

I find this to be a strange story we are hearing this morning. It's a little different than the story you may have been expecting. You may have been hoping for the version where Mary Magdalene is weeping and has an encounter with a mysterious gardener who turned out to be the risen Jesus! Great joy in that version. A face-to-face encounter. A joyful reunion. Come on Pastor, we want more joy this morning. /

Sorry folks, that doesn't seem to be what we have. This is the resurrection story we have for today. Three women heading to the tomb to do the traditional work of a grieving family. At the time when Jesus was crucified, it was the strong custom for the family of the deceased to prepare the beloved body for burial, just as quickly as they could. Then, place it in the tomb before the sun went down. This was more urgent than ever for those who were close to Jesus. The gospels place his death at about 3 pm on Friday, which was already cutting it close in terms of burying Jesus before sunset. Add to that the fact that it was the Roman custom not to release bodies for burial at all, but rather, to leave them (1)

on the cross, and let nature, in all its goriness take its course. However, a religious leader, a respected man, persuades Pontius Pilate to go against Roman custom. Pilate allows Jesus' body to be taken away. But there is still no time to do the tender work of anointing. That will have to wait until after the Sabbath. /

What this means, is that the women we are meeting on their way to the tomb this morning have had to wait, from Friday afternoon until dawn on Sunday. And that is when we encounter them. Very early on that first day of the week. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Sal-Oh-May (Salome) bring spices, as soon as the sun has risen, so that they might go and anoint Jesus' body, as required by their custom and care. /

And they have been wondering together: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" (pause) /

Imagine a cave, the tomb of Jesus was a cave carved into limestone, with an opening about four feet in diameter, not at all high enough for most adults to walk into upright. Inside this cave is where Jesus' body had been laid on Friday, in haste, everyone rushing to get (2)

home for the second night of Passover and the beginning of the Sabbath. Now imagine a stone large enough to cover that opening tightly, rolled in place on a little channel carved out of the rock. A stone designed to stay there, not to be opened again in a couple of days. A stone weighing, perhaps, a ton. Maybe two. /

It makes sense that they wonder who will roll this stone away? I imagine the weariness in these women. I imagine, what they have been through during these terrible days. The trauma of that Friday we call “Good,” but they would have already understood to be the one of the worst days of their lives. Imagine worrying for more than a day about the fact that their beloved Jesus, this person whom they had cared for, loved, trusted, followed, understood to be God’s prophet at the very least, God’s Messiah most likely. This person who underwent such a terrible death. I imagine the anguish of not being able to do anything at all for him. The agony of simply sitting and waiting for the time to go by, and having only the terrible memories for company, an endless loop of suffering and sorrow. (pause) Do you know how agonizing 28 hours can be? I’m certain, at least, some of us do. / (3)

Who will roll that stone away, the stone of the women's sorrow?
The two-ton stone that is sitting there, squeezing the very life out of their hearts? /

I'm not good at waiting. I don't like having to wait things out that are causing me distress. Things like the flu. Or grief. Or times of not-knowing. I do not like it. /

Who will roll this stone away, I wonder. WHO? And then I do one of the things I like to do when the stone is just *sitting there*, and the waiting time seems like my enemy, my eternity. You know the kinds of things we do to distract ourselves, to make it stop hurting, to place our pain somewhere else for a while. It could be anything from retail therapy to a dip into the cookie jar to becoming extra controlling, which is always fun for those in our path. /

Who will roll this stone away? Which is the exact question the women are pondering when they learn, they see, with their own eyes, that it has already been moved away. And so they bend down, and they enter the tomb, but instead of finding the body of their Lord, they (4)

encounter a young man, robed in white. And he has something to say to them. /

“Do not be alarmed,” he says. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” /

Now I’m imagining the women, trying to catch up, their brains in rebellion; this is not supposed to be happening. This is, beyond understanding. (pause) /

“But go,” the young man continues, “tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” /

And the women go. They run. They flee. They are amazed. And they are terrified. And they tell no one. Here ends the gospel according to Mark. (pause) /

It’s a strange story we are hearing this resurrection morning. This doesn’t sound much like the Easter story you may have been expecting to hear. Amazement? Yes, sure. But fear? / (5)

And, for those of you who were following along with the reading of the scripture passage in your pew bible, you undoubtedly noticed something. After verse 8, everything else, the “Short Ending” and the “Long Ending” is in parentheses. Which means, there is a question. There is doubt. Most scholars believe that the gospel of Mark’s real, authentic, original ending, is right here. Terror and amazement and fleeing and telling no one. /

So, over the course of about four centuries, other endings, more satisfying endings, were slapped on and circulated, because who wants a gospel ending that looks like failure? Who wants a resurrection that smells like fear? /

Terror and amazement. But also, a promise of a meeting. A rendezvous, back in Galilee, where it all started. When you were a fisherman and met someone who made you jump out of the boat and leave your nets. Or where you were that woman in a crowd listening very hard to someone who actually seemed to care about you? Or were you that man with a useless hand that no one could heal, until now? (6)

Or were you Peter's very, very sick mother-in-law, who suddenly got to her feet and decided, this Jesus is someone I must serve? (pause) /

“There you will see him” Back in Galilee, where it became very clear, very fast, that this Jesus was, something special. Someone special. When it became undeniable that he was unlike anyone else, anyone *ever*.

A reunion, back at the beginning, when your faith was new, and just about the most exciting thing that had ever happened to you, when it drew you out and into something bigger than yourself, something stronger, something you could trust. /

Back when you were 3, and your mother rocked you to sleep singing you a song about a Lord of all hopefulness, a Lord of all joy. Back when you were 5, and the kindest Sunday School teacher in the world helped you to understand that Jesus loved the little children, all the little children of the world, that they all were, that you were, precious in his sight. /

Back when you were 13 and had finally felt moved to say the believer's prayer, and ask to be baptized, and went, the next Sunday, (7)

shaking but resolved, for your pastor to sprinkle you with water, wet but joyous, soaked but elated. /

Back a few years ago, when someone placed your newborn child in your arms, and you suddenly realized what grace was, had a tiny inkling of what the love of God felt like *from the other side*. Or that other time, when at the bottom of a very large pit of despair, you called out in your heart to Someone, Anyone, who might be out there, and to your shock, Jesus answered. (pause) /

The young man robed in white tells us, Go there. Go back to where it all started. Jesus will meet you there. Go back to where it all started, and you will realize that the stone has already been rolled away, and God did it gladly. God did it for you. /

This may not have been the Easter story we were expecting. But the Easter we have been given, the resurrection we witness today, is no less joyful, and it may be far more powerful. It is a story that has gotten out despite the initial impulse to keep it quiet. It is a story that has gripped people's hearts even when and where being a believer was dangerous, even unlawful. It is a story that has come down through (8)

the ages, from person to person, from mother to child, from friend to friend, even occasionally, from preacher to congregation, despite the very human desire that it be more palatable, provide a lot more proof and substantially less terror. But this is the story we have: a story that cannot be stopped. (pause) /

That makes it the best story in the world. We have the story of a God who rolls away the stone from our crushed, aching hearts and administers CPR to us through the Holy Spirit. /

We have the story of emptiness, an empty tomb, that somehow signifies the greatest abundance, resurrection to new life, the fresh beginning each of us yearns for. /

//// We have the story told again and again in the gospels, that when we try to hold onto our lives, that is when we lose them and that when we finally let go, that is when we find them. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

You do not have to die in order to discover the truth of this teaching [Mark 8:35] ... You only need to lose track of who you are, or who you thought you were supposed to be, so that you end up lying flat on the (9)

*dirt floor basement of your heart. Do this, Jesus says, and you will
live.(long pause) /*

This story may very well find us on the dirt floor basements of our hearts, but it does not leave us there. This story bends at the waist and enters our tombs, the tombs in which we have laid away our hopes and dreams and the bitter losses that we can barely bring ourselves to acknowledge. This story greets us and says, “Your hopes are not dead and buried. You are alive again. You are alive, with the glory of love.” This story says, “You may think you will flee in silence, but trust me: this story will get out. And you will be the one to tell it.” /

He is not here; he has been raised! Let him roll away the stone from your heart, and then and there, you will see him. Thanks be to God. Amen. /////