

A lot of people think of the center of the Gospel being the Crucifixion and that Easter is the “mere confirmation that Jesus is, in truth, God’s Son. But Easter is much more than that. Today we’re looking at the Gospel of Matthew’s version of the Easter story. Think about those who take steps to make sure that Jesus does not rise from the dead. Frightened officials whose interests and commitments are such that they cannot even allow for a rumor of resurrection. They have to guard against it, and they do this by sealing the tomb and having Roman soldiers guard it. But here we are on Easter morning celebrating Jesus’ resurrection. The stone has rolled away, and the tomb is empty. Yes, Easter is part of the saving work of Jesus. It is the beginning of victory. It is the inauguration of God’s reign” (Justo Gonzalez, *Three Months With Matthew*). Easter proclaims the truth that while **you can crucify God’s love you cannot keep it dead and buried** (William Sloane Coffin, 1984 sermon). In light of all this, it is surprising to see that Easter causes fear, not only among the enemies of Jesus but also in the case of his followers. Matthew’s telling of the resurrection story is dramatic and wild, boiling over with supernatural events! As with many stories in the Bible, upon hearing it we are filled with questions and maybe even some doubts. We tend to see what we think is possible and resist seeing what we assume is not. Matthew is a masterful storyteller, and “imagination is an essential tool for creating space for spiritual perception” (Wm. Loyd Allen, *Connections*). Maybe just maybe the supernatural is possible?! “Matthew’s core theological point is that there is no merely naturalistic way of speaking of the resurrection. This is not about human capacities or possibilities. It is wholly about God’s capacity and determination” (D. Cam Murchison, *FOW*). Out of all the possible questions this story raises, I’ll start with my first one. Why are the Marys going to the tomb? Ok, and a second. Who is the

other Mary? Matthew doesn't tell us why they're going like Mark does- to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices. In Matthew's account, you couldn't get inside the sealed tomb if you wanted to with those guards keeping watch around the clock. Maybe the reason they come is that God wants them there for such a time as this? It is significant that it is not the powerful or the elite, not the male disciples, who gather. The angel sent the women to carry the story back to the guys. They are the first people to hear and tell the good news of the resurrection. In those days women were not considered reliable witnesses. "Not just colloquially but legally- a woman's testimony to an occurrence like this one would not have been admissible in court. And so it is all the more remarkable that Jesus would entrust this profoundly important message to two women" (Ayanna Johnson Watkins, *The Christian Century*). The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who is known for focusing on the hope that the resurrection brings, says it best. "[Without](#) women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection." And the other Mary? Who is she? Well, we don't know. It could be Jesus' mother, but we aren't told. But before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

"After the sabbath, as the first day of the week is dawning..." This is how Matthew begins his announcement of Easter. "After midday darkness and earthquakes on Good Friday and sinister plots by night and the shadows of evil, at last the day was dawning, and with it a new light was shining in human history. Somewhere along the path to the cemetery, however, the women left one world and entered another" (Thomas Long, *Matthew*). As they approached Jesus' grave, all heaven appears to break loose. "Without even knowing that they had crossed the border,

they left the old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, and peace has little chance, and the rich get richer, and the weak all eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another, and dead people stay dead, and they entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been dead, dead, dead on Friday afternoon, was not in his tomb that morning, and the world- theirs and ours- has been turned upside down ever since” (Long). The start of that morning was another shattering earthquake that brought about the arrival of an angel, with clothing that was lightning white, who effortlessly rolled away the massive stone entryway and then sat on it. Matthew’s account is the only one where the stone is rolled away after the women arrive, but the resurrection has already happened. The angel said, “Do not be afraid! He is not here! Come and see where he lay!” “The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in” (Judith Jones, *WP*). Matthew has only one angel whereas other gospel accounts mention more than one. And what of those guards- the ones who are unique to Matthew and who were supposed to make sure that Jesus stayed in the grave?! Talk about a pretty crappy assignment?! Hey, who wants to sign up to watch Jesus of Nazareth’s tomb? It turned out to be more than any human could handle. As a matter of fact, Matthew reports that the two guards were reduced to a quivering but paralyzed mass of fear. Matthew can’t help himself. He says that they become “like dead men” (v. 4). The irony! The dead man is alive and the alive men become like dead people. Again, **you can crucify God’s love, but you cannot keep it dead and buried.**

The resurrection of Jesus proves- once again- that God keeps God's promises. But the Marys don't get to tarry long at the empty grave, as the angel soon gives them their marching orders. I love this because it's as if the angel checks the box and says, "I've done my part now go and do yours!" The Marys leave to fulfill their mission with a mixture of fear and joy- like the church in miniature- overcome with joy over the good news they have heard yet also apprehensive as they move with this news toward a skeptical and dangerous world (Long). And then just as the women were being obedient, Christ appears, and they bow down at his feet and worshiped him. Now I have all kind of questions for another sermon about what Jesus looked like or how they recognized him; nonetheless, I'll say this... ghosts do not have feet, but the post-resurrected Jesus did! And he quickly tells the Marys the same message the angel had given them: Don't be afraid. But then he does have one difference- Go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee. I'll see them there. Notice that through the power of the resurrection, the disciples, who denied and abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, have been forgiven and restored to their standing as "brothers." He hadn't come back to get revenge or condemn anyone. No, he returned to gather his family. Matthew is also trying to let us know that in saying that he'll meet his disciples in Galilee, Jesus is fulfilling his promise that though the sheep are scattered, he will gather them together again in Galilee. Galilee has special meaning for Matthew, as it is not only the place for this promise; it is also the place where Jesus' ministry, which embodied the dawning reign of God, had been lived out. It's the place where the gospel was extended to the Gentiles, the "doorway to the world." Yes, "the risen Jesus is to be expected in the places of his once and future ministry, in all those places of grace-full endeavor, where healing, feeding, teaching, and even suffering are

undertaken in his company” (Murchison). So, where’s Galilee for us? Where is God commissioning us to go or calling us back to? Where do we encounter the risen Lord?

I recently read an article where the author said, “Because it’s Easter, I’ve had my head in the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Our world is crying out for peace and wholeness right now, so I’ve been combing the air for signs of resurrection. The word resurrection means a rising up, a raising up, a standing up. After a time in the dirt, after our falling, after taking a seat, lying down, even after our collapse, our seeming end- resurrection is our rising. Like Jesus, we are raised up to new life. We find life out of death, water in the desert, hope out of grief. For **you can crucify God’s love, but you cannot keep it dead and buried!** Yes, sometimes resurrection can surprise us in its ordinariness. And sometimes we need to be surprised again by God’s presence in unexpected places. Where have you experienced or witnessed resurrection in everyday life? If we weren’t surrounded by death, the good news of Jesus wouldn’t be quite so good” (Sarah Bessey, [Broadview](#)).

Because the Lord is risen, we, like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, are to witness to what God is doing in Christ alive and at large in the world! And when we do the things God wants us to do, the risen Lord just may greet us! We’ve got to stop being afraid for God has defeated death. Let’s rejoice and share the good news! “Sometimes resurrection can look like taking the scraps of our life and somehow creating a quilt of warmth and beauty and service. It looks nothing like what you expect, and it looks like everything you ever wanted. Resurrection looks

like scars where there were wounds, and it looks like so much light and hope that you even feel afraid of your joy. Resurrection always surprises us: who could expect it? Resurrection is a whole new ground beneath our feet; it's new air to breathe; it's new eyes to see. This is why it's a testimony- this is what we have seen and what we have heard and what we know. We're learning to embody a new life in the power of the Holy Spirit" (Bessey). Sometimes resurrection surprises us in the line at a store. I was out and about this week and witnessed resurrection at Macy's of all places. I was in line and tired of being in line and the woman behind the counter began to tell me her story. She asked "Are you in a hurry?" How could I say yes, I am? She proceeds to tell me that she quit smoking in February and that she lives at Front Porch ministries through Grace Church. She was living in her car prior to Front Porch because she couldn't afford a place to live- working two jobs. She was denied an opportunity to live at Front Porch the first go 'round, but she called and asked them what she needed to do to be considered, and she did those things, reapplied and was accepted a year and a half ago. Then she shared that she was diabetic and was recently taken off all of her medications. She said that she has members of the church who coach her on her finances. She thought she had bad credit because she had a credit score of 0. She didn't know what she didn't know. It wasn't that she had bad credit; it was that she had no credit. She slowly and wisely began to build her credit and a year later her credit score is 762! She was beaming as she delivered this news! And she just kept going; she couldn't contain it! Her joy was so contagious! All I could think was this is what resurrection looks like! This is what it looks like to run and tell that you've seen the risen Lord. And she was telling anyone who would listen- in

Galilee- I mean- in Macy's- of all places. For **you can crucify God's love, but you cannot keep it dead and buried!**

The Lord is risen! "A new world of peace, love and justice has been proclaimed" (Gonzalez). So, don't be surprised if resurrection shows up in Galilee or in Macy's or out on the sidewalk here on Rutherford. Because our Risen Lord is on the loose- and resurrection is taking place all around us in ways that we cannot fully understand but might occasionally be privileged to witness. For our tombs, and those of our loved ones, prove only as secure as Christ's! Thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Risen Lord Jesus Christ! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Hallelujah and Amen.