



"What's Your Story?"

Matthew 28:1-15

March 23, 2008

Easter Day

As the gospel lesson was read, did you notice that Matthew tells not one but two stories of Easter?

There is the familiar story of women coming to the tomb who are greeted by an angelic visitor: "Do not be afraid, you seek Jesus who was crucified; he is not here; he is risen." The women dash off to tell the others the astonishing news. That's the story we expect on Easter morning. That's the story Matthew really wants to tell us this day but he knows it's not the only story going around.

There's another story, a simple explanation really and, perhaps, even more believable than the one of the angels and messengers at the tomb. This story simply explains that his disciples came by night and stole him away while the soldiers were asleep. No resurrection. No mystery. It's believable. It's a reasonable story and Matthew frankly admits its popularity. It is not the story Matthew believes and it is not the story Matthew wants to tell today, but it is a story that was gaining traction among Matthew's community.

The question is, **which story will you tell?** Perhaps you were expecting to be asked, which story do you believe? Which story do you find credible? But Matthew is more interested in which story you will be willing to tell out loud. What you believe is important to be sure, but what you are willing to say is vastly more telling.

Will it be Matthew's story you will tell? Don't answer so quickly because Matthew's story is a wild and highly improbable tale. Easter Day in Matthew is a stormy time. There are no lilies and happy choruses in Matthew. Instead he describes an earthquake shaking the ground giving us no firm place to stand. An angel rolls back the stone at the tomb so we can look inside, and this angel is no cute Hallmark cherub. This angel has work to do and the beef to haul rocks. Matthew says the guards took one look at the angel and they were so horrified that the blood drained from

their faces and they looked like death itself. When women arrive at the tomb the first thing the angel must do is calm their fears: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised."

To tell Matthew's story we straddle a fault line in an earthquake zone. The ground shudders under our feet. It's a risky place to stand. Even if we tell this story we are by no means certain we understand what it means, but this much is clear: something new and unpredictable is happening. If this story is true, anything is possible. All the best hopes are possible, all the best dreams may come true. God shakes the earth to let loose a future where all things may be made new. The future is wide open—or so the story Matthew tells would have it.

The "Official Story" tells it quite differently. A news release has come down from the capital to reassure us. "Yes, there have been rumors of tremors and resurrection but these are not to be believed. We've checked it out, looked at the sources—just a few Galileans and some women—no real credible witnesses at all. We believe the body has been taken by unauthorized persons; we are investigating. Everything is under control."

The "Official Story" is impressive, complete and convincing. No earthquake. No resurrection. Everything is as it has always been. The "Official Story" is so reassuring. The earth remains firm under our feet. Go back to the way things were.

On Saturdays our local paper prints in parallel columns two alternative perspectives on a single issue. The juxtaposition of the two positions asks you to think and decide for yourself. If you were to pick up this morning's paper and read Matthew's two accounts, side by side, which would you find more believable? And, more to Matthew's point, which story will you tell others?

All through the last chapter of Matthew we hear clearly the summons to "go and tell." Matthew wonders what people are going to say. The angel at the tomb doesn't just say something to the women; the angel gives them something to say to the others. "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead.'" When the women meet Jesus on the road they want to hold on to him but Jesus has things to do and places to go and he says to the women, "**Go and tell** my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Back in Jerusalem the authorities are bribing the soldiers to make sure what they will **say**: "Tell people that his disciples came by night and stole him while we were sleeping." When his disciples finally do find Jesus atop a mountain, Jesus gives them something to say: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them...all I have commanded you."

The angel says, "Go quickly and tell...that he has risen from the dead."

The authorities say, "Tell people that his disciples stole the body while you were sleeping."

Matthew lays these alternatives side by side as if to ask us: "**What story will you tell?**"

Your child wakes screaming in the night. Horrible monsters have invaded the bedroom and you try and make them feel safe. You hold the child to yourself as mothers and fathers do, you ache with your child's pain and rock the child into a sobbing calm. **And what do you say?** "Shhh...don't be afraid—everything is okay--- everything will be all right." By what authority do you say that? Are you simply stuffing the child's mouth with pretty words the way you slip in a pacifier, something for momentary comfort but no real nourishment? Or are you bearing witness to the greatest truth you know, that in spite of all the terrors of the dark, indeed, overcoming all the terrors of the dark, Jesus Christ is alive, vastly alive, and in ways we can scarcely imagine and only barely believe, everything **will be** all right.

As Matthew tells the story of Easter, it is not a story about what we will believe as much as what we will say.

You go to visit a hospitalized friend. You stand by your friend's side and your friend is afraid. Afraid of being sick. Afraid of surgery. Afraid of living with pain. Afraid of dying. Your friend looks at you with eyes begging you to say something. What do you say? As long as no one asked you had all the time in the world to think about it but now a friend is asking. What story will you tell?

Matthew understands that faith is not just what we think in our minds; faith is what we say with our lips. Only by speaking faith do we live faith.

Matthew tosses in this small comment in the Easter story. Perhaps you noticed it. Matthew says, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." Even on Easter Day uncertainty gathers like clouds around the mountain where Jesus is. Matthew understands doubt as well as faith. The important thing is not just what we come here believing, it's what we leave saying.

If I read this rightly, the first Easter sermon was the angel's message, "Go quickly and tell...he has risen from the dead." Twenty centuries of Easter preaching has not improved upon that. Go and tell. Go and tell what you have heard. Go and tell your friends. Go and tell people you love. Go and tell your children. Go and tell strangers that the earth is shaking with the presence of God and the whole creation trembles with resurrection life breaking through. Go and tell what you have found.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Amen.