

April 5, 2015 (Easter)

TEXT: Matthew 28:1–20

TITLE: The Extraordinary & the Ordinary

Ladies and gentlemen: It's time to present "the Easter sermon"—that once-a-year offering of preaching pyrotechnics, guaranteed to captivate a capacity crowd and perhaps entice you to return again next Sunday. That's the pep talk I gave myself as I strode to my desk and prepared to write this message. I pulled out my bible, a fresh sheet of paper and a new pen (blue ink). I checked to make sure I had plenty of illustrations to spice up my content: some material from Marilynne Robinson, sermon helps from great preachers like Will Willimon and Barbara Brown Taylor, and in case of emergency a couple of jokes. For the biblical material, I had chosen an entire chapter—20 verses of scripture—the climax of Matthew's whole gospel. I was positive there would be great stuff there about the wonderful, amazing, extraordinary day of Christ's resurrection.

The passage started out well. Early in the morning, two women made their way to the tomb. They're sympathetic figures, doing what's expected of them despite being downhearted and filled with grief. We've all been there, so people can relate to them. Next comes an earthquake. Excellent! Special effects and we're only in the second verse of the passage! An angel flashes in like a bolt of lightning, rolls back the stone and sits on it. Next I read about guards passing out from fear just as the angel is about to deliver the first Easter speech ever spoken—when I realize I'm stuck on a detail back in the previous verse. Why is the angel sitting on the stone? Shouldn't it hover in the air dramatically? Or stand on the ground in shining raiment guarding the entrance to the empty tomb? An angel sitting on the stone, dangling its feet, seems so anti-climatic.

I shake off my concern and keep reading. The women see Jesus, but frankly not a lot happens in that conversation. Then there's a section about the guards being paid off to tell everyone Jesus' body was stolen. It's interesting material, but honestly we're all a bit jaded about political corruption and bribe money. At last we get to the final paragraph where the risen Lord appears to his disciples. But even that is a fairly quiet event. No poetic pronouncements or florid speeches about God's power being revealed to the whole universe—just low-keyed instructions to go into the world, teach, baptize, and trust that Jesus is with them always. Sure, it's good stuff, but will it preach on Easter?

I keep coming back to that great big stone blocking the entrance to Jesus' tomb that the angel rolls away and sits down upon as if to say, "What do you think of that?" It's like the angel wanted to get our attention and have a laugh at our expense at the same time. It reminds me of a man who got caught in a camera speed trap. He received in the mail a picture of himself driving his car and a traffic ticket for \$40. Feeling a bit cheeky, the man mailed back to the traffic court a photograph of two \$20 bills. That was fine until a few days later he received

another official envelope, this time containing a photograph of handcuffs. He paid his traffic fine.

Our expectation is that the resurrection of Jesus is a big event, so we imagine things unfolding like in a Hollywood script. Body buried behind a huge stone—check. Guards in the cemetery—check. A spectacular resurrection moment full of shock and awe in a good sense—not quite. Our trying to write the Easter script so that it makes sense to us has about as much value as a photocopy of two \$20 bills. Here's what you need to realize—the angel didn't roll back the stone to let Jesus out of the tomb. Jesus had already been resurrected. He's already gone. Stones and guards are no longer an issue for Jesus. He's been raised and he now moves in our world differently, appearing on the road or behind locked doors, unbound from limits of space and time yet with us until the end of the age. The angel only rolled away the stone so that the women could see the tomb was empty. The angel likely had to suppress a laugh at our limited understanding; so to point out the silliness of trying to use a stone to contain the Son of God, the angel sat on it. Don't forget: Easter is fundamentally a time of joy and laughter—the one who was dead is now alive! The tomb couldn't hold Jesus. Stones—why they're nothing more than angelic footstools. On Easter, the miraculous is revealed amidst these mundane, laughable, wonderful details—so let us rejoice!

Having already mentioned that there were armed guards at the tomb, Matthew, the good storyteller, goes on to describe what happened next with them—how they ran into town, met with the temple leaders and told them that Jesus' tomb was empty. If an angel sitting on top of a stone is unexpected and whimsical, this cluster of conspirators concocting alibis is far too common and not very funny at all. Preacher Will Willimon commented that it was an unusual moment in history when you had to pay people to disbelieve in the resurrection.¹ Given today's skeptical society, it is intriguing to imagine having to bribe folks to do then what is far too common now. Another preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor points out that not every soldier at the tomb joined in with this conspiracy.² Scripture says "some of the guard went and told the chief priests everything that had happened." Whom did the other guards tell about what they saw? How were they changed by Easter morning? Don't forget, the first person to name the crucified Jesus as the Christ was the centurion standing near the cross, who commented after Jesus breathed his last, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mt 27:54).

Again, we may have hoped for something more dramatic here. Jesus has been raised from the tomb. The world is different! But the first worldly thing we hear about involves frightened men huddled like boys in a secret clubhouse working out their alibi in nervous whispers. They decide to say that the body was stolen. Money changes hands as an added incentive. Yet outside their door, angels sat on stones, kicking their legs and laughing with joy. Other soldiers told their wives and children what they saw that morning in the cemetery, and how this Jesus was truly someone special. At the same time, the women disciples saw the resurrected Lord, heard his voice, and ran ahead to roll away stones burdening

the hearts of other disciples back in the city. On Easter, the miraculous burst forth out of the mundane; the heavenly overwhelmed all that was unholy—so let us rejoice!

The author Marilynne Robinson reminds us that we often get the meaning of Easter backwards. We look to the resurrection to explain everything about Jesus. We point to the empty tomb, the folded burial cloths, the angel messengers and loudly announce, “See, because of this extraordinary miracle, Jesus too is extraordinary and part of the greatest story ever told.” So we talk about Easter with preaching pyrotechnics to capacity crowds. We combine Easter with 100,000 colored eggs and photos with Disney princesses on church lawns. But Robinson reminds us not to look at the resurrection to understand who Jesus was; instead she would have us clearly look at Jesus—the teacher, healer, friend of outcasts, the innocent one crucified on a cross—and then imagine what would a resurrection of this Jesus look like.³ It wouldn’t involve celestial fireworks. It wouldn’t involve sonic booms or shock and awe. As Robinson eloquently put it, *“Splendor is very well for youths and angels, but when Jesus takes up again for a little while the life he had wept to leave, it is the life of a plain man.”* In a real way, that’s precisely how the bible describes it: In Matthew’s gospel, the one for whom the women mourned at the cross meets them again in the cemetery yard. In John’s gospel, the one no longer confined in the tomb is mistaken for a gardener until he calls Mary Magdalene by name. In Luke’s gospel, the one for whom the disciples grieved suddenly strolls up beside two of them walking to Emmaus. And later, after counting heads for supper and coming up with 11 guests to feed, they decide to count a second time and this time the total is 12, for Jesus, the risen Christ, is now, inexplicably, wondrously, in their group. On Easter, the miraculous is known in the midst of the mundane; the extraordinary is revealed through the ordinary.

I could do you no greater disservice than to emphasize the Easter Jesus at the expense of the everyday Christ. We need to start with the Jesus of the gospels, the One who blessed children, healed lepers, called women equals and fishermen leaders and all of us meek, poor, confused souls blessed. And then we are to ask, “What would his resurrection look like?” The details of what happened behind the stone don’t need to be reported. The plotting of guards and false councils don’t amount to a hill of beans. The One who was dead is now alive, going before us. All else falls away as we carry this message to every corner right here and around the world—as we baptize and splash water and lift out of darkness every wounded spirit—as we teach and dream and do our best to love one another as Christ loved us—and in all these everyday things, the risen Savior will be with us: the miraculous now transforms the mundane, the extraordinary now redeems the ordinary.

And through it all, if we listen closely, what’s that we hear but the sound of angels, clapping and kicking their legs and laughing, sitting on useless cemetery stones all over the world. Thanks be to God.

¹William Willimon, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew 28:11-15, Pastoral Perspective, p. 362.

² Ibid., Barbara Brown Taylor, Homiletical Perspective, pp. 365, 267.

³ Marilynne Robinson, The Death of Adam, "Psalm Eight", pp. 238-9.