

(Easter Sunday)

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April 21, 2019

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-15

In his book, *A Hat Full of Sky*, author Terry Pratchett writes: "There's always a story. It's all stories, really. The sun coming up every day is a story. Everything's got a story in it. Change the story, change the world."

The old hymn, like our banner, proclaims: "We love to tell the story."

And the story we love to tell is a mystery of sorts or would it be better to say, a mystifying one?

It is a story of a death one whose life had promised so much, and ended on a cross, killed by the political powers who sought to silence him for speaking out against the injustices targeted at powerless by them, while standing with the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable ones who had no voice or hope in society.

It is the story of a vigil kept amidst the grief by women, including Jesus' mother, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the other women. The story of an early morning, as a new day was dawning, journey by the women to see the tomb for themselves. It is the story of a guarded entrance, an earthquake, a stone that had sealed the tomb rolled away, of the guards becoming like dead, a messenger of God, and a mystifying, unexplainable message "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".

And as the story says, the women went with fear and great joy, only to encounter for themselves the risen Jesus, who greets them, telling them not to be afraid! Then he sends these women as the first new post-resurrection disciples!

That is the story we heard the writer of Matthew tell us this morning. Each of the four Gospels that made it into the New Testament tell a similar story, though not exactly the same way.

Mark tells us that the women after encountering the angel, hearing the message, flee the tomb and not with joy but in fear and tell no one!

Luke doesn't mention an earthquake or guards or a stone rolled away. There is an angel, a message, though it is a bit different phrasing: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He has been raised and is not here. Now go and tell his disciples." And they do, but none of the men believe the women! It is not until Peter takes off in a sprint to see for himself that they are believed!

John, has a similar account, though it varies, with only Mary Magdalene, being the one to encounter Jesus, mistaking him for the gardener. And when she tells the others "I have seen the Lord" and then it is a race between Peter and the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved to see who can get to the empty tomb first.

Of course, there are other accounts that have circulated about what might have happened. As Matthew notes, the guards reporting to the political leaders of Jerusalem, are paid "hush" money and told to spread another story, one in which

Jesus body was stolen by some of his disciples. Imagine, people in powerful positions, paying hush money and then fabricating a narrative.

There have been lots of tales told about what might have happened to Jesus. Dan Brown in the DaVinci Code told a good one, which is actually based on some legitimate legends that have circulated through the centuries.

Other accounts have Jesus being slipped some type of herbal drug the induced a deep, death like sleep, and then he awoke, and secretly made his way out of the area, living in India? France?

What story do you want or need to believe? I can't explain to you what actually happened. If as some believe, his actual body was literally, physically resurrected, then as my New Testament professor, George Edwards would ask: "Where is the body today?" As a young seminarian, I found that a very interesting question.

After all these years trying to explain what might have happened back then, I have to admit as a preacher, I can't tell you.

What I have come to believe is this. The story of Jesus' resurrection, as it is told in its various forms in the four Gospels, is not a tale told about a past event.

It does not begin with "Once upon a time." This story of the risen-ness of Jesus is not one about something that happened a long time ago in a far off place. The resurrection story is a living, breathing story which is taking place in and through people's lives out in the world.

As the Rev. Jim Friedrich says: "Easter isn't something we remember. It's something we live and breathe."

So let me tell you a couple of experiences that for me, reflect my belief and understanding of the risen-ness of Christ among us still today.

Mike Wilson is a member of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson. He is an Elder, having served, and might be still serving on the Session there. I met Mike when he came to Marshfield to visit our congregation and speak with us about his ministry. He is also one our honored First Citizens, a member of the Tohono O'odaham Nation. As a follower of the Risen One, Mike lives out his faith by providing water to people who are making their way across the dangerous desert that runs through the Tohono O'odaham Nation's land, land which borders the state of Sonora, Mexico and Arizona. Almost daily he ventures out into the wilderness to place gallons of drinking water around, sometimes having to do so several times a day because vigilante groups and border agents destroy the water.

The desert can mean death, especially with no water! Water, as we know, is a symbol of life. It is necessary for life. Without it we all would die. In the Sacrament of Baptism, the baptism we share, we speak of being immersed in the waters as a symbolic "dying" with Jesus, and coming up out of them, as being raised in Christ to a new life. Mike takes his baptism vows seriously, and lives it each time he ventures out into the desert to offer life where death reigns.

Regardless of what story you might believe about immigration, for Mike, the water he offers is a witness to the life giving power of the living, breathing risen-

ness of Christ for all people, including God's children who come into our midst across borders or through the doors of a church. Alleluia! Christ lives! Amen!

The story I want to share with you involves two phone calls. One involves death. This past December, I received a phone call from the mother of one of my middle school students. Her daughter, Sarah, an eighth grader, was dying. Marcia did not know me, but reached out to me since I knew Sarah. I spent the next day keeping vigil with Sarah, anointing her and her family, praying with them, offering a presence as they made some difficult decisions around removing their only child from life support. How does any parent make such a decision? We wept, held each other, and then, Sarah offered the promise of new life even in the midst of death. She became an organ donor, donating her kidneys. If you haven't become an organ donor, please, please do so! When the time came, and the organ donation team was ready, we walked with Sarah to the operating room, and as Mary, Jesus' mother, stood by as her son died, Sarah's parents and family gathered around, holding her hand, until, like Jesus, she breathed her last. But as the story of Jesus own death and resurrection informs our living in the face of death, death does not have the final say. Life does! Life always answers death!

As some of you know, this past Friday, I received the second phone call. Again, from Sarah's mother, Marcia. And I need an "Alleluia"! She and Sarah's father, Sam, had just received a letter from a 48 year old woman, a mother, who was one of the recipients of Sarah's kidneys. Life answered death, again! Alleluia! Amen!

My friends, The risen-ness of Christ is all around us, happening in the midst of the growing death-like darkness of hate speech and hate crimes, gun-violence, bloodshed, abuse, and lies told to twist and distort the sacredness of God's holy image that dwells in all people, even the least of these in our society and world.

We bear witness to the living story of Christ's resurrection that still shakes the ground we walk on and our own lives, freeing us from the tombs of death that seek to swallow us up in hatred and bigotry, fear and violence, and calling us to live as the risen-ness of Christ in our world today!

The resurrection is not a past event to tell about and commemorate one Sunday a year. Jesus is alive, today, and is still rising in and through our lives when we reach out across borders that separate people, tearing down walls built by fear that seek to alienate us, offering water to those who thirst, a hand to hold to those who face death, a life-giving piece of ourselves to those whose health seems bleak.

Together, we rise as One World, One people, witnessing in our transformed lives - that nothing, not even death can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus! Alleluia! Amen!