

Gift or Guide?

^{NRS} **Matthew 28:1-10** After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he¹ lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

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One of the great joys of ministry is reading and studying scripture, and in the process, finding things that I haven't noticed before. The scriptures are a vast mine of treasures, and some things only come by digging deeper. There's always more to learn, greater understanding to be reached, and deeper wisdom to be granted by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, in chapter ten, Jesus proclaimed, (Matt. 10:32-33 NRS) "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." That seems pretty straightforward, a clear warning, if you will. In fact, I find this passage often quoted at the end of religious emails, with the insinuation that if I don't forward the email to at least ten friends, I'm denying Christ, and the fires of Hell are licking at my heels. The person who sent me the email wants to be sure that I fear for my eternal destination, and by being afraid of the consequences of denying Jesus by not passing on the email, they assume I will quickly forward it to ten or more folks in my address book.

Over the past week, we've been reminded of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus was arrested, all of his disciples ran away. They deserted him. They didn't come testify on his behalf before the High Priest, or Herod, or Pontius Pilate. The disciples denied Jesus their presence, their comfort, and their testimony by running away when he was arrested. Only Peter followed at a distance, and then he denied that he even knew Jesus. Given what Jesus had said about acknowledging and denying back in chapter ten, on this resurrection morning we would expect Jesus to say something on the order of "Depart from me, you unfaithful disciples. I don't know you anymore!"

In today's scripture, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary suddenly met Jesus and he said to them, "Greetings!" The word translated here as "Greetings" doesn't mean "Hi there," but something closer to "Rejoice!" Rejoice? Not, "Get out of my way. I don't want anything to do with you?" Rejoice? The angel had said to the two Marys, "tell the disciples" but Jesus said "tell my brothers." This would seem to be a way of saying that he had already forgiven the ten who ran away and forsook him, and forgiven the one who followed but then denied that he knew him. And when we read the stories about Jesus appearing to the disciples, walking with them on the road to Emmaus, and broiling fish on the shore of Lake Galilee, there's never a word of rebuke, never a condemnation. They don't get what they deserve; they get forgiven.

In the old Law of Moses, in the book of Leviticus especially, we find lots of rules and regulations about sacrificing animals in the Temple. With that background we often think about the crucifixion of Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins. Interestingly enough, there's another thread of thought that begins back in the days of the prophets. Hosea brings God's message to the people of Israel saying, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hos 6:6 NRS) Jesus picks up that same thought and teaches in the ninth chapter of Matthew, ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire

mercy, not sacrifice.' (Mat 9:13 NRS) So, both God's message in the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus in Matthew make pretty negative statements about sacrifice. Perhaps there's a different way to see the meaning of Christ's death, or at least an **additional** way to understand these events that gives even broader and deeper meaning.

In our study on Palm Sunday and on Maundy Thursday, we saw how Jesus died because of his life and his teachings. He was killed because of the things he did – and didn't do. He exposed the shallow petty religious rules of the Temple establishment and made them angry. He was popular with the common people, but didn't bow and scrape to the Roman officials. When he was arrested, he didn't resist. He didn't call for guerilla resistance by his disciples, or even a public hunger strike. And though he said it was **his** for the asking, he didn't appeal to his Father for twelve legions of angels.

Today is Easter. Today is about the resurrection. What does the story of the resurrection tell us about God? Resurrection is God's comment on the events of Good Friday. "Christ's death on Calvary was not in itself the central act of salvation, but his death and resurrection; it was the resurrection that completed his victory over sin and death."¹ The early Christians claimed that God raised Jesus from the dead to undo the injustice done to him and to place the divine stamp of approval on his teaching and his life. Paul says in Philippians second chapter that "Jesus was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him." Resurrection is God's "yes" in response to the "no" of earthly powers. It was God's "yes" to a peasant prophet - and God's "no" to the Roman Empire.

Easter is God's stamp of approval on The Way, the path that Jesus taught and walked. The empty tomb is sort of God's trophy, symbolizing his victory over the enemies of Jesus. They had very effectively used their power against Jesus, up to and including putting him to death. But executing him was the limit of their power. They could do nothing more to Jesus. Paul told the Christians in Corinth that when this mortal body puts on immortality, then death is swallowed up in victory. (1 Cor. 15:54) Peter preached on Pentecost that the Jesus who had been crucified - was made Lord and Messiah by God. God vindicated Jesus and God won against the worst that the Roman Empire could do. "Jesus was a martyr. He died for the righteous cause of God's new empire. To say that God raised him from the dead, was to say that his cause was indeed just, that his empire was truly God's empire. 'Jesus is risen' finally means 'Jesus was right.'"²

The movie, *Men in Black* is a rambunctious science fiction romp about alien creatures living incognito among humans here on earth. It's a hilarious movie with anxious moments when aliens choose to misbehave. One creature goes on a murderous rampage and the men in black suits, Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith must bring him to justice. As they discuss their strategy, Will Smith sees a big collection of futuristic weapons and he exclaims, "Now that's what I'm talking about!" With the resurrection, God said regarding Jesus, "That's what I'm talking about!"

The truth is, in some ways, we'd rather leave Jesus sealed up in the tomb. After the resurrection Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. (Matt 28:20) Well, that's pretty inconvenient. Can't we at least keep Jesus bottled up and only let him out at Christmas and Easter? Or, at least, only on Sunday? It can make things difficult if we realize that Jesus is with us all the time. What about if the king of generosity sees the paltry tip we leave for a struggling mother trying to raise her kids with what she makes as a waitress? Do we really want Jesus to hear the sales pitch we use to make another sale? Do we want him to know what we thought about the pretty young cheerleader, or what we claimed on our tax return? He said "Feed my sheep," but we would rather keep the tomb shut. The lambs have such terrible needs and they could sap our abundance; we're afraid they could wilt our wallet.

When Jesus said, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age," it was like a coin with two sides. We'd rather not have Jesus around to witness our shenanigans, our weaknesses, and our misbehavior. On the other hand, it would be great to have some support, some help, some love - when life is tough. Clarence Jordan, author of the Cotton Patch Gospels, put the whole situation in his own challenging style when he wrote, "The resurrection of Jesus was simply God's unwillingness to take our 'no' for an answer. He raised Jesus, not as an invitation to us to come to heaven when we die, but as a

declaration that he himself has now established permanent, eternal residence here on earth. He is standing beside us, strengthening us in this life. The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is not that we shall die and go home to be with him, but that he has risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick prisoner brothers with him.”

Jesus said, I am with you – from now on. In today’s reading, “When the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid,’ or when Jesus said, ‘Fear not,’” it is **not** assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God’s love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end – and sometimes even before the end – God’s love is triumphant.”³

Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid,” but fear gives us excuses to do less, be less confident, to fail to risk standing up for what is good because it is unpopular. Fear is a great curse in our lives. We are all, in some way or another, a hostage to fear. Fear that we will fail in some important effort. Fear that we will be recognized for who we are behind the façade we erect to impress others, fear that we will be hurt, or that we will hurt someone else, fear that perhaps what we most believe may not be so. And so we fear life and fear to move outside the circle of fear that holds us together and holds us back.

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid.” Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid.” We don’t want our failures and weaknesses to be exposed. We don’t want to look at them ourselves, much less for them to be seen by others - and certainly not by Jesus. But look at this passage. Even those who deserted Jesus when he needed them most – even they were forgiven! What could you possibly do that would be worse than turning your back on Jesus like they did?

If we only look at the crucifixion as sacrifice for our sin and see resurrection as simply a divinity confirming miracle, then we don’t go on to find deeper and richer meaning. In some ways that’s easier. We can accept an action that is already accomplished as a gift to free us from sin. It’s done. We had no part in it one way or another. However, when we understand resurrection as God’s stamp of approval on the teachings of Jesus and the life that he led, then it summons us to take up the task of following where Jesus led. The question becomes whether we will choose to resurrect our lives. Jesus said, “I am with you.” He said “I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) Life begins when we really hear the “Fear not!” Then we can “get on with the serious and glorious business of living and loving. Life begins for Easter Christians when we realize that we do not have to die to live. You can begin it right now, right here. You don’t have to [wait for] an after-death experience. You can live life while you’re still alive.”⁴ Is it risky? Sure, but life always is. The great news is that life can be far more meaningful when you live a resurrected life with your Savior as your guide and companion, even unto the end of the age. Amen!

No one has the authority to tell you “Fear not” but God, because only God can be with you down all of your path in life. **Matthew 10:39 NRS** “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” **Acts 2:36 NRS** “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

¹Walter J. Ciszek, “Fear Not” in *Bread and Wine* (Farmington, PA, The Plough Publishing House, 2003) p 307

² Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004) p 111

³Martin B. Copenhaver, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p350

⁴ Peter Gomes, *Sermons* (New York, Avon Books, 1998) p 76