

September 6, 2015 **A Suffering and Resurrected Savior** Matthew 28:1-10
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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 worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Matthew 28:1-10

The resurrection doesn't happen for its own sake. God has a message in the resurrection for each of us, and all of us... and it has been so since the beginning....

When we began this sermon series, millennia ago (or so it feels like), back in June, I presented you with a hypothetical character, Matthew Levy, once a Jewish tax collector, later called to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus ('come, follow me' were the operative words.) Then, according to some traditions, he became the author of the Gospel message bearing his name. (If it wasn't this Matthew himself who held the pen, then it was those who followed in his cultural shoes; new, Jewish Christians- filled with knowledge, love and poignant memories of our Lord.) So it's through Matthew's eyes that I'd like to begin this message today, because his world and our world appear to have some striking similarities, despite the passing of two thousand years.

Some might cite a similar cultural heartlessness in western society and ancient Rome, numbed by violence, cruelty, fear and a growing division between 'have's' and 'have-nots.' The role of sport as a distraction, gladiatorial spectacles, real or 'virtual' in particular, is also often cited as a similarity, as well as geographical border issues, refugees or migrants, fleeing for their lives for fresh beginnings in new lands.

There were two dominant ideologies in Rome that influenced many and elevated the individual over the common welfare. Stoicism favored a life lived in harmony with wisdom, indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune, pleasure or pain. A Stoics' life is what it is, no more or no less than what we see here and now.

Epicureans hailed 'pleasure' as the greatest good. Held in moderation, it favored the simple life, enjoying the finer things of life, not asking too much, not expecting too much from life; basic happiness, contentment and peace, thank you very much.

In other words, under the best of Roman rule, life was 'under control'; there was peace at home, food and security for those who were citizens, and relative contentment among the masses.

And into the midst of all of this, entered through the gates of an ancient Middle Eastern tribal faith, the Hebrews, one who was said to have performed miracles, healings and wonders, who embodied wisdom, challenged the ‘powers that be’, was crucified for it, and in the end was said to have been risen from the dead (!)

This is our story for today. Though we take it as matter of fact, it is still really, beyond comprehension. It’s been said that if the typical first century Roman or Jew were to hear the rumors that a man had been risen from the grave; that person’s response would likely be “how can we get him back in?”

In other words; the status quo ruled. Romans liked things the way they were. Things might not be great (or maybe they were), and it was good enough. The same goes for us, today. We know what we’re getting, anyway... If this is true, that someone has been raised from the dead, then what he said and did is true, too. Then this person really spoke the truth, lived the truth and *was* the truth in a way that has happened to no one else in history. It wasn’t a biological aberration, a chance happening, a one-off occurrence to some random person.

As was told by Matthew, the resurrection of Jesus was God’s validation of all he said and did; and if *that* was true, it was worth writing down all he said and did for generations to come.

Maybe it didn’t make a difference to Stoics, or Epicureans; ashes are ashes, dust is dust; those who live, live, those who die, die.

But Matthew saw it another way. And to others with a heart, he wasn’t alone in seeing the power of this Jesus’ transforming love; and with it a capacity to reach out and change people’s lives- even from beyond the grave.

In 1939, Bill Wilson and the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous saw, in a similar light, the power of a presence; one who could be turned to in time of need; who could be trusted, who had already passed through the worst that life could dish out, and not be indifferent to those who were looking for help.

In this Jesus, who is looked to in step after step of the 12 Step process, they met the same person Matthew and his friends knew. This Jesus was available and ready to listen, ready to share his strength to any and all who sought his comfort; ready to welcome all and invite all into fellowship together. And somehow, this Jesus was able to expand the horizons of those who followed him, from that of “I, Me and Mine” to “We, Us, and Ours.”

Perhaps the most striking words to me that jumped out at me in studying this passage through the week, in this Resurrection story shared out of season, are words that Jesus does and does not say in his newly resurrected state.

Unlike in John’s Gospel, our newly resurrected Jesus does not say to the women who first found him and reached out to grasp him: “Do not touch me.” Instead, he allows his feet to be grasped, for him to be touched, even held, and unflinchingly says... “Fear Not”- “Do not be afraid”, and he lets this new found fearlessness be the order of the day/for it to become their new motto.

For Matthew, all of this became personal. He knew this Jesus was the same after the resurrection as he had been before.

And this person who had lived and taught, shared and suffered, who had known utter defeat and whose life had then been totally validated in being raised from the dead proved to be the key to a whole new understanding of life as we know it.

As Richard Rohr puts it in his epilogue to 'Breathing Underwater', only those who have suffered can share, and save one another. In this way, Jesus started the ball rolling....and it has continued through his followers ever since.... the forgiveness he shared, the mercy, the caring, the fellowship. They found each other and grew in those same gifts, increasing as they shared....

They knew that they had found healing in the oddest place, in one who had already died, but in one who still made his mark on those who met and continued to worship, study, praise and serve in his name. This Jesus wasn't done yet. Jesus won't ever be done with us...

Still, he says to us 'Fear not'. 'Do not be afraid',.. 'touch me; take hold'....

Hearing these words can mean different things, in different contexts. When Jesus shares these words with us, it is not as a life insurance policy guaranteeing that things will never go wrong, because, often things **do** go wrong; that's life as we live it. And what goes wrong is what we often pay more attention to than what goes right. Rather, Jesus shares words with us that become the Assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God in Christ has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we may face, we will not face it alone; that nothing we encounter can ever be stronger than God's love; that ultimately, God gets the last word.

The resurrection doesn't happen for its own sake... God has a message in the resurrection for each of us, and all of us... and it has been so since the beginning....

We remember what the resurrection means for us today, and Jesus' continued presence as well, through this Meal prepared for us.

It is only a small meal, and it is small for a reason. Because God knows, we'll come back for more; and Jesus will be with us, for us, and among us... as he always is...

Amen.