



“Wild Easter”

Text: Matthew 28:1-10

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I will confess to you, my brothers and sisters, that I do not often look forward to writing the annual Easter sermon. I don't really know why. My hunch is that Easter is better sung than spoken. Give me a rousing rendition of the “Hallelujah” from the *Mount of Olives* by Beethoven, or “Alleluia, Amen,” from *Judas Macabbeus*, and I have all the Easter I need. So, I'm always a little perplexed, and even intimidated, when it comes to writing the Easter sermon.

Sometimes, when looking for inspiration, I look to the sermons of others. One collection of sermons, by one of my mentors and my former pastor, Richard M. Cromie, contains fifteen of Richard's Easter sermons. Not one of them - not one! - was based on Matthew's telling of the Resurrection. Thanks, Richard.

So, the next thing I do is to compare the various gospel accounts. In Mark's Gospel, which is generally accepted to be the first gospel account, a group of women go to the tomb on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, to prepare Jesus' body for burial, only to find the stone that covered the tomb's opening rolled away, with a young man in a white robe in the tomb telling them that Jesus had been raised and for them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and meet Jesus there. Mark tells us, “they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And that's where the original story from Mark ends.

Luke's gospel tells us much the same story with a few noticeable exceptions. The women find the stone rolled away, enter the tomb, and find not one, but two men in dazzling clothes. The women, terrified, (as well you might assume) bow to the ground, and are assured that "He is not here, but has risen." The women return to tell all of their experiences to the eleven disciples, thus becoming the first apostles to the apostles. However, the disciples dismiss their story as "an idle tale and did not believe them." Peter got up, ran to the tomb, found it as the women had told them, and went home amazed, if not confused.

John's gospel changes things quite a bit. Instead of a group of women going to the tomb, in John's telling, it is only Mary Magdalene. She goes to the tomb early in the morning, finds the stone rolled away, and runs to tell Peter and the beloved disciple, who run to the tomb, find it empty, and return to their homes. Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb and sees two angels dressed in white who ask her why she is weeping. She then turns around to see someone she believes to be the gardener, but who is, in fact, the risen Jesus, who speaks her name and she recognizes him. Mary returns to the disciples and says, "I have seen the Lord."

Essentially, the stories are in agreement. The early morning, the walk to the tomb, the discovery of the stone rolled away, the missing body, the sharing of the good news of the resurrection - it's all there in one way or another. It's a Disney Easter and you expect there to be little bunnies and birds and fawns and the ultimate happy ending. Write a kitschy little whistling tune and it could be a classic feature film.

But then you turn to Matthew's gospel, and it's "Wild Easter." Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are on their way to the tomb, and unique to Matthew, they are not going to prepare the body. They are going to the tomb simply to be there. They are going for some peace and quiet. They are going to mourn.

On their way there is an earthquake. According to Matthew's gospel, there had been an earthquake on Friday afternoon, when Jesus died, that opened the tombs of the believers who had died. Rocks were split. On Easter morning, the earth shook and an angel descended from heaven, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. The angel looked like lightening and his clothes were as white as snow. In pure fear, the guards who had been stationed at Jesus' tomb, shook like leaves in the wind and fell down and appeared like dead men. The angel says, "Don't be afraid." Good luck with that! "Go and tell his disciples that he has been raised and will meet you in Galilee!" The two women begin to run to tell the news to the disciples, only to encounter the risen Jesus, who affirms what the angel told them. And as if all that were not enough, according to Matthew's telling of the crucifixion, those dead believers, whose tombs had been opened on Friday, started entering the city of Jerusalem on Sunday!

Matthew doesn't give us a Disney movie. Matthew gives us a special-effects spectacular. We don't get Snow White from Matthew. We get an episode of "The Walking Dead." Matthew's resurrection story is a Lucasfilm production, complete with the imperial storm troopers being struck down by an unseen force and left as though dead.

So, what is going on? Why the drama and spectacle? Why this extraordinary pageantry?

Up to this point in the story of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, God has been silent. Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" God's silence in the face of the injustice done to Jesus was deafening.

But now, God is speaking. In the sound of the veil of the Temple being torn in two from top to bottom, in the rumble and chaos of earthquakes, in the splitting of rocks, in the blazing appearance of an angel, in the paralyzing fear of the soldiers collapsed on the ground, in the resurrected dead entering the city - God is speaking.

God is speaking - in the wildness of Easter - and God is saying, "You will not silence my voice. You will not thwart my will and my way. You will not prevent my desire for my creation from coming to pass. You will not impede my justice from flowing down like waters and my righteousness running like an ever-flowing stream."

The realization of the resurrection is that God will not be dismissed from bending the world to God's will and way by anyone or anything. Rocks don't get in God's way. Soldiers don't get in God's way. Death doesn't get in God's way. God is persistent in bringing the good news of this new life to the world.

When we deny the poor the ability to live the fullness of life,
when we dismiss those who love differently from ourselves,
when we disown responsibility for endangering the planet,
God's persistent presence calls forth new life.

When we build walls instead of bridges,
when we enshrine injustice into law,
when we encumber the lowly to provide for the rich,
God's persistent presence calls forth new life.

When we exclude some from the table,
when we barricade ourselves behind misguided philosophies,
when we welcome hate and falsehood and malicious deception,
God's persistent presence calls forth new life.

This is the relentlessness of the Resurrection. This is the ferocity of the Resurrection. This is "Wild Easter."

In his book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis gives us a scene when Mr. Beaver is telling the children about Aslan. Susan asks Mr. and Mrs. Beaver if Aslan the Lion is safe. “Safe?” says Mr. Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

There is nothing safe about the God of Wild Easter. God cannot be domesticated. God cannot be Disney-fied. God cannot be denied. God cannot be created in our image. But God is good.

Rocks don’t get in God’s way. Soldiers don’t get in God’s way. Death doesn’t get in God’s way. Christ is Risen! And God’s persistent presence is calling us to new life.

For now and evermore. Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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