

“Swift Witnesses of Good News”

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4-4-21 Easter Sunday

Based upon Mal. 3:5-6; Matt. 27:57-28:15

Last week on Palm Sunday, I talked about how we need to make sure that evil doesn't get the last word in our world. Today we see why, even when it feels otherwise, it is impossible that it could. Although the crowds with their fickle allegiances and the authorities with their jealousy and evil intentions carried the day after Jesus rode into Jerusalem; although they whipped him and beat him, nailed him to a cross and made a mockery of everything he stood for; although they killed him, put his broken body in a tomb, and sealed it shut with a giant boulder, their “NO!” to Jesus and his good news was not the last word. Christ was raised, and with his rising offered the world a resounding, transforming cosmic “YES!” that no evil has ever or will ever be able to silence. God's “Yes” will always be the last word. “Yes!” to love. “Yes!” to forgiveness. “Yes!” to hope and life triumphing over death. “Yes!” to new life and new beginning. “Rejoice!” the risen Christ told the women who came to the tomb, (not simply “Greetings” as the NRSV records.) “Rejoice! For the God of love and justice has had the last word, and always will.” So, we do rejoice today and every day because Christ is risen! Evil and death will not ultimately win. Thanks be to God forever!

All four gospels record this good news in their own ways to make sure that we know what happened. They don't all agree on the details, but that's okay because the good news is less about those details than it is about the wondrous miracle to which they point, and upon which they do agree: The Resurrection. Matthew's version, which we heard this morning, is great for modern Christians, I think, who come to the empty tomb with more than a little bit of post-Enlightenment cynicism and skepticism in their hearts about what it all means because Matthew, more than the other gospel writers, tells the story as if he has something to prove. He did. When he was writing his gospel, about 50 years after the Resurrection, there were rumors going around that Jesus wasn't raised; his body had just been stolen and hidden. “Smoke and mirrors,” “Total nonsense,” some people were saying, not unlike what some people still say today. In order to make it clear that evil's power was no match for God's power, therefore, like a good litigator shoring up his case, Matthew offered a wide variety of witnesses in his story.

First, he records two women coming to the tomb, not just Mary Magdalene. *Two* witnesses were required by Jewish law in order for any claim to be considered legitimate. (Deut. 19:15). Then he adds some hostile witnesses in the form of authorities who were actually worried because they remembered Jesus saying that he would rise again after three days. Hostile witnesses are great because if they actually testify to your point, they are highly credible because it is against their own interest. “Go and make the tomb as secure as you can,” Pilate tells the contingent that comes asking for some troops to guard the tomb. The authorities weren't concerned that Jesus would actually rise; they were concerned that someone would steal the body and say that he had. They also thought that guards and a huge stone would rule out that possibility. (Incidentally, the non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* adds that the tomb was also sealed with seven seals just for good measure.) Then Matthew adds the guards themselves as false

witnesses, making it clear that they were paid to lie after their humiliating defeat at the tomb by the angel. Finally, to highlight the power of God and demonstrate the absurdity that the forces of evil thought they could ever make something secure against God's intervention, Matthew adds an earthquake, and describes how the angel moved the impossibly heavy stone and sat upon it as if it was no more of an obstacle to God than one of those Styrofoam boulders Hollywood uses. Once the tomb was opened, it was clear to the women, the angel, and the guards that it was already empty. For someone to have taken the body, he or she would have had to transport it magically through multiple feet of solid rock. "Still believe the rumors?" Matthew says with his version of the story. "Who's the one being unrealistic now?"

Now since some of the details that Matthew adds about the authorities don't quite make sense historically, and since he is the only one who records guards and rumors and payoffs and such, most scholars assume that Matthew was just embellishing the original story a bit in order to silence the naysayers from his time. He was anticipating and responding to issues he encountered, more than recording like a reporter exactly what happened in Jesus' day. Because of this fact, if there were a lawsuit about the Resurrection today, modern lawyers would probably describe Matthew as a "swift witness," a pejorative term used to describe someone who is so zealous and partial to the side for which has been called to testify that he betrays his bias by his readiness to answer questions, or volunteer information. In other words, modern lawyers would argue that Matthew, by embellishing facts and revealing his bias, ended up doing the very thing he was trying to prevent, making the Resurrection seem less credible.

But we don't do ourselves or the world any favors if we approach the Resurrection thinking this way because it has never been an event the veracity of which can be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt to satisfy non-believers. No one witnessed the actual Resurrection. It is an event that cannot be understood from a scientific or legal perspective, but only through the lens of faith. That doesn't mean that it did not happen, however. Hundreds of people witnessed the risen Christ. Millions and billions of people through the ages have had their lives and their world view transformed by his rising. It is their testimony which is the basis of our faith, their zeal, which has never waned over time despite periods of extreme persecution, which makes the truth of Easter evident. The truth of the Resurrection cannot be successfully litigated, but the impact of it is real. Its truth has been, and must be lived, for it is in the living of it that God's goodness, mercy, and love get the last word.

"Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,'" the angel told Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who was most likely Jesus' mother. Here in *Matthew*, we see the value of "swift witnesses" of another kind. In Mark's Gospel the women are too frightened by what they have seen to tell anyone, and in *Luke* and *John*, the disciples don't believe them when they do. But in *Matthew*, the women clearly did as they were told; they went quickly, told their story, and must have done so persuasively because the next thing we know they and all the disciples are in Galilee, where the risen Christ told them he would meet them. I wish Matthew had told us exactly what the women said, but it's probably just as well that he didn't because then we would be focused on their words, instead of their behavior and zeal, which I suspect is what was really convincing. They behaved as those who had seen the risen Lord! They behaved as those who had experienced personally that even when it seems like all is

lost it's not over until God says it's over. It was their hope, joy, courage, and conviction that made the news real for the others.

This is "swift witnessing" biblical style. While the modern court system may use that term negatively, in the Bible it's nothing but good because that is the way that God promised to witness. "God will come as a swift witness," the prophet Malachi tells the Israelites in today's Old Testament lesson. God will "speak out zealously against those who oppress hired workers, neglect widows and orphans, refuse hospitality to foreigners, and offer false witness." With eagerness, God will testify on behalf of those the world oppresses and marginalizes, and against the forces of evil because regardless of what humanity does or doesn't do, God will always be biased in favor of justice, righteousness, and love. Gleaning from this text, Jewish commentaries deduce that a "swift witness" is someone who is a passionate, reliable, and persistent witness who does not crumble under cross-examination. A swift witness is someone who both proclaims the truth about what he sees and is willing to participate actively in living out the implications of that truth.

Since this is the kind of testimony that Jesus offered consistently and faithfully, testimony that was against evil and biased in favor of God's love, forgiveness, and grace, many have argued that he was the divine swift witness about whom Malachi prophesied. But that doesn't mean that there is no more need for such witnesses in our world; quite the contrary. Now more than ever we need to join Jesus in witnessing to the truth the Resurrection proclaims: God is more powerful than evil. Love is more powerful than hate. Sin and death are no match for God's mercy. We can still have a future with hope, despite the evidence to the contrary. We can live in a world with justice and peace. This isn't pie in the sky thinking, it is truth grounded in Jesus' rising. As God raised him from the dead, so God can raise us into a new and better life, now and well as in the hereafter.

The late great preacher Peter Gomes put it this way. He said, "The evidence that Christ has risen is a transformed Easter People.... The evidence of Easter is a reconfigured Easter people, people who are no longer afraid of the dark, people who dare to live by their affections and not by their fears, people who know that they need not die in order to truly experience resurrection living... people who fear neither death nor life. In short, people such as you and me [sic] who aspire to be people like that. We are the Easter people for death, in all of its cynical, calculating, greedy ways, no longer has control over us. We have a better idea, we claim a greater truth, we live because we are loved; and because we are loved, we can live."¹

I agree with the first part, that we are called to be Easter people, and especially with the last part, that because we are loved by a God who is more powerful than anything in the universe we can live. But I must confess that even though I aspire to be an Easter person, I still sometimes struggle with the middle part; you know, the part about not being afraid of the dark, and not being afraid of death, and living by your affections not your fears. Maybe you do too? We are only just beginning to climb out of a very difficult stretch of human history that has been

¹ As quoted on the bulletin of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, April 16, 2006; <https://www.fourthchurch.org/bulletins/200641606b.pdf>, citing Gomes, Peter, *What We Forgot to Tell You*, (Cambridge: Memorial Church Harvard University, 2003).

characterized predominantly by fear, darkness, and death. We have lost the sense of security we once had. We have lost the trust, and for some, even the hope. Given these circumstances, the problem with Easter is not that we lack objective evidence of a Resurrection that happened 2,000 years ago, it's that many of us aren't quite convinced in our hearts that it makes any difference to our lives today even if it did happen. Christ is risen! Yes, but that doesn't mean the pandemic is finally over, or that George Floyd will get justice, or that Asian Americans will be stop being attacked, or that all GLBTQ people will be properly valued, or that everyone will find the work, food, medical attention, and love they need any time soon. How can we be swift witnesses for others if we ourselves still struggle to feel the truth of the Resurrection in our hearts?

I don't have a quick fix for this kind of disease created by our living so long after Jesus was raised and in the circumstances such as we do. But I think if you're feeling iffy about the truth of the Good News, it does help to go back to *Matthew*. Matthew's version of the Resurrection story speaks to our circumstances as well as his. It is all about power and security. In the beginning, evil has all of the power, and the followers of Christ having lost all of their security. The powers of evil then stack the deck even further. As if it's not enough that Jesus is dead and buried, they add guards in front of the tomb, determined to hold onto their power forever. But just when it seems like all hope is lost, everything in the story flips and suddenly evil's attempts to make everything "as secure as possible" are a joke, and two powerless women find themselves holding the feet of more power than they can imagine, feeling more secure than anyone else on the planet. They see that God couldn't be stopped by a little rock and a few soldiers stuck on cemetery duty. God couldn't be stopped by a cross either. "Do you see how this changes everything?" Matthew says to his readers with this story. It doesn't matter whether or not he added the guards to make evil look even worse. We know that life adds guards like that all the time. The truth that Matthew wanted us to take away is that no matter how bad it looks, evil can't ultimately win. Christ has been raised! God has both the power and the desire to change us and the world for the better and cannot be stopped. Our security rests not on the absence of darkness or fear or death, not on the absence of guards and lies, but on the presence of the risen Christ in our lives. His presence with us changes everything.

We have it within us to witness persuasively the love and grace and mercy and compassion as Easter people. We can, through our resilience and helpfulness, share the hope and truth of the good news in all kinds of compelling ways. Never forget that. But if you are feeling a little shaky still about your proclamation because of everything we've been through and still have to go through, then let me get you started on your swift witnessing by giving you a single word to say to yourself and those around you which effectively sums up what Matthew tried to convey with his story: "Nevertheless." The great theologian Karl Barth wrote about how both the Old and New Testaments witness to what he called the "nevertheless of God."² "Nevertheless, I still love you and always will," God says to people facing judgment for sinning. "Nevertheless, I am with you and nothing is impossible for me," God says to people in times of anxiety. Every time you feel uneasy about all the guards that are still trying to secure the hold of evil in the world, tell yourself "Nevertheless," and remember that evil couldn't stop the tomb from being

² See Eilers, Kent, "*Barth's Nevertheless of God's Faithfulness*," THEOLOGY FORUM, Oct. 15, 2010, <https://theologyforum.wordpress.com/2010/10/15/barths-nevertheless-of-gods-faithfulness/>; Karl Barth Quotes, quotation from *The Epistle to the Philippians*, GOODREADS; https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/23117.Karl_Barth

empty. Every time you feel insecure because of the crises that you are personally experiencing, tell yourself “Nevertheless,” and remember the power of God’s mercy and grace to transform our lives. Then on the days when you feel confident about God’s resurrecting love and grace in your life, you will know what to say to those you meet who raise an eyebrow at the Resurrection given the evidence back then or the state of the world right now: “Nevertheless, it is true,” you can say zealously with your words and your actions. “Just look at what a difference it has made in me.” Christ is risen! Thanks be to God now and always! Amen.