

April 16, 2017 – Easter Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 28:1-10

According to Matthew

Every evangelist explains Easter a little differently—“evangelist” being just a fancy way of saying gospel teller. I thought I’d use a fancy word, since you all look so fancy. I’m especially delighted to see some hats. After that first Easter blew the bonnets off the two women at the tomb, after an experience that shook them, and the guards, too—did you notice the description of the guards in the Easter gospel? The ones who were supposed to guard a dead body were the ones who ended up looking dead. That’s a detail specific to Matthew, the account we hear this Easter Sunday. Matthew also notes that what happened was earthshaking, another detail specific to this gospel: after an earthshaking Friday, an even bigger quake three days later. Matthew is notable for such details, for bright lights and big booms; Matthew is sometimes described as an evangelist with a fondness for special effects. What Matthew could have done with CGI...

Matthew’s take may be particularly well suited for today. Not just because of the kind of movies that have overtaken theaters, especially with summer just around the corner. Maybe the earthquake in Matthew is an added sound effect; it could be man-made. But then again, the natural world has been doing strange things for us, too. Did you hear the wind, and rain last night?! But of course much crazier than that: what was this last winter? That was not a Chicago January, or February! Did man-made effects have something to do with that? (To be ecologically fair, climate change is woman made, too.) I think Matthew’s account may be especially fitting for us this year, most especially because of the seismic changes going on in our nation: executive orders, and nuclear options, and protests, the political fault lines across our country, across our dinner tables. Perhaps you have done a better job than me of maintaining equilibrium in the ongoing upheaval. It probably doesn’t help that I have a news alert on my phone, which shakes with its own mini quake on a regular basis, shaking me up.

But shouldn’t I be? Shouldn’t we all be? Shaken up? Around the world there are places of grave instability and death, chemical weapons in Syria, Palm Sunday bombings of Christians in Egypt, and bombings by us, the mother of all bombs, a terrible famine in South Sudan that is barely making the news, and closer to home, too, in our city, which I love, which has too much death. Perhaps for you this year, especially, death has hit close to home.

It hit close to home for the women, those two that Matthew says were the first to the tomb. Matthew made a point of noting that those same two were at the cross as well. And Matthew says that those same two were also there, when they laid him in the tomb. On this morning they return to it, as on that Good Friday, shaken to their core.

But this morning, Easter morning, they also get told what to do, they get a message. The angel says it, in case we missed, plainly as that, “This is my message to you.” If you, like me, have been feeling shaken, this message is for us, too, so important that we hear it, that it’s said twice. First by the angel, who introduces it with flashing lights. Then again, more succinctly, from Jesus himself. Same message, two times, with three parts: Do not be afraid. Go and tell others. You’ll see Jesus ahead. Do not be afraid. Go and tell others. You’ll see Jesus ahead.

We can understand why they would be afraid, even without the flashes and quakes. They saw hope executed and stopped up in a tomb. And then they saw things that made no sense, that

rendered the toughest people, trained Roman soldiers, catatonic. We can understand why the soldiers, and the women, were afraid; we ourselves have reasons to be afraid. We also know how much good that does us. We know what kind of choices we make, when we are afraid. We know how good our decisions are when we are afraid—if we are even able to decide, or do, anything. Fear is stupefying, and stupid-fying. A first part of the Easter message is, “You are made of tougher stuff. You are smarter than that.” A first part of the Easter message is that living in fear is no way to live. Do not be afraid.

Go and tell others. That’s next part of that Easter message for those two, and for you and for me. It starts with those two; those two at the tomb. Lord knows you need someone to go with you to places like that, to places of death, to places of grave illness, to places where hope feels buried. You need someone with you, when you yourself appear, feel, more dead than alive. You shouldn’t go through that, to that, alone. I think you also need someone with you, especially at times like that, so that you can see resurrection. Sometimes the bright lights are blinding. Sometimes, times when you can hardly believe, when you are just not seeing it, you need someone to tell you, “Yes, it doesn’t make sense, and yes, something strange—and wonderful—is happening.” I know that I need this. Not only do I need people to lament with me, I need people to encourage me. This is a pretty good definition of what a church does. It’s one of the reasons why we say that you can’t really be a Christian alone. You need two, or three, gathered, and then there is someone in the midst of you, too. Faith communities weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. Like those two women. What they experienced wasn’t meant to be limited to or for them only, it was a message to be shared, and shared. Go and tell your brothers (and sisters). Go and tell others.

You’ll see Jesus ahead. Now on a most basic, narrative level, this is simply geographic directions. This is Google Maps before there was Google. The tomb and the women are in Jerusalem; further sightings of the risen Lord will take place in another location, Galilee; go there. But as with everything else about the gospel, there’s also something much more profound being said here, a deeper message about what Easter is, and about what to do: You’ll see Jesus ahead. This is great comfort to those who are near to death, and to those who mourn. At the last, we’ll see him ahead, see loved ones who have died. You’ll see Jesus ahead. But this is also true now, here, on this side of the grave. It is also true, now, that Jesus is ahead of us. Always Jesus is ahead of us—and that’s where we’ll see him. To see the risen Lord we have to keep heading in the direction he went: the direction of peace and forgiveness. To see the risen Lord we have to go ahead to Galilee, to places he was known to frequent, do things he was known to do: eat with outcasts, welcome strangers, bless children, teach adults, tell stories of hope, of new life—tell gospel stories.

Matthew did, but he was just one evangelist, and that’s not enough, not even for the Bible, and not for today. You also can be an evangelist. You can tell the gospel story, in a different way, a way particular to you. Maybe your lights will be even brighter—or softer. Maybe our shaken world, our shaken selves, need just that. You can be an evangelist, you can explain Easter. Who can explain Easter? No one. Not alone, that’s why have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Lord, with us here. Do not be afraid, tell others, you will see Jesus ahead. Alleluia and Amen!