

**SPREADING TRUTH; MATTHEW 28:8-15; EASTER II, APRIL 19, 2020;  
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Now that we are somewhat back to “liturgical normal” this Sunday after Easter I thought we might explore a different biblical story. Usually, this Sunday is reserved for the account of Jesus meeting Thomas one week after the resurrection in the upper room. But there are other post-resurrection texts that have important information about the impact of the empty tomb not just on the disciples but in the wider community.

One of those texts is the one we just heard Beth read. It is a little-known story because of the Sunday lectionary preference for Thomas in the upper room. But today’s episode has equally compelling insight into the first responses in Jerusalem to the resurrection. Matthew masterfully juxtaposes the two Mary’s carrying the truth of resurrection into the world over against the two soldiers carrying the lie that Jesus’ body was stolen to any who would listen.

Two forces are at work here: the women give their allegiance to the power of resurrection and are willing to do anything that needs to be done to announce or spread this amazing truth to others; while the soldiers are devoted to the protection of the power of the authorities who fear that if word gets out that Jesus was raised from death, the people would no longer give credence to their authority; nor are the soldiers as devoted to their mission as the women for they have been bought for a price.

Yet, if we were making wagers on whose message would prevail, we might be tempted to bet on the soldiers; they are after all military personnel trained in the use of force, plus they are employed by the state, a sprawling empire with vast resources.

The women on the other hand are not trained in the use of force, have no connections to a powerful secular authority or cunning, determined religious leaders. As women they have little social standing, plus one of them is perhaps an adulteress which would seriously compromise her credibility.

We might view this episode as a confrontation between truth and falsehood. Is it possible to contain or keep others from finding out about resurrection? That the attempt to do so failed so miserably becomes in itself a “proof” for the veracity of resurrection. The fact that this attempt at containment is such a disaster is also why it is remembered and told, as Matthew says, “even to this day” which would have been at least two generations after Jesus was raised.

There is something else worth mentioning – an elegant literary nuance – that helps us get the ‘take away’ of resurrection. In the first chapter of Matthew, just twenty-three verses into his gospel, he tells us Jesus is “Emmanuel” which means “God with us.” Then twenty-eight chapters later, Matthew has Jesus tell his disciples in Galilee, where he meets them after he is raised and sends them to make disciples of all nations, “I am with you always to the close of the age.” Matthew book ends his gospel first with the promise, then the reality that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

If you get hung up on the physics of resurrection; consider that it translates into “God with us.” Rather than focusing on the laws of nature, be on the lookout for the presence of God in your life – you could find that power in myriad ways, it is elastic, liquid, as strong as granite – the key is to be open to it.

Jesus Emmanuel is God at our side no matter what. *That* is resurrection.

I say we're "back to normal" one week after Easter and resurrection. The calculating enemies of the good news and guile of the religious authorities that confronted and challenged Jesus throughout his ministry spring up again after his resurrection.

The chief priests meet and give money to the guards. They tell the guards to spread the news that the disciples have robbed the body of Jesus and that if the regional governor finds out his soldiers were bribed the priests reassure the soldiers that 'they will take care of the governor,' – all of this is in order to avoid the death-shattering truth of the resurrection.

The chief priests do not and *will not* accept the good news of resurrection.

Instead, they prefer to believe their own lie rather than to allow the cosmic truth of the empty tomb into their religious institution let alone their personal lives. Imagine: religious leaders rejecting *THE core religious truth*.

The story drips with irony. Yes, the world is back to normal!

Fast forward. That's the 'normal' we live in; it means there are still times and places and people for whom death is sovereign. Last week we said that death takes hold of us and directs our decisions and actions because of fear. Death and fear result in the exchange of our humanity for conformity; the silencing of our voices and opinions for allegiance to the authorities. Death is sovereign where freedom of expression is taken away by fear of being ostracized and punished with social stigma and condemnation.

When death is sovereign the purpose and mission of religion, of the state and of society are corrupted to serve the few at the expense of the many; and at the expense of any regard for truth, justice, honor, grace, peace, good will and the common good. We can call it the sovereignty of death or we can call it the empire of fear – the point is it is the way of the world and we see it at work even now.

But notice what happens to the women and disciples. The joy of resurrection overcomes their fear. The earth trembles, an angel appears and the guards are so fearful they become like dead men. The women are frightened also but the angel tells them not to be afraid, then announces that Jesus is raised and that they will see him again. Then Jesus appears to the women on their way to tell the disciples this amazing news. Jesus says "Rejoice!" When the women fall down to worship him *he* tells them not to be afraid and to go tell the disciples that he will meet them in Galilee.

I say the week after Easter the world is back to normal. Yes and no. The news of resurrection is loose among us, that's why we, like those women and disciples don't have to be paralyzed by fear, but can continue to function, to be the church, to serve even in the midst of a pandemic.

Thank goodness that despite questions of whether and how to open up the country; and disagreement among elected officials and the inadequate response of the federal government that failed to administer resources and personnel; *thank goodness* that enough people took the advice of experts seriously enough to self-isolate and, it appears, contain the virus in most states. At least for now.

We don't have to be afraid to be the church because the power of life is with us in this pandemic. Nor do we have to be afraid of leadership that seeks to bury the truth in order to protect its ego and perceived power or "total control" as it has been called. We don't have to fear such leaders because we learned on the first Easter that attempts to cover up the power of life to protect the abuse of power don't work.

Today's story of the failure of the authorities to silence the power of life with a lie has relevance to a nation fighting a deadly virus and being regularly subject to misinformation. This disconnect of leadership at the highest levels is concerning because human lives hang in the balance.

When briefings from the White House become campaign speeches that make false claims of what the president did and did not do to prepare the nation for the onslaught of a deadly disease; when on the one hand the elected leader says the states must figure out what to do and how thoroughly to adhere to precautionary measures health experts are urging the entire nation to observe, then on the other hand announces that he alone will decide when and how to reopen the society and economy—a claim retracted the day after it was made for its utter lack of legal or historical perspective or common sense; when the elected leader touts his media ratings before any news or update on the deadly toll of the pandemic and the efforts being made to contain it; and when he abruptly terminates a widely respected Inspector General and tweets that he has been urged by some to terminate the leading infectious disease expert who has guided the nation through this pandemic – we cannot ignore or dismiss such attempts to protect ego, grab power and remove either a trusted watchdog over trillions of relief dollars or to be coy about the fate of the doctor who has done more than anyone to protect lives from the virus. Nor can we accept his relentless abuse and personal attacks on reporters for asking relevant questions in the service of a free press in a time of national crisis.

Bribing two guards to tell a lie about an empty tomb seems innocuous by comparison.

When the gospel spells out in detail the nefarious strategy and efforts of those in power in Jesus' day to keep and protect their power while disseminating lies about the very power they were afraid of—it seems to me dishonest, if not an abdication of my responsibility as the preacher, to gloss over the central theme of this morning's scripture as if it had no bearing on our national crisis. Indeed, darker days lay ahead for those first followers of Jesus. All of them would be martyred and then thousands after them, not for organizing resistance to the state but because their ultimate allegiance was to the only absolute power and authority they would recognize – the risen Christ. History is filled with examples: Wycliff, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, George Fox, Count Zinzendorf not political ideologues but believers in a higher authority who were targets of the state.

Thank God we live in a free country. We not only have the right and privilege, protected by the sacrifice of human lives over our two and a half centuries, of selecting, by democratic process, our leaders; we have the right and freedom to worship God or not according to our conscience; and to align our lives with what we regard, in good faith, as the *ultimate* spiritual power and authority regardless of the occupant of the White House. We have a range of opinions among those of us viewing this service today about the present elected leader in the White House. My aim is not to dissuade anyone from their opinions and support for the leadership they deem needed and appropriate for the nation.

My aim is to remind us today – in the midst of one of the greatest national crises we have faced in a hundred years – of what Matthew discerned was important enough to include in his gospel. We need not fear leaders who seek to undermine the truth and go to unethical if not illegal lengths to preserve their hold on power.

What the gospel instructs us to do today is to not be afraid, to go to Galilee where we will meet the risen Christ and be given our marching orders: to spread the good news of the victory over death as far and as wide as we can....

And to let this cosmic truth of death's defeat and the defeat of every attempt to silence it, to guide us as we face the challenges of our time – as family members, church members, and citizens.

The coronavirus pandemic is far from over. There are tough days ahead. We need to be at our best at every level of government, in every business, school and household. And yes, we have Emmanuel, God with us! Amen.