

“Thinking Outside the Tomb”

Matthew 28:1-10

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Did you notice about the angel’s Easter sermon? Did you notice anything unusual about that sermon? If you read that sermon in the scripture, it is about 65 words long. I’m way ahead of you. I know what some of you are thinking already: “I wish my minister would take a clue from that.” Sixty-five words. We ministers could learn from the angel. On Easter Sunday, so often ministers try to explain, convince, and even prove that which cannot be proved.

We don’t need to explain the resurrection. The resurrection explains us. It explains who we are. As I prepared for this sermon, I was aware that there are at least three groups of people here. I would say that you would identify with one of these groups.

The first group is comprised of those who have celebrated the most Easters, and also those who have celebrated the fewest Easters. Persons in their 70’s, 80’s, 90’s—they understand something about Easter that perhaps the rest of us don’t. Little children around 8 years old and even younger approach the Easter story with a trust and an innocence that most of us only longingly remember. That’s the first group.

The second group is composed of persons that we read about later in that 28th Chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus appeared to the twelve and Matthew says, “They worshipped him, but some doubted.” I know there are some of you who are here this morning who are sure and certain of your Easter faith. In fact, you are so sure and certain that you know if you stop being sure and certain, you might stop believing altogether. “They worshipped him, but some doubted.” There are others among us who, the only thing we’re certain about, is how uncertain we are. Can this really happen? Can we believe a story like this? “They worshipped him, but some doubted.”

The third group is composed of those who find themselves somewhere in between the first two groups, which is where most of us find ourselves in most of life, isn’t it? Somewhere in between doubt and belief. .

There is an old teacher of preachers whose name was George Buttrick. Buttrick wrote these words about Easter that means so much to me. Listen closely.

“The beckonings of God are just that—beckonings, not bludgeonings, not batteries of irrefutable evidence, not the tyranny of unanswerable logic. Always there is freedom for our choosing and response; for God’s beckonings are always by hint and gleam, lest we be coerced.”

Don’t you love that? God does not coerce us. The Easter angel does not coerce. Matthew does not coerce. And so my message to you is not a message of coercion, but a message of hope. Hope that you will be able to believe on this Easter Sunday.

Of all the gospel accounts of Easter, in some ways Matthew is my favorite because we read about something in Matthew's gospel that is not included in the other gospels. It is the story of the guards. Just after the scripture I read this morning, we read about those guards who shook and became like dead men trying to explain what had happened. The authorities said to them, "This is what you can do. You can make up this story, say that someone came and stole the body." Matthew says to this day that story is being spread.

Do you know what I wish would have happened on that first Easter? It didn't, but I wish it had. I wish the guards would have stolen the body of Jesus. I wish they would have stolen the body of Jesus and taken the body and hidden it somewhere in a warehouse. When the authorities come and ask them, the chief of the guards says, "Yes, we've got the body right back here. Come back here and we'll show you." They go in the warehouse and open the closet, and there's no body. The body is gone.

Our faith in Easter, however, is more than an empty tomb. That is not what Easter faith is about. Instead of an empty tomb, Easter faith is about full hearts, full faith, and full love. I believe the way we approach this fullness that Jesus wanted for us: "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly," is to start thinking outside the tomb. You've heard the saying, "We need to think outside the box." In the church, we need to start "thinking outside the tomb." Often in the church we have lived as if Jesus is still dead inside the tomb. Let me give you some examples.

Do you remember that in World War II Nazi soldiers had a slogan engraved on their belt buckles. My German is not good, but the phrase was something like this: "Gott Mit Uns." That means "God With Us." The church in Germany blessed what the Nazi's did. Now, you might say, "That's not our problem. We're not like the church in Germany."

How often in the church have we cared more about maintaining the institution instead of reaching out to those who are in need? "Well, we need to reach the budget." "You know, we might not have enough money." How often the church has been resistant to change? I am so grateful, as I know most of you are, for the gifts of Carol Lawson. Did you know that in most churches in our country today, Carol Lawson could not serve as a minister because those churches are resistant to change? How often has the church cared more about being "popular" instead of being "prophetic?" Instead of speaking truth to power, we have lived as if Jesus is still inside the tomb, dead.

During his ministry, Jesus spoke about speaking outside the tomb. You remember what he said: "You have heard it said, 'Thou shalt not kill' but I say to you, if you get angry with your brother or your sister, you are liable to judgment as much as if you kill them. You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, 'turn the other cheek.'" "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, 'Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.' 'You lay up for yourselves treasures on earth when you need to be laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven.'"

I have made a list of examples of how we as THE church—not just this church, but THE church, the individual members of the body of Christ, think inside the tomb instead of outside.

Listen to these examples.

Contempt, criticism, complaining - that is inside the tomb living. Encouragement, affirmation, appreciation - that is outside the tomb living.

Expecting the worse - inside; expecting the best - outside.

Doubt, despair, fear—inside. Faith, hope, courage—outside.

Inside the tomb thinking: “We never did it that way, before.” Outside the tomb thinking: “Behold, I make all things new.”

This is kind of tricky: Inside the tomb thinking says: “God is on our side.” Outside the tomb thinking says, “We need to be on God’s side.

Inside the tomb, “Our way or the highway; we know what’s right; love it or leave it.” Outside the tomb thinking, “Christ is the way, the truth and the life.”

Listen to this one. Inside the tomb thinking: a husband says to his wife, “Honey, have you gained a little weight?” That’s not only inside the tomb, that’s stupid. Outside the tomb thinking, a husband says to his wife: “I thank God for you.”

Inside the tomb thinking, a mother says to her daughter, “I wish you were more like your sister.” Outside the tomb thinking, “You’re a great kid.”

This is another tricky one: inside the tomb thinking says: “As long as there’s life, there’s hope.” Outside the tomb thinking saying, “Even in death there is hope.”

Do you remember the first thing that the angel and Jesus said to the women? The very first thing on Easter morning? “Don’t be afraid.” You don’t have to be afraid ever again in your life. You don’t have to be afraid of your health failing; you don’t have to be afraid of your spouse leaving; you don’t have to be afraid of running out of money. You don’t have to be afraid of anything because death and all it represents has been defeated.

Some of you might have seen the thing that was going around on the internet about Easter being early this year. You don’t need that reminder to tell you how early Easter is. Someone said the last time Easter was this early was 95 years ago. The next time it will be this early is over 200 years from now. Is that just a coincidence? Maybe Easter came early this year because we had that horrible ice storm. Maybe Easter came early this year because we are facing so much mud—not mud caused by the rain but mud that’s being slung by politicians. Maybe Easter came early this year because we have begun the 5th year of a war that is too long.

Hear this message of Easter. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared only to those who loved him. Did you realize that? Only those who loved Jesus saw him after he had been resurrected. I believe the same thing is true today of the living Christ. Only those who hear the Good News (and the only way to hear the Good News is to listen, and the only way to listen is to love him).

My Easter message is not a message to convince, cajole, or coerce. It is simply this. You know the message. We are going to sing it in our invitation hymn today. Might we have the faith to join with the hymn writer and say,

I serve a risen Savior who's in the world today,
I know that he is living whatever men may say.
I see his hand of mercy; I hear his voice of cheer,
And just the time I need him, he's always near.
He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today,
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives, he lives, salvation to impart.
You ask me how I know he lives,
He lives within my heart.

On this Easter and always, may it be so for each of us. Amen.