Sermon for Easter Sunday Year A

Readings: Jeremiah 31:1-6; Matthew 28:1-10

i

In Matthew’s version of the Easter story Jesus is on the express train to paradise. There is no mention of the Upper Room appearances of John and Luke, no walk to Emmaus, and even though the prospect of an appearance in Galilee is raised, there is no equivalent of John’s story of Jesus by the lakeside.

Matthew’s Easter story goes with breathless speed to towards the conclusion of his gospel which for Matthew is the commission to the Church to go out to all nations to share the good news.

So much for what is absent in Matthew’s version; let us now consider in some detail what Matthew does choose to include in his Easter story.

Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the ‘other Mary’ went to the tomb just as dawn was breaking. There are several theories about the identity of the ‘other Mary’, but most scholars believe her to have been the Mary who is also the mother of James and Joses and wife of Cleopas. The most important aspect is that these two women were present at the crucifixion and at the burial and had known Jesus for several years, or in the ‘other’ Mary’s case, may even have been related.

This means that they knew Jesus well; they knew he was dead because they put him in the tomb; and they knew which tomb it was.

Matthew does not speculate about the reason they were going to the tomb so early after the Sabbath; he makes no mention of wishing to anoint the body and no mention of any worries about moving the stone. Perhaps they were simply going to offer prayers. Or perhaps Matthew does not want to get bogged down in details – he does not want to muddy his picture by recalling the initial lack of faith and misapprehension among the women and the male disciples. What matters to Matthew was not the time they took to understand and believe, but the fact that they did come to believe. That is the most important thing for Matthew because their belief forms the foundation of the Church.

In Matthew’s version the immediate response of the women is a sense of awe and joy as they start the Church’s mission to go and tell others what they have seen. There is no weeping outside the tomb, no mistaking Jesus for the gardener, no disbelieving disciples or doubting Thomas, no disconsolate disciples walking home to Emmaus. Matthew has no time for all of that. He cuts to the chase. Jesus rose. They believed. The Church now passes on their message.

ii

The women are told to do three things by the angel: believe, share and rejoice.

There seems to be only one angel in Matthew’s story, not the two angels of Luke and John, although some try to reconcile the accounts by suggesting one angel was outside the tomb and led the women inside to see where Jesus had been and there inside was the second angel. On the other hand, Mark has only one angel.

The essential aspect the gospels have in common, despite not agreeing on how many angels were there, is that the disciples and the women were shocked, frightened and bewildered at first. “Do not be afraid,” is a common refrain throughout the gospels. But who could wonder at their bewilderment and fear? They were witnessing events that had no precedent and completely changed their understanding of the world forever.

Beyond fear and bewilderment comes faith: He is not here, he is risen. The angel reminds them that Jesus had told them that he would be raised on the third day: “he is risen,” says the angel, “just as he said.” That is the essence of it for Matthew. No room for doubt or error. There are no unanswered questions to Matthew’s mind. The Church has a clear, unambiguous and confident message to proclaim. That is what matters. He is risen. That is the Church’s message to the world. Believe it and be saved.

That is rather too blunt for some Christians today, but it was the direct, unflinching proclamation of this central truth that turned the world upside down. Whatever the initial fear or incomprehension, they believed and so we believe.

Secondly, the women were told to share their story. “Come and see” was followed by “Go and tell”. This points us towards Matthew’s climax at the end of this chapter, the great commission to the Church to go and make disciples of all nations.

Witnessing to the gospel is an essential aspect of believing the gospel. It is impossible to believe that you have found life in all its fullness in Jesus Christ, freedom from guilt and power from above, something which is on offer to every human being on the planet, and then just sit on that information. A church that isn’t involved in evangelism isn’t Church.

The fact that we can recount tales of how some people have shared the story which would make you cringe is no excuse for abdicating the responsibility yourself or for leaving it to the experts. All those gathered at the ascension are told to make disciples. The two women who are the first to encounter the risen Jesus are urged to “go and tell’. Witnessing to Christ is not an optional extra.

Thirdly, the women were told to rejoice. Jesus met them and said, “Greetings”. That is the translation in my Bible. Other translations may have had the word – “Hail”.

The Greek word is *Chairete –* which is a common form of greeting, such as our English translations suggest, but the word actually means “rejoice”. The women, as we have noted, depart “filled with joy”.

If we do believe, we have good news and every reason to be filled with joy. Church life doesn’t always fill us with joy, I admit, but today of all days, joy should be filling our hearts. Nothing else can match or mar the joy of Easter. As the hymn says:

“This joyful Eastertide, what need is there for grieving?”

iii

The compilers of the lectionary have decided not to include the following verses of the chapter concerning the measures taken by the Jerusalem authorities to bribe the soldiers who witnessed the resurrection into silence. (For comments about the role of the guard see: Sermon for Easter Day Year C).

This is the first of many attempts after that first Easter to stop the Christian story spreading. They used an act of betrayal to arrest him, false witnesses to condemn him and bribery to keep them quiet about the Resurrection. But similar and worse has been perpetrated by others since those days.

Today there are Christians who face forced conversion, imprisonment, murder and rape in a bid to turn back the Christian tide.

I recall meeting Methodists in the old East Germany before the Wall came down and hearing of families whose businesses were confiscated by the State, or whose children were denied university entrance because they were “indifferent to the Party” which was the bureaucratic language they used to denote Christians and others who did not obey the Communist apparatchiks.

When living in Rome I visited the Colosseum many times and wondered at the sheer brutality many of my fellow Christians once faced in that dreadful place. Yet defiantly, they continued to believe.

I have stood in the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory and imagined the terror and the bloodshed when the Vikings first glided through the mist to wreak havoc on the defenceless monks. I have looked at ancient standing stones decorated in Viking hieroglyphs praising the glory of Thor which have also shown the first signs of the cross which ultimately defeated the mighty god of war.

It started this day over two thousand years ago with two startled women. The story goes on and nothing the world has so far thrown at us has been able to silence that story. So how can it be, despite all those battles won, that today’s generation of Christians in the West are in danger of singing their resurrection song no more? How can it be that we should falter before the onslaught of secular materialism?

Let us not lose heart, let us not lose faith, let us not lose our joy, let us not lose our way, for Jesus is with us, his Spirit fills our hearts to tell the story of faith that the world still needs to hear. May the story go on.

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