

Sermon Text for April 16, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema
EASTER SUNDAY

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Matthew 28:1-10

“The Day of Resurrection”

Welcome to Easter Sunday! We have been on a journey together. This family which is gathered under this roof has been on a journey together. This journey has been marked by prayer and you came through, you were incredibly faithful. All 120 spots were filled by you so you had someone praying for this church 24 hours a day from Palm Sunday through 1pm on Good Friday. You were faithful.

Yesterday we saw the results of the hard work of Amanda Allison and Carol Mccomsey, and these prayers that you lifted up for this church. Last year we had 117 kids at the Easter Egg hunt, this year we had 176. Some of you may be here today because of that egg hunt so you need to know this is a family that is faithful and takes their faith in Jesus Christ seriously.

Our journey over Holy Week has taken us away from Romans and deposited us down in the Gospel of Matthew. We've followed Matthew's account on Palm Sunday, at the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, and now today on Easter Sunday, on Resurrection Sunday, we find ourselves listening to his account of the resurrection. You are told on Easter and Christmas you stay away from controversial topics, but you know me well enough that I just can't do it. Today, we are going to address a controversial topic that has been the source of much debate around the dining room table that is the resurrection.

There is nothing more controversial than listening to someone who actually believes the resurrection, literally. Today we are going to hear less about what we should do once we believe, which is my favorite of all topics. If you have ever been here and heard me preach you know that I always talk about our need to put our faith into action, how we are called to radically serve the marginalized in this community. We have added programs and financial support to these areas. But today, instead of jumping to what we are to do, we will look at what are we to believe. The day of resurrection will give us plenty to talk about.

READ SCRIPTURE

So the literal resurrection is a sticking point for many because it simply cannot be proven. It would be nice to actually be able to believe that the resurrection actually happened. Of course, the disciples from Good Friday to this morning felt as if Jesus were present in Spirit, but an empty tomb and a Jesus on the road is a little too literal of a reading.

I know we have a couple of lawyers in the house and so if we had to submit the proof of the resurrection to a jury, the case would be seriously flawed. The discrepancies in Matthew are many. Who was the first to see that the tomb was empty? When did they see it? How was the stone rolled away? And Matthew doesn't help his cause any by introducing angels, this simply doesn't increase the credibility of the story.

In defense we could argue that we have other sources that point to a resurrection. We not only have today's Scripture in Matthew, but we also have Mark and Luke and John, and Luke mentions it again in Acts of the Apostles. We have witnesses. But then the counter would come that they are all different and their stories are not consistent with each other.

We also have the hostile witnesses of the guards who will tell anyone who asks them that Jesus' disciples came and took the body, there was no resurrection. What about the women, the protagonists of the story. Nothing could hurt his cause more since the primary role of the women in Matthew flies right in the face of the cultural fact that in Jewish courts in the 1st century women were not allowed to testify. So it seems as if Matthew has really done everything he possibly could to weaken his argument.

But the fact of the matter is that Matthew wrote this story not to try to convince anyone, but rather to express a faith perspective of an historical event that took place in his lifetime. Believing in the resurrection is a matter of faith. If you are new to this family know that Jesus' resurrection is fundamental to our understanding that every single person needs Jesus as a personal Savior. That salvation is wrapped up in the resurrection.

Let's go through the resurrection narrative in Matthew. We have a few main characters in the story. The first two are Mary and Mary. They are Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother Mary. They are the only ones that we find present at his death, his burial, and now today at his resurrection. They are the only ones who stayed with Jesus the whole time through all the most difficult times especially. So it makes sense that God chooses them to play the primary role on earth in the resurrection.

The guards are next and they play the role of the antagonists in the Resurrection story. They witness the earthquake which comes about as a result of Jesus' resurrection. Remember on Palm Sunday when the people quaked? Jesus rocked our world and Matthew loves that concept as 5 times he speaks about a seismos, and earthquake. Here in this story he has it twice with the earth trembling and the guards were shaking as if they were dead.

So last Monday Ellie barked once in a strange way. It was night out and it was just about time for her to come in so I went out and called her, and there she was sniffing at something in

the driveway. It was a possum, and it was huge, probably 50 pounds, it was huge! It's eyes were open and so was its mouth so I could see its sharp little nasty teeth. But it was dead. Ellie was all around it sniffing it and it wasn't moving. It was dead. We went inside and brought Ellie inside because it really freaked us out. In the morning it was gone, it wasn't dead at all.

The guards were shaking as if they were dead. You know how kids think if they close their eyes then you can't see them? It is here where we see the first of three times that the term fear is used in the telling of the resurrection story. There is a strong contrast between what the guards do in fear, remain paralyzed, and what the women do in their fear. Fear is going to be a crucial element to the resurrection story.

Then there is an angel who rolls away the stone and then sits on top of it and says: how you like me now? Not really, but we do see him sitting on top of the stone after it rolls away almost as a sense of accomplishment. Matthew in his Scripture uses angels a lot to help clear things up in confusing situations. The angel Gabriel approaches Joseph and explains what is going on with his fiancée. An angel speaks to the magi to tell them not to return to Herod. An angel tells Joseph to escape to Egypt as a refugee for his safety from an administration that was seeking his life. So the Holy family seeks asylum and it is granted.

The angel in this narrative encourages the women not to be afraid and in vs. 6 provides proof that Jesus has been raised. He says come, see the place where he lay. He tries to answer a question they would have about the resurrection, such as how, by sharing them the proof of the empty tomb. The angel tells the women what to do and where to go and then leaves with the words of Bob Marley's song three little birds: This is my message to you... These are the main actors in the resurrection story on the day of resurrection. Until Jesus enters the scene a bit later in these verses.

You know the roles of the women in this story cannot be overstated. In vs.8 in Matthew they leave with a combination of fear and joy and so are ready for what comes next. When the resurrected Jesus appears and says: "Greetings!" Really? I mean, who talks like that? Not the Jesus I know. The actual Greek is *chairete* which is a command so really Jesus probably said something like: "I'm baaack." No, but *chairete* could be, and should be translated as Rejoice! Be glad. Come on let's celebrate! Their reaction is to grab him and worship him.

In Mark we have the women leaving from the tomb in fear and not saying anything to anyone but here in Matthew the joy that they feel is rewarded by Jesus appearing and then they being able to be the first to worship the risen Jesus Christ. Let's get this straight. The day of resurrection has these two women, Mary Magdalene who was thought to be a woman of ill

repute and Mary Jesus' mother who had a child out of wedlock as they first evangelists of the Gospel message. The day of resurrection is controversial and it is a scandal and I love it. That is the Jesus I know. I know reading this resurrection story that if God can use these women, he can probably, maybe, surely use me as well.

But we aren't talking about how God can use us today, but he can. The impact of the resurrection on our lives has to be significant. In our first reading in Jeremiah we find a celebration for the families of God who will one day be restored. Our belief in Jesus Christ is centered on a restoration that took place in the resurrection for all of humanity.

But even in the New Testament we find that the Jewish community wasn't in agreement about the resurrection. See, it was controversial even then. The Pharisees embraced it and the Sadducees not so much. In the New Testament the concept of the resurrection is non-negotiable for our Christian faith. The resurrection of Jesus is the presupposition not only of these stories but of the entire New Testament. Paul states in I Corinthians 15:14 "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain."

We began by saying that we are not here to try to prove the resurrection to any of you. But we are here to celebrate it. The resurrection is not a carefully constructed myth but an inexplicable event. The story is credible simply because God is credible. The empty tomb is not proof of the resurrection. But it is a sign of the resurrection for those people of faith who are encouraged to look for signs of the presence of the living God in our life. That is all we really need on this day of resurrection.

The resurrection is God's response to Good Friday. It ushers in a new era. With Jesus his resurrection is a sign that God's kingdom has already broken into our kingdom story. An event reserved for the end of human history has happened in the midst of our human history. The kingdom of God as seen in Jesus, today on this resurrection day, is among us. Amen.