

Easter Eyes

Matthew 27:57 – 28:10

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When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

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; 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 worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

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It’s easy to get lost on Easter Sunday. There’s a lot going on. It’s pretty crowded – and crowded with many sharply dressed people...many of whom broke out the seersucker and white shoes. There are Easter eggs. Easter bunnies. Butterflies. Sunrise services. My guess is a few of us in this room have plans for lunch. There is brass. The choir is especially magnificent. This sermon has to be short enough for those in our television congregation to hear the Hallelujah Chorus before our broadcast goes off the air.

And then there is the story.
I'm sure you've heard it before.
Each of the gospels has an account of that first Easter morning. But have you noticed that each of those accounts is a little different?

You might think that is strange.

In the gospel of Mark, the women who were come to the tomb find it empty, hear from an angel that Jesus has been raised, and they run away and don't tell anyone because they are afraid.

In Luke's gospel the women do tell someone – the disciples – but no one but Peter believes them. They think this story about the resurrection is an idle tale.

John's gospel just has one woman – Mary Magdeline – in the scene – and she meets a man in the garden who she doesn't recognize as Jesus until he calls her by name.

In the gospel of Matthew, the women (two Marys this time) experience an earthquake, and then encounter Jesus (whom they do recognize) before going to tell the disciples what happened.

There's a lot going on.
It's easy to get lost.
And it's even easy to get distracted.

The simple truth is that we are incapable of comprehending how significant Easter is.
For Jesus to willingly lay down his life to show the depth of his love for a people who betrayed and denied him?
For one who was fully human and fully divine to experience the bitterness of death and the hell of separation from God?
For God to act beyond the natural order and claim victory over sin and death by raising Jesus to life?
 We don't have the capacity to comprehend it.
 We don't have the language to explain it.

And yet – too often we get caught up...lost even...in the good news of Christ's resurrection by trying to prove or understand what happened on that early morning at the empty tomb.

Poke around and you can find thousands of sermons or articles or books or Bible study lessons that take the Easter story and attempt to explain away the mystery of God's action by forcing the story into categories that make more sense to our modern minds. Or, the other side of the coin, you can also find thousands of sermons or articles or books or Bible study lessons that are so focused on proving the historical fact of Jesus' bodily resurrection that they miss the point of why God

raised Jesus in the first place, not to mention what the implications are for a resurrection faith.

There's just so much more to Easter than whether or not we can understand or prove how it happened.

I'm reminded of a poem by Updike:

*It was not as the flowers,
each soft spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles:
it was as His flesh: ours . . .*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages . . .*

*Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty . . .*

Let us walk through the door.¹

That's what Easter is about – it is about walking through the door – into the reality of what your life and this world are like because of Easter.

What may surprise you is that nowhere in the Bible is there a verse that provides us an account of when Jesus' resurrection happened. You can look – you won't find it. Oh, you'll find angels...messengers who relay the message. You'll find some women – Mary among them – who heard from the angels about what happened. But the Bible doesn't pay too much attention to the mechanics of resurrection. What the Bible is more interested in is the appearance of the living Christ – and how encountering the living Christ can bend the world from what we have come to expect into what God has always intended it to be.

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Mary Magdalene and the other Mary knew what to expect. They had been there to see what happened to Jesus. They were there to see Jesus being crucified. They saw Pilate give Joseph of Arimathea Jesus' body. They saw Joseph lay Jesus' body in the tomb. They saw the tomb sealed with a great stone. As night falls on the evening of Jesus' death, the last image we have is that of the two Marys sitting opposite the tomb.

¹ John Updike, "Seven Stanzas for Easter" (Collected Poems: 1953 – 1993)

At sunrise on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary head back to the tomb. Matthew is very careful to tell us why. In other gospels, the women head to the tomb on what turns out to be Easter morning with spices and oils to anoint Jesus' body. In Matthew, however, the Mary and Mary go to the tomb in order to see.

The Marys went to see the tomb for the same reason we visit graveyards or columbariums – to pay respects, to grieve, to speak words that we meant to share when our loved one was alive...and to accept that death is final. But when they arrived at the tomb, what Mary and Mary saw reoriented them to a new reality that changed everything.

Instead of death – they saw life.
Instead of suffering – they saw joy.
Instead of brokenness – they saw healing.

And when they encountered the living Christ, he told them to go and tell the disciples to go Galilee – to the place where they had lived and worked together – because there they would see him.

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I wonder if Mary and Mary realized that Jesus had been training them to see all along.

As my friend Kimberly Clayton observes, “Throughout his time with them, Jesus had been teaching his disciples to see...to see the world differently from the way most people saw it and lived it. Jesus showed them the world of the Beatitudes, where the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, the hungry and the persecuted turn out to be the blessed ones. He showed them a world where people did not exchange an eye for an eye, but offered a cloak to the one who just stole your coat. He showed them a world where loving your neighbor is right, but loving your enemy is necessary. He showed them the world God intends, where diseases are healed and storms do not sink boats. He showed them active faith that knows no fear. Jesus showed them that even swords and high priests and false witnesses and denials do not have the last word.”²

All along the way, Jesus had been showing Mary and Mary how to walk through the door – how to open their eyes to a world that is not defined by hate or division or death or sin or exclusion or violence or oppression or injustice.

And when they finally realized what it meant to see the world through the eyes of the God who loved it so much – they were overwhelmed. They were filled with both

² Kim Clayton, *Journal for Preachers* (Easter, 2008)

great joy and fear. And along with the disciples they told about their encounter with the living Christ, they began to spread the good news about how God's vision for this world is more than the things we have learned to settle for or come to expect.

If you think about it, that is part of why you are here this morning – because the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning learned from our risen Lord how to see the world differently – and they trusted God enough to tell other people about it.

You've heard the story.

And I don't know what you expect when you look out at the world.

I know what I've seen: I've seen politics that hiss, terrorists that incite fear and death, hospital rooms that are filled with worry, parents who are scared for their children, prejudice that hurts...and that's just this week.

But I'll tell you what else I've seen: I've seen the power of prayer, I've seen hope spring up like a flower after winter, I've seen the groundswell of love counteract the temptation to fear...and that's just this week, too.

I don't know if you have decided to settle for the kind of world defined by the limits of our sin and brokenness. I'll admit that there are times when I find it hard not to.

But our God is bigger than that...our God is not limited by the constraints of what we think is possible or reasonable.

Because Christ is risen.
The tomb is empty.
The stone is rolled away.

So let us walk through the door – training our eyes to see the world as God sees it: redeemed, brimming with possibility, abounding in hope.

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*O God of the empty tomb,
Easter our eyes to see beyond this broken world to a vision of your
kingdom.
Easter our minds to imagine possibilities for hope beyond our
understanding.*

*Easter our faith, that we might have courage to live as your people as we follow
the One who was dead, but is now alive.*

The One in whom we – and the world – find our salvation.

Alleluia! Amen.