

Egerthe

Matthew 28: 1-10

Leonard J. Vander Zee

For a preacher this is the big leagues folks. It's the ninth inning and there's two outs and I'm up to bat. At least that's the way it feels. When all is said and done, this is the greatest and deepest truth I have to proclaim to you. If I can't preach this message with compelling conviction, then I might as well just shut up. Because it all comes down to this: Christ has been raised!

What keeps me from total pastoral breakdown, what I keep telling myself, is that the message is already there, in the gospel. All I need to do is tell it, perhaps explain a little here and there. And all you have to do is hear it again, not with the smug, "I've heard all this before" attitude, but with the wonder and awe of the first disciples.

It always begins with those women. Those faithful women who stood all day at the cross, wept while they lowered his body in the grave, and now, with the Sabbath over, free to complete the rituals of burial; cleaning of the body, anointing it, embalming it with spices. While the 12, now 11 disciples hide behind locked doors, and mope, the women get up before the first light to do their loving duty. We celebrate Peter's boldness and John's love, but we really we need to celebrate the women's fidelity and courage. They were the world's first ordained preachers, sent by the Lord himself.

Matthew says they came "as the first day of the week was dawning." Those words are pregnant with meaning. It's the first day, a new week, but for Matthew a new creation, a new world is about to begin. They approach the tomb as the first streaks of pink and purple hint at the dawn, prelude to the rising sun. This is important because Matthew has left us in the night. Jesus breathed his last in the darkness, and they had to wait till nightfall to carry his body to the tomb in order to honor the Sabbath, which ended at sundown. It was night when they last saw his broken, bloody body. But now the first light of dawn appeared. After the cosmic night of crucifixion, comes the freshness of dawn. As the Psalmist sings, "Weeping shall tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

“And look! A huge earthquake, and an angel rolled away the stone and sat on it.” A bit of Matthew's wry humor. You can only get the joke if you read the last verses of the previous chapter. Pilate and the religious leaders had gotten together to make sure the tomb was sealed and guarded. The sealed and guarded stone was a calculated and desperate act of state control. No one's going to take the body out of that grave! This Jesus thing is all over. The crisis management team could go home now, the business of temple religion could continue, and Pilate could relax with a drink, knowing that Jerusalem was under firm Roman control.

But the angel rolled the huge stone away and sat on it, legs crossed, and as I see it, a sly smile on its face. And the guards, the enforcers of the world's greatest power, they fell down like they were dead. What a joke. The man they are guarding inside is supposedly dead, but the men outside, supposedly alive, fall over like dead men. Matthew uses the same Greek word for the earthquake that shook the ground and the "manquake" that knocked the guards on their keesters. Who's in power here? With this earthquake the epicenter of power in the universe has shifted.

Now it's important to understand that this is not a description of the resurrection itself. You won't find one here. The event itself is wrapped in mystery. No one needed to roll away the stone to let Jesus out. He was already out. The stone was rolled away to allow the women to see in, to see that he was not there. There are some much later so-called gospels, like the 2nd century Gospel of Peter, that give us a Hollywood-style description of the event, with Jesus emerging victorious and smiling from the tomb, accompanied by a full orchestra. But in the gospels it's just scared, weeping women and befuddled disciples, who can't quite seem to get it. It belongs to the candor and dignity of the gospels that they make no attempt to peer into the mystery itself. No human being can perceive God in the act. They let the empty tomb speak for itself.

How do you tell the story then? You describe its effects by telling what happened afterward, and especially what happened to those men and women who met the risen Lord. And that's what Matthew and all the other gospel writers do.

First, listen to the angel. The word angel means messenger, and when God needs to tell the world a message that can only come from heaven because it cannot be conceived on earth, he sends an angel. And just as they told the message of Christ's birth to some no-account shepherds, they tell it now to some no-account women, for that's what they were in that society.

Listen. The angel said to 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. Come; see the place where he lay. 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.'"

You can be as artful and sophisticated as you want but sooner or later the shocking, awesome, breathtaking heart of the Christian message must be spoken. This is not about new life in springtime, new life, new growth. Fleming Rutledge says she has a file of published Easter sermons with the heading: "A hundred and one ways to avoid saying Jesus is risen from the dead."

"He has been raised." In Greek it's one word, egerthe, (that's the aorist passive for the verb egeiro, to raise. Hey, can't I show off a little bit on Easter?) Like it or not, the whole Bible, the

entire dependability of God, the integrity of the Christian faith, all comes down to this. Or, as master commentator Frederick Dale Brunner says, "The whole gospel truth rests like an inverted pyramid on the truth or falsity of this one word." If this one word is not true the whole thing comes crashing down, and it deserves to, because if this dead man is not alive, it's a lie. It's *egert* or nothing.

But if this one word is true, then everything is changed. It means that God has been faithful to his promises and we can rely on him no matter what. It means that death does not hold the trump card over our lives. It means that life has a purpose, a goal, a glorious destiny, for Jesus Christ is Lord and he holds the keys of death and hell and opens the door to eternal life. If this one word is true then a new world dawned that morning. This wrinkled, sagging flesh, this already decomposing body, this decrepit bag of bones, has a new and glorious destiny. If this one word is true then, all appearances to the contrary, everything is changed.

How do we know it's true? Can we prove it? No, we can't prove it in the sense of scientific investigation or logical proof, any more than we can prove any of the theories for the origins of the earth. There are all kinds of things you stake your life on every day that cannot be proven with meters and microscopes, or the airtight arguments of logic.

Does that mean we just have to take it on blind faith? Listen again to what the angel says. "Come, take a look at the place where they put him." Brunner says that this is the gospel's invitation to research and study. The angel doesn't say, "Don't bother to look. Take it by faith. Don't ask any questions." No, the angel invites the women to check out the facts as we have them. Christians do not get a lobotomy at their baptism. Jesus wants his people to be honest, to think about their faith, to investigate it's claims and problems.

And, let's be honest, there are problems. Read the gospel accounts and in one sense they are a mess. Each one has its own way of telling the story, and sometimes they even contradict each other in the details of what exactly happened when and where and to whom. It's like the conflicting details that may emerge from various witnesses at the scene of an accident. Do we then say it didn't happen? Evidently no one got a committee together to smooth out the transcripts to make a more cohesive and convincing story. The whole idea that this was some vast conspiracy to cover up the fact of a dead body is rendered preposterous by the very candor and messiness of the gospels.

We can rationally believe that Jesus rose from the dead, as have many of the world's most brilliant men and women. All the gospels and Paul agree. The essentials are all there. These are the facts as we have received them. The women went to the tomb that Sunday morning expecting to find a body, and instead they found an angel and an empty tomb. They were all scared, and doubtful. The Lord appeared to them, and to the disciples, and to many more. They touched him, talked with him, and ate with him. And they all came away utterly convinced that Jesus was

alive. Call out the witnesses. Our faith rests on the unbroken chain of testimony of witnesses from Mary to Paul, to my grandfather, and on down to this preacher on this very Easter Sunday in South Bend.

I'll tell you what I cannot believe with my rational mind. I cannot believe that these men and women would dedicate everything, and often enough pay with their very lives, for a trumped up lie, or some vague notion of Jesus living on in their faith. I cannot believe that a brilliant man like Paul, whose letters I have studied for 40 years, would spend years trudging around the Mediterranean, enduring hardship, sickness, beatings, shipwreck, persecution and death, for some half-baked sentiments about springtime in the heart.

But the mere fact is not enough. There's a huge difference between believing the fact, and the Easter faith that transforms our lives. The fact of the empty tomb must always turn into a personal encounter with the risen Lord. Jesus met them on the way. And do you know what Jesus' first words spoken in the gospel of Matthew are? The King James has "All hail!" which sounds quite dignified. Our translation has "Greetings." The Greek is best translated as the simple street greeting that you'd offer to anyone: "Hi there." That the translation I like best. It's ordinariness and earthiness is wonderful. It tells us that after his resurrection Jesus may be much more, but he is nothing less than our brother. Jesus is still Jesus; he hasn't become some distant holy icon.

Our real Easter faith always begins when we meet the risen Lord. It may be in some dark place where the flickering light of his presence lets you know that he is near. It may be as you gather around the Lord's table and Christ's "real presence" is not an abstract doctrine but a palpable, lump-in-your-throat experience. It may be in a sermon, in the embrace of a friend, or in a moment when his amazing grace makes you know deep down you are accepted no matter what you have done. Believers are those, who like the women, have met him on their way, embraced his feet, and worshipped him.

If you're not a believer yet, just hang around scared, doubtful, befuddled disciples like us for a while. With us, listen to his words, come to his table, pray to him in the shadows of the night; and one day, sooner or later, you will know he is alive, as his powerful, loving presence becomes real as skin.

I got an e-mail yesterday from my daughter Lenore. It's about a Saturday night and Easter Sunday morning a few years ago (the only Easter Sunday I ever missed being in the pulpit). Here's what she wrote. "The day before Easter always reminds me of that day nine years ago when Mom went in for emergency surgery (for a severe hematoma). That was the first time I saw you cry. I remember how [the next morning, after surgery] you wrote "Easter Bonnet" on mom's bandage covering her head; how you were so honest with me when I asked, "will she be all

right?" and you said, "I don't know". Somehow it is strange to look back on how we almost lost her that day, since now we really have. But that moment symbolizes for me the cohesion, hope, and love our family shares and shares still. For all these reasons Holy Week and Easter are always bitter-sweet for me; the near loss of Mom, the hope of recovery, the relief on Sunday morning when she was pulling through, the very real presence of the crucified and risen Christ with us through it all."

As he said, "Do not be afraid. Tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."