

## “The Last Word”

Let’s be clear: I love my job. I can’t imagine a more fulfilling calling, or a better place to do it, or a better group of characters to work with. And I love Easter. It’s my favorite day of the year, by a long shot. There is nothing I would rather celebrate, or talk about, or sing about than Easter. When 12:30 rolls around today and coffee hour is closing down and everybody is leaving, I’ll be ready to go another round.

So I’m not trolling for sympathy.

But this job is not without its challenges. I mean... how do you start an Easter sermon when everybody already knows how it ends? I am reminded of the story—probably apocryphal—that is told about Elizabeth Taylor’s seventh husband who is reputed to have said, “I know what I’m supposed to do. I’m just not sure I can make it interesting.”

I take comfort from knowing that far more faithful preachers than I have been faced with this challenge; beginning, perhaps, with the writers of the first gospels. Each of these four biblical writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—had the same problem: how does one begin to tell a story we already know? Each goes about it in a different way, each emphasizing different elements. I particularly love the way Matthew tells Easter: with humor and irony setting things up like a pool shark arranging a trick shot.

Matthew sets the stage for Easter by telling a story that no other gospel includes. On Saturday, the day after Jesus’ death, the Sabbath, some of the Jewish leaders violate the Sabbath—something they had often accused Jesus of doing, by the way—by going to see Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. The religious leaders and the Romans were the unholy alliance that conspired to kill Jesus in the first place. Now these religious types remember that Jesus had predicted that he would rise again after three days.<sup>1</sup> Fearful—and “Fearful” is the middle name of these guys—that some of Jesus’ followers would steal his dead body from the tomb and claim that he had been raised, they ask Pilate to command that the tomb be “made secure.” Pilate says to them, take some soldiers and, “go, make it as secure as you can.” They do. They seal the stone and they guard it with soldiers. Make it as secure as you can... you bet!

---

<sup>1</sup> Actually what he had said was “on the third day” so they weren’t listening *that* closely. See Matthew 16:21.

At dawn on the third day, Easter Sunday, as Jerusalem is waking up after the Sabbath and preparing to begin the work week, two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, mother of James and Joseph,<sup>2</sup> go to the tomb. In other versions they bring spices to anoint Jesus' body,<sup>3</sup> but in Matthew's telling this has already been done by Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>4</sup> Here the women are coming simply to "see" the tomb... and they get an eyeful, witnessing the great confrontation. In this corner, the worldly "powers that be," religious and political, the kingdom and the power and the glory of Rome, set to do battle with... they're not sure what.

We got a little taste of this confrontation last week on Palm Sunday with competing parades into Jerusalem: Pilate and his legions thundering into the city in an intimidating display of military might from the west; Jesus and his peasant peeps ambling in from the east, Jesus the peasant rabbi on a plow animal, a donkey, making a completely different statement about to whom belongs the kingdom and the power and the glory. So here comes the big showdown, and the women have a ringside seat. Are you ready to rumble?

It's a good thing they don't blink, or they'd miss it. "Suddenly" there is a great earthquake. An angel from heaven streaks down, rolls aside the stone and sits on it. "For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men." In the immortal words of the Firesign Theatre, "They're no fun, they fell right over."<sup>5</sup> It's comical: shake, rattle and roll.

The angel ignores the unconscious soldiers and addresses 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." And then the angel teaches them the Easter two-step: come and see, go and tell: "Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples..."

Easter isn't just news you sit with. The women have a job to do, to rouse the dormant disciples who spiritually speaking have been dead themselves, and tell them to go to Galilee to meet the risen Christ. Come and see... go and tell. Get moving.

The women go their Mary way (they're both named Mary), leaving the tomb "quickly with fear and great joy." I love that: those two live within us, don't they, fear and joy? Don't be scared to death. God is calling you to dance a new life, and you have a job to do.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:56.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 16:1. They're also accompanied by a woman named Salome—not the dancer.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:27-63.

<sup>5</sup> From The Firesign Theatre, *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All*, Columbia Records, 1969.

It is no accident that these women encounter the risen Christ as they are doing his work. Already their lives are in motion. They are people with a purpose. You can't steer a parked car.<sup>6</sup> Abruptly Jesus appears and says... "Greetings!"

Sounds pretty lame, doesn't it: "Greetings"? But much is lost in the translation. The Greek word, a derivative of words for "rejoice" and "grace" *can* be an ordinary greeting, but Matthew doesn't often use it that way. The last two times we encountered this Greek word in Matthew it was spoken to Jesus: by Judas as he said, "Greetings, Rabbi" and betrayed Jesus with his kiss of death; and then by Roman soldiers who beat Jesus and mocked him saying, "Hail [same word as "greetings" in Greek] King of the Jews." Spoken in betrayal and mockery, now it is the first word out of the mouth of the risen Christ. "Greetings!" Earlier it was ironic. Now it is triumphant. Boo-yah!

The women fall at Jesus' feet. This is a gesture of worship, to be sure. But it is also the sort of thing one would do before a monarch. There is more irony here. The religious leaders, groveling toadies that they are, when meeting with Pilate a little while ago addressed him as, "Lord."<sup>7</sup> And the sign on the cross, announcing Jesus' "crime" in mockery had said, "King of the Jews," a political charge. Now Jesus is acknowledged, rightfully, as King of kings and Lord of lords.

So all the tables have been turned: Jesus is alive, the guards are as good as dead, betrayal and mockery have turned to triumph, and the kingly title bestowed in ridicule turns out to have been right all along. Pretty sweet, huh?

Matthew knows how to tell a story. And he even knows how to rub it in a little bit, as he does by adding the Easter postscript we included as a bonus with today's reading, describing the desperation of bribing the guards into claiming they had fallen asleep in order to keep alive the dead end story of the Christian grave robbers. Great storytelling, Matthew!

But if that's all it is, a ripping yarn artfully told, then we've missed the point entirely. For Matthew wants us to know that Easter isn't Easter until it's gone somewhere, until that Easter rhythm of come and see, go and tell has taken hold of us. He closes out his Gospel with a scene that takes place when the disciples do as they are told and go to Galilee. There they encounter the risen Christ and they are told to "make disciples of all nations": to take this

---

<sup>6</sup> I first heard this from Ernest Campbell, former Sr. Minister of the Riverside Church in New York. But somehow I doubt it was original to him.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 27:63. There the NRSV translates it "Sir," but the Greek is *kurios*, and it becomes Christians' favorite term for Jesus, "Lord." In fact, the earliest Christian confession of faith was simply, "Jesus is Lord [and not Caesar]."

good news of a Jewish Messiah and share it with the whole world: teaching what Jesus taught, living as Jesus lived, sharing God's love with the world in word and in deed. And in the performance of that mission, Jesus promises to be with his faithful followers "always, to the end of the age."<sup>8</sup> That's how Matthew ends: with a never-ending ending.

And that's how Matthew's story continues. Our Easter celebration is the "come and see" part: come together to hear the story we already know and to remember that love wins. But the "go and tell" part has to do with how we live our lives, how we take the victory of life with us and embody it in the world in every imaginable situation and some unimaginable ones, as well. If the tomb is empty then the world is full<sup>9</sup>: full of the love of the living Christ who is on the loose, not confined in our churches and our dogmas and our preaching and singing. Easter isn't in here, it's out there. Come and see, go and tell: that is how Easter becomes the celebration of life that never ends.

To be sure it is a daunting task to live God's love in our personal lives, in our families and in our world. We need help to find the clarity and courage and commitment to seek and to do God's will, to become our best and truest selves. That's why the church exists: to be a community of support and challenge... to increase the love of God and neighbor.

For no matter how the story begins, the last word is always the same. Come and see, go and tell: the last word is *you*, living out in your own inimitable way the greatest truth we know: that Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ  
4126 Ingersoll Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312  
(515) 255-3149  
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM  
Fax: 515-255-8667  
E-mail: [druhe@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:druhe@plymouthchurch.com)

---

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28: 16-20.

<sup>9</sup> This is a wonderful line from Robert H. Smith in his commentary on Matthew: *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989, p. 331.