First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

4/9/23

Great Expectations

Matthew 28:1-10

**The Resurrection of Jesus**

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

I saw a meme on Facebook, the other day, describing an imaginary conversation between Pilate and Joseph of Arimathea. And the conversation went something like this:

Pilate says to Joseph of Arimathea, “Joseph, you’re the richest man around and you’ve spent a fortune on that new tomb for your family!” “Why did you let Jesus use it?” Joseph replies, “Well, it’s only for the weekend!”

You’ll notice that I used a different version of the Resurrection narrative than what was printed in today’s bulletin, and that wasn’t by accident. Over the course of my preaching career, I’ve had the opportunity to preach on all four of the passages, which record Jesus’ Resurrection and, while the Lectionary called for John’s version today, honestly I tend to prefer the way the writer of Matthew describes this event, so that’s the passage I’ve chosen to use.

At Bible study, last Tuesday, we took time to compare all four versions of this event, and there are some significant differences in the way the authors tell this old, old story. Differences such as the number of women who came to the tomb that morning, or whether the stone was rolled away or not, when the women arrived, or were the angels inside or outside the tomb. Other differences include the number of angels, and whenever or not Peter and John make an appearance. It truly is enough to make people’s heads spin; I mean, really, in describing the most important event in Christianity, you’d think the writers would have been able to agree on what exactly happened.

So, maybe this is a good time to remind you that the writers of all four of the synoptic Gospels, lived some 50 to 70 years after Jesus’ resurrection, making it unlikely that they witnessed what happened, first hand. Also, they were writing for very different audiences, and, add to that, the stories of the resurrection had been handed down through an oral tradition. So taking all of that into account, it’s not surprising that there’s four different versions to consider.

The writer of Matthew’s gospel was writing for an uneducated, mostly rural, Jewish audience, and his goal was to convince his readers that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. That’s why, when you’re looking at Matthew, you’ll find Jesus’ genealogy, linking him to the great King David, as well words that connect Jesus’ life and ministry to the ancient prophecies proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. Of course, Mark, Luke and John also had the same goal of convincing their very different audiences of the divine nature of Jesus, and they all wrote in such a way that would resonate with their particular readers.

When you get down to the basics, there are a couple of things that all four writers include in their narratives. One, Jesus was indeed resurrected. He’s not where anyone expected him to be. The second point that shines through all of the various mentions of angels and earthquakes and foot races, is the central role played by women. All four writers make it very clear that women, and specifically Mary Magdalene, are the first witnesses to the resurrection, as well as the first evangelists, and are critical to getting the word out.

There’s another thing that all four narratives share and that’s the command to the women to go and tell the disciples what they had witnessed. I think this is significant because these women are given the opportunity to participate in a way that was counter cultural. Women of this time were, at best, second class citizens. They had no power, they had no authority, they had no control over their own lives. They were entirely dependent on their husbands, brothers and sons for everything. They were little more than property.

So, in verse 10, when Jesus commands Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, … “To go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me,” he’s offering them a chance not only participate in sharing the good news of his resurrection, but he’s also offering them the chance to experience a resurrection moment of their own. All of a sudden, these lowly women, who had no power, no position, nothing, were given the authority, by Jesus himself, to preach the good news to men. All of a sudden, these second-class citizens, were elevated to prophet status. Not exactly the way the disciples expected to hear about Jesus’ resurrection, to be sure. But this is consistent with the entirety of Jesus’ ministry, isn’t it? Scripture is filled with examples of Jesus choosing to work through the marginalized and the outcast to spread the good news.

Too often, I think we see the resurrection as an event that happened 2,000 years ago; something we think of as a one and done type of situation. We know it happened, and it has changed all of our lives forever, thanks be to God. We believe that as a result of Jesus’ resurrection, we too will be raised up at the last day. That said, is it possible that we, right here and now can experience the type of resurrection moments I believe the women at the tomb experienced? I think so.

The key to experiencing resurrection moments in the here and now, is found in Jesus’ command to the women not to be afraid and to go and tell. I believe, in that moment, Jesus was asking the women to partner in the act of resurrection.

I talk quite a bit about being God’s hands and feet in our world, which is vital to my understanding of what we, as followers of the risen Christ, are called to do. But let’s look at that piece from a different perspective. Yes, we are indeed called to put our faith into action by following Christ’s teachings to create a world where captives are freed and good news is given to the poor. But what happens when we turn that around and think of how we might be changed, when we are active participants in the creation of such a world?

I believe that when we are willing to let go of our biases and prejudices, when we are willing to overcome our fear and speak truth to power, in order to bring about God’s Kingdom here on earth, when we are willing to risk the scorn of others to make our world more just and fair for all, I believe we are following the call to partner with God and experience resurrection moments.

Why? Because by stepping outside of ourselves and by remembering that Jesus wasn’t sacrificed just for a few, but for all of humanity, our perspectives shifts, our vision becomes clear, and our own lives become changed forever. When that happens, becoming God’s hands and feet in the world, becomes a two-way street where not only are the lives of our neighbors, our families, and our communities changed, but our lives are transformed as well.

We have the opportunity to experience our own resurrection moments every day. We have the opportunity to use those moments to turn from the despair of the cross into the blessed assurance of new life, in our risen Savior, so my question is this: Where in your life, do you experience resurrection moments? And, equally important, when you experience those resurrection moments in your life, what do you do with the joy and excitement that comes with the realization that those moments are happening right here and right now?

Folks, on this glorious Easter morning, remember that the tomb is empty, Jesus is indeed risen. The resurrection happened and we rest in the assurance that we will experience it ourselves, at some point in the future. But remember this too, resurrection moments happen each and every day to each and every one of us, if we are willing to seize the opportunity.

AMEN