

Easter Service

Texts: Jeremiah 31:1-6, Matthew 28:1-10

What is clear, as Matthew describes the details of the events on that Sunday morning, is that there is no trace of human fingerprints. He records no words from human tongue. None of the drama was initiated or directed by human will or intention.

So, we're off the hook, as humans. We can take a deep breath, release any expectation that we've got to be like one of them back then, follow their example. They didn't do anything to bring resurrection. It's not our doing. This is a Lord our God Sunday morning; this is the Lord's Day. The drama presents an angel as actor and announcer. The story opens the curtain, so to speak, with the post-death Jesus stepping onto center stage. We join the others, watching, in amazement, from the wings.

At dawn, at first light, after the day of sabbath rest, the two Marys "came to look at the tomb". They literally came to see life's dead end. They knew what to expect; everyone knows about the tomb. Where it all ends. It's all she wrote. Farewell, forever. They came to the final resting place of their friend Jesus, to look. Brave women.

We know that dead end is real and unavoidable. We'd prefer to keep our distance. We'd prefer to forget it's even there, not think about it, keep it out of mind, out of sight, far away from our family and loved ones. They chose to go, "to look at the tomb". Brave women.

Matthew describes how it happened. An earthquake. An angel came down from heaven, rolled away the stone, rearranging the entire world, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, his clothes white as snow. The guards shook with fear and then froze up like statues. The angel spoke to the two women, "Don't be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified dead. (Period.) This, here, is no longer the same place; Jesus is risen. Look, see; he's not here. Just as he said. Hurry, go, and tell the others; he'll meet them in Galilee."

This, I'd like us to suggest, is the ultimate exclamation point: **the** point in time and space when and where an unparalleled universal message originated and is exclaimed. Human witnesses arrive after the act, post-tomb opening, after the sun comes up. God has already been active in the death arena. And the record shows, if God was there, it will not be the same again. Major excavation work happened overnight to open up what had been a dead end. The holy construction crew opened up, overnight, a way where there was no way. The crew goes wherever God sends them. Even there, at the tomb, where death is a sad, painful, and unavoidable fact, a way out opened. The ultimate exclamation point: go tell the others.

Do you remember what you used to have to do in the old days, on a typewriter, when you wanted to put an exclamation point on the end of a sentence? I remember playing

around with my mother's manual typewriter when I was a kid. Practice typing: hitting keys, plunking out words, sentences. Searching and pecking at those mixed up keys, "Where is the exclamation point?" There was no exclamation point on those old typewriters!

Can you imagine, putting ink on page, recording your thoughts, telling your story, without any exclamation points? Restricting your expressions to flat, sedate, muted expressions. No astonishment, or shock, or shouts, or warnings, or vows. Just, it is what it is, the flat ink on flat page, unable to break out in exclamation. Period. Just as it says: happy is happy, sad is sad, sick is sick, and dead is dead. War is war. Hunger is hunger. Racism is racism. What's gone is gone forever. On that Sunday morning, when they came to look at Jesus' tomb, Mary and Mary discovered the exclamation key.

Not everyone, yet, has found that key. For people whom we all know and love, life will be unfair, people can't be trusted, everyone's out for themselves, different day same stuff; pain is pain, expect the worst, death will inevitably win. There is no Easter exclamation point on their keyboard. If I don't see it, it can't be! No one I know ever bypassed the grave!

My mother showed me, maybe like your parent or teacher showed you, it's there, it was right there at your fingertips. It may not be marked as such, but it's there. Type the period. Back space. Type an apostrophe. You got it.

I've had to go back, many times through my back pages, things I remember, thought I'd understood, locate those places where I put a period, but those are really points of exclamation. Go back, find the period, at the end of those sentences, at the end of those chapters. It wasn't a period. It was a wow! Astonishing! God **was** there! Add the point; the ultimate.

Back to the time, in college, when I didn't know what to do with my life. I dropped out, two years in. Went home, confused, feeling like a failure, unable to put words to what was going on with me, my parents unable to make sense of it either. Period. Read my Bible, the gospels, talked to a minister at church, got this strange thought of maybe ministry, maybe seminary. Period. Back space. Apostrophe. God opens a way where there is no way.

To the Jewish exiles, in Babylon, hurting, decimated, cut-off from their God and their home, Jeremiah revises that ending, changes that period to a point of exclamation. "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. As Israel searched for a place of rest, the Lord appeared to them from a distance. I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. I will build you up, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy, plant vineyard, cultivate farms, and enjoy the harvest." This no dead end God: God is not the creator of dead end life. God does not mute astonishment, nor flatten joyful exclamation. Trace back through the story, through your story. Those times where the sentence ends final and lifeless; where the chapter fell hopeless or pointless. The Lord

our God opens a way. Each lily, given to remember a lost loved one, trumpets a profound resurrection joy. Exclamation point.

Not just on the written page. Not just on our back pages. The parting words of the angel, as the women left the tomb, following the track that led out from the tomb: "I've given the message to you." The message we are given to exclaim. The missing key to add to all keyboards, the key to open enduring, abundant life. Each and every final chapter, is reconstructed. The stone is rolled away. Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Written into our lives are exclamation points which are not our doing. No trace of human fingerprints, beyond what we can accomplish or imagine. A way is open beyond addiction, beyond grief, beyond cancer, after the layoff, after the accident. Beyond exile. Beyond slavery. Beyond injustice. God, in Jesus Christ, revises dead ends to life's new beginnings.

Like the brave women, we are not afraid. We can see death, sickness, tragedy for what it is now: not an ending but a point of exclamation. We've got that key. At every stop, at the end of every chapter, wherever death or darkness claim their mark is last: Christ is risen. Period. Back Space. Apostrophe.