

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! So much is packed into this ancient Christian greeting on Easter morning. One question: Do you believe what you have said" (Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*)? I mean, do we really believe these words? And if we do believe, how does our living reflect the good news of Christ's resurrection? I woke up this morning and the words from the band Poison entered my mind. "Give me something to believe in!" I don't know about y'all, but in life-ing I most definitely need someone to believe in. This Lenten season we have been journeying with Jesus from the wilderness to glory. Well, today is Jesus in glory! "The God who remained apparently silent on Good Friday is having the last word. He is answering the unspoken questions of Jesus' followers, and the spoken question of Jesus himself on the cross" (N.T. Wright). Yesterday I was talking with a friend who is concerned about people who can't find affordable housing. In an effort to do something about it, she said "I'm going to research today if the Greenville area has any federal land available." My response: "Anything is possible...especially on this Holy Saturday. Because with God...all things are possible" (Mark 10:27), and I really meant it. I went to visit someone in the hospital last night who didn't know I was there. She was in a bike accident and has a brain bleed and was in needed sleep. As I prayed with her friend and family and with her, I mentioned the silence of God and the hope of the resurrection as well as for healing, as she began to turn a corner yesterday. Would I have prayed the same if things were different? Today in the Gospel of Matthew's version of the Easter story, Matthew could win an Oscar in the most dramatic telling category. His telling boils over with supernatural events: an earthquake, an angel flashy as lightning, guards that appear dead, two women disciples, an empty tomb and a resurrected Jesus.

These ten verses, a mere 208 words long, spend most of their words on things beyond nature. I mean the very words out of the angel's mouth alone announce something "completely foreign to human possibility: *He is not here. He is risen*. In other words, Jesus was dead, dead, dead, and on the third day, God raised him from the dead and he was alive, alive, alive. One can see where this is hard to swallow let alone believe. It's as if some of us may not be confident that God can, or that God did, do anything outside of human capacity?! We say things like, "Won't He do it?" But do we really believe that God can and did?! Think about those who take steps to make sure that Jesus does not rise from the dead. Those who offer alternative narratives: you're too sophisticated or simple-minded to believe that! 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. The stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty! Yes, Easter is part of the saving work of Jesus. His resurrection is the beginning of victory. It is the inauguration of God's reign" (Justo Gonzalez, *Three Months With Matthew*). One can argue that it is not at all surprising to see that Jesus' resurrection causes a mix of emotions. 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?! Ever allowed yourself the space to imagine that? If not, I invite you to do so now. "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*). So let us use our imaginations, putting ourselves in the disciple's shoes, as we turn to God's word for us this day but first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

"If that doesn't make your hair stand on end, I have not read it right. Matthew means for it to strike us with utter, dumbfounded, stupefied awe" (Rutledge). Imagine being in the shoes of Mary Magdalene and Mary that first Easter morning. "We owe it to those first Christian disciples to do our very best to understand the utter hopelessness of their situation after the Crucifixion. They had invested their whole lives, well at least three good years, in what appeared to be a diabolical joke" (Rutledge). The woman in the ICU last night...her father said to me, "Last night I didn't know if my daughter was going to make it or not. As her accident happened on Good Friday, I was praying to God to spare her life and I now have a greater appreciation for how the disciples must have felt with Jesus' death. Talk about having no hope and God being silent?! You can't blame them. These disciples, including Mary Magdalene and Mary, had seen their beloved Master beaten, mocked, dragged through the streets, nailed to a cross and left to suffer public agony like he was a worthless piece of garbage; a nonperson. Not one of them had dared to come forward in their Master's defense: Peter denied him and Judas betrayed him. So why did Mary Magdalene and Mary show up at Jesus' tomb? Matthew doesn't tell us why they're there like Mark does- to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices. Why do we visit graves? Isn't it because we want to try to hold on to some kind of shred of closeness to the deceased? Aren't flowers on graves a way of saying we haven't forgotten, we miss you, we love you, we

wish you had not died? We most definitely do not visit a grave because we expect to see somebody rise out of it (Rutledge)! Surprise! But what if the women are actually there to look for resurrection?! In Matthew's account you couldn't get inside the sealed tomb if you wanted to with those guards keeping watch around the clock. Whatever the reason, something or someone compels these women to come. If they weren't there, would we know the good news of Christ's resurrection today?! 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. These women are the first people to hear and tell the good news of the resurrection. This should be a clue that the kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom.

"Somewhere along the path to the cemetery, 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 was dead as a doornail on Friday and now he is alive! He is alive indeed! and the world- theirs and ours- has been turned upside down ever since" (Long). Matthew's account is the only one where the stone is rolled away after the women arrive, but the resurrection has already happened. Jesus is already gone so why does the angel roll away the stone? The angel said to them, "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. You see- the power over life and death belong not to the empire’s emperor, governor, or soldiers; it belongs to God and God alone.

Yes, I know all the objections: the Gospel accounts seem to contradict one another; the Roman soldiers never wrote up a report, medical science scoffs at this, none of this can be proven. Here’s the thing though: none of this is possible as we understand possibility. I also know this: this is a message that would explain everything that happened afterward. *He is not here; he is risen*. That, truly, is a piece of news to shake the foundations of the Roman Empire and the stronghold of death itself (Rutledge). The resurrection of Jesus proves- once again- that God keeps God’s promises. What God is doing is beginning the new world promised long ago: a whole new world is opening up right in front of them (Rutledge). A world where the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the poor are taken care of, the sick and prisoners are visited, the immigrants are welcomed, enemies are loved and neighbors agree to disagree and still love one another. The Marys don’t get to tarry long at the empty grave, for they have news to tell and ministry to do.

As the angel gives them their mission, they leave to fulfill it 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 filled with misinformation and alternative narratives (Long). And just as the women were obedient in leaving, Christ appears; they bow down, touch his feet and worship him. Now I have all kind of questions about what Jesus looked like or how they recognized him but Matthew doesn't really tell us. I'll say this... ghosts do not have feet, but the risen Jesus did! The Risen Lord quickly tells the Marys the same message the angel had given them: Don't be afraid. But then he says- Go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee. 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." Jesus hadn't come back to get revenge or condemn anyone. No, he returned to gather his family. And 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. Yes, "the risen Jesus is to be expected in all those places of grace-full endeavor, where healing, feeding, teaching, and even suffering are undertaken in his company" (Murchison). So, where have you encountered the Risen Lord so much so that you cannot deny it?

Like Mary Magdalene and Mary, we are to witness to what God is doing in Christ alive and at large in the world! And when we do what God calls us to do, the Risen Lord just may greet us! Don't be afraid for God has conquered the grave. Or maybe we just do it scared- scared yet full of Easter joy?! Christ is alive! He is alive indeed! We don't just tell it; we live resurrection life. "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 to be true" (Sarah Bessey, e-newsletter). She ran up to me on the sidewalk. Out of breath and waving something in the air, she blurted, "Pastor Jennifer, I got my three-month chip. I ain't done no drugs or had no alcohol for that long. Oh, and I got housing!" Her face beamed bright white, probably like the angel in today's story. 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 in your life. And she was telling anyone who would listen- in Galilee- I mean- on the Stone Ave. sidewalk. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And righteousness, mercy, and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. We have to decide where we stand and what we will do in this new and frightening resurrection world" (Long). "A new world where peace, love and justice have been proclaimed" (Gonzalez). For some of us, "today the Easter story begins again in darkness, fear and disbelief. Destruction looms. Justice hangs by a thread. But we too are discovering that Christ is alive wherever two or three gather to do the next right thing" (Ann Dean, inward/outward e-votional). So let's go together and point beyond the current horizon, shouting- Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And we will one day be raised with him as well. That is good news worth telling and believing in today's world! Alleluia & Amen!