see this, go quickly. This news is not meant just for you; it is for the disciples as well. Carry it with you. Tell them that he has been raised from the dead, and not just that but he's actually

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going ahead of you to Galilee. And then this five word phrase, “There you will see him.” “There you will see him.”

The angel is saying that even in the midst of the shaking of our foundations, there is a place where we will glimpse the Risen Christ.

And so the women wrap their fear up in great joy, and they begin to make their way; and here is what I love. They haven't made it a few steps away from the tomb when Jesus appears to them. “Greetings.” he says, simply greetings. And they recognize him immediately, and they take hold of his feet and they begin to worship him. Love can't wait until Galilee. Love has to make love's way to the women immediately. When they have moved forward in faith, even in fear, but also joy, love meets them on their journey. This is good news to them, but here's the...the good news of Easter. This is a key point for us this morning. The good news of Easter for us is this proclamation is both public and personal. We need it to be true in both spheres of our lives because we know what it's like to have the earth move under our feet, to have our foundation shaken, to know brokenness and violence and hurt, to know worry and anxiety and even fear.

But the good news of Easter is as people of faith, we are called to fervently proclaim against all evidence to the contrary that there is a different way that is possible, a different way that is not only possible but is actually the power of God at work in the world. Our world has been shaken, and just like an earthquake, it can't be put back to how it was before. That's the thing about an earthquake.

And while the powerful shake and freeze, while the powerful deny and admit their own powerlessness, we are called as people of faith to claim that God is still at work, that there is a different way. We are to carry that news to the disciples, but also to all people, to say that where you find joy and where you find grace and where you find, yes, even peace, there you find Christ.

But the good news isn't just public, it's also personal, and here is the tricky part.

You might have come to this Sanctuary this day not expecting very much of anything. Lord knows the women did. The women were not task oriented that morning. They just decided they needed to show up. And what they found when they got there was a stone being rolled away, and the Earth shaking underneath them, and the good news that they couldn't have ever imagined. The tricky part for me as a preacher this morning is I'm not sure what tomb you are approaching this day. Maybe it's divorce or a new diagnosis; maybe your tomb is emotional; maybe it's physical. Maybe it looks like addiction or it feels like abandonment; maybe it's anxiety over getting into college or finishing up school. Maybe you're wondering if you'll get a job or ever own a house or pay the bills next month.

I don't know how the ground has shaken and is shaking under your feet, but I do know this.

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On this day we claim as people of faith that Resurrection is actually earthquake, that it feels like our foundations moving underneath us, that it looks like things never going back to the way that they once were. That it can overwhelm us with true fear.

And in claiming that we also claim this. We claim what the angel told the women. We claim that he is not here, that he has been raised just like he said he would be. And not just that but that he is going ahead of you. "There you will see him," the angel says.

And that's good news, because it means that wherever you are moving in this time, whatever the rest of the story looks like for you, whatever tomb you have approached, whatever journey you have to take from this point forward, God is going ahead of you. No road that you have traveled or will that Christ has not already sojourned through.

If you don't see him, you're not there yet.

Because the gospel promise that Matthew proclaims is that he is going ahead, and there we will see him. So, beloved, on this Easter morning I pray that as the ground moves under our feet, we might not be frozen, we might not stand like dead men, but we might be called collectively and personally to wrap our fear with a good measure of joy, and to carry it with us. And maybe, just maybe, along that journey, Christ might interrupt us, greet us in that place and let us know that there we will see him.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.