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## EASTER STORIES

Last Sunday we listened to the Easter story. Well, actually, we listened to *one* of the Easter stories. In the Bible, each of the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life contains a different version of the Easter story. They all tell the same message--the account of Jesus rising from the grave--and yet, they are also all different. Each one tells the story in a different way, with somewhat differing details, as each gospel writer highlights different themes. I am grateful for all four accounts because sometimes one of the gospel accounts of the Resurrection will speak to more profoundly than another. And then another time I'll read a different Easter story in one of the other gospel accounts and discover a new message for me in that one.

Today, we are going to listen to all four Easter stories, to hear what each of the writers might be saying to us, to ponder what questions they pose to us, and what good news we might find there. We begin with the Gospel of Mark, considered by most scholars to be the earliest of the four gospel accounts. Mark's story begins like this:

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; 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. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So 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.

One of the peculiarities about Mark's Easter story is the way it ends. The women run away and say nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. This leaves us with a big question: if

the women didn't say anything to anyone, how did the Easter story get told and shared? Did the women at some point finally overcome their fears and say something to others? Or, perhaps this odd ending was Mark's way of prodding us listeners of the story with another thought: if the women don't tell the Easter story, then who will? The answer is: you and me. We the listeners of the story are now responsible for telling about it by the way we live and words we say and the causes we care about. The Easter story becomes our responsibility. When, like the women in this story, when have your fears kept you from proclaiming and living the good news of the Resurrection? And how will anyone ever know this good news if it isn't told by you?

We turn to Matthew's Easter story:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But 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." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Twice in this short Easter story, we learn that the risen Jesus is to be found in Galilee.

First the angel tells the women that they will see Jesus in Galilee. And then the risen Jesus himself appears and tells them to tell the other disciples to go to Galilee where they will see him. We might wonder, what's so important about Galilee? Galilee was Jesus' hometown region. And it was the home region of his disciples as well. Jesus' crucifixion takes place in the city of Jerusalem. But now the risen Jesus is telling his followers that they will find the risen Jesus back home. Galilee was not a very prominent region in that era. Some considered it a backwater region. So what was so special about Galilee? I wonder if its ordinariness is precisely what the

gospel writer of Matthew wants to emphasize in his Easter story. Galilee is ordinary. Galilee is where we live every day of our lives--our ordinary lives, doing ordinary things, carrying out our daily tasks. What if Matthew is trying to tell us that we will experience the risen Christ not so much in extraordinary churches or places but typically right smack dab in the middle of our ordinary lives. It is in our ordinary days that we are tried and tested, that we experience heartache, that we need strength and courage, that we experience worries and disappointments. There in our ordinary lives, the risen Christ meets us with love, forgiveness, healing, and the power to raise us to new life.

But let's hear what Luke has to say about Easter:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The two men who appear to the women at the tomb ask them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" The women had come that morning expecting to find a dead body. That seems understandable since they had witnessed Jesus' death and had seen his body laid in the tomb. But maybe the Easter story Luke tells us, challenges these common assumptions we all have as we go through life. Do we overlook signs and moments where the God of new life and hope is active because we have become so accustomed to seeing only death, and division, and selfishness? Are we so cynical or skeptical that we don't see resurrection moments when they occur? Because if we are blind to the resurrection, then we cannot be changed by it, lifted, by it,

raised by it. Nor can we participate in it for others. Why do you seek the living among the dead?

But the Gospel writer John has an Easter story to tell:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

What I love about the Gospel of John's Easter story is the profound and understandable emotion it expresses. We can feel Mary's grief as she weeps. We can imagine her distress when she concludes that the body has been stolen--and how this indignity only compounds her heartache. We can understand how through her tears she mistakes Jesus as the gardener. And then, then there is this amazing and rapid shift in emotions as her grief changes to great joy when she realizes that this man was not the gardener but Jesus. Maybe you have experienced a time when your distress or anger or fear went through a sudden and rapid change upon learning some piece of good news. Maybe when the doctor said, "It's not cancer." Or maybe when your spouse

said, "I'm so sorry, I was wrong." Or maybe after telling your parents some piece of news you knew would upset them, they uttered the words you longed to hear, "I love you." These are also Resurrection stories in our lives.

That's one of the things we learn from these biblical Resurrection stories. There is not just one Easter story, nor are there just four Easter stories. In fact, there are millions of Easter stories. We each have Easter stories that take place every day of our lives. These are stories of where God's power has raised to new life, where we have experienced hope breaking through our despair, where God has helped us overcome fear, where we have been given the strength to forgive and been called upon to raise others from their hardships, and where we, like those first women at the tomb, where we have proclaimed the good news of the God of life through our words and through our actions.

Here is what the Resurrection tells us: the God of new life is at loose in the world. And there is just no telling when an Easter story may take place.