

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/24/2011, Easter Sunday
Matthew 28:1-10
Two Marys

At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening Bible text speaks of two women. They are both named “Mary” and they are both from Galilee, which means they come from the outlying region where Jesus grew up. One of them is Mary Magdalene. The other one is simply called “the other Mary.” I would love to think she is Mary the Mother of Our Lord, but St. Matthew seems to point to a third Mary, one called “Mary, the mother of James and Joseph.” (Matthew 27:56, RSV) In any case, these two women are the heroes of my sermon this morning. My text, then, is from Matthew 28:

⁸So they [Mary Magdalene and the other Mary] departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Hail!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. (Matthew 28:8-9, RSV)

These two dear women have traveled quite a journey, and now they are happy and faith is easy. Their former fear, heartache, and uncertainties are done, and now they worship their Lord with settled and happy hearts.

In our life here in the city, there are things that vex us, tempt us, discourage us, and make faith hard. Certainly there are good things, deeds of kindness and neighborliness. And yet the things that hurt humanity loom large, seem never to decline, but only to get worse. Our people are threatened by the complexities of the economy and uncertainties about jobs, by crime and violence, by ecological shifts the scientists warn us about, by the fading away of courtesies and increase of rudeness... I mean, things are shouted on the sidewalks that when I was boy I never imagined women and children would have to hear. And behind it all, death still stares at us with cruel confidence that it has laid many people low and means to get us too. But the great thing about this Easter story is that when these two women see the resurrected Jesus, all these other kind of problems fall away, and the women gladly fall at the feet of Jesus and worship him. As for these other problems, Hah! Be gone! Christ is risen, and your day is ending!

This is the picture I love: the picture of joyful and innocent faith. All the trials and uncertainties of their journey are done, and now the two women simply fall

down on their knees and worship the One whose resurrection means that all things are going to work out well in the end.

My theme this morning is that there will come a time for you too when faith will be clear and easy and when there will be no need of rubric or liturgical gesture guiding you to kneel. You will simply fall on your knees in joy at the feet of Jesus and you will know that everything now is better. Till then, follow on behind Jesus.

Let me begin by tracing some the journey these two Marys have traveled. Did they know each other back in Galilee? Our text does not say. Mary Magdalene gets her name from her hometown, Magdala. That is a coastal town along the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum. As for “the other Mary” we know only that she is one of the women from Galilee who followed Jesus and took care of him:

⁵⁵There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; ⁵⁶among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Matthew 27:55-56, RSV)

These two Marys at the Easter morning tomb, then, were united by their devotion to Jesus. Like you and me and our brothers and sisters in this congregation, they might have come from different towns, from different socio-economic backgrounds, and different experiences, but they are drawn to Jesus and therefore to each other.

So, they journeyed with Jesus during his ministry and they followed him all the way to Jerusalem, indeed all the way to his Cross. His Twelve disciples abandoned him and fled, but not these two women. They are there within sight of their Lord as he dies on the cross.

But it is not so much their geographical journey that interests me so much as the wild ride of their hearts during Holy Week. When the crowds saluted Jesus, waved their palm branches, and shouted their hosannas, these two Marys were probably proud and happy for their Lord. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, they were probably appalled. And when Jesus was crucified, they were probably crushed. Their hearts were broken in pieces, I do not doubt.

But these two Marys had a kind of loyalty to Jesus that simply went on, even when all normal cause of hope had ended. So, St. Matthew says that these two Mary’s were nearby when Jesus was laid in the tomb:

⁵⁹So Joseph [of Arimathea] took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. (Matthew 27:59-61, NRSV)

They go home for the Sabbath day, which was proper, but first thing the next day, that good day, they return. Why? They simply came “to see the tomb,” as St. Matthew puts it. Love drew them, I believe.

And then their wild ride really begins. There is an earthquake. One of the old commentators (Matthew Henry) figured that the earth was leaping with joy at the resurrection of Jesus:

When he died, the earth that received him, shook¹ for fear; now that he arose, the earth that resigned him, leaped for joy in his exaltation.

But whether the earth shook with fear or with joy, it is a disorienting thing for a human being to be caught in an earthquake. It just does not seem natural to us for the ground to be moving.

Then they beheld the angel. Hardened soldiers, who probably prided themselves on facing danger without blinking, fainted in fear before this angel:

...for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. ³His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: ⁴And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. (Matthew 28:2-3, KJV)

Naturally, the women are frightened too, but the angel invites them to have no fear and tells them the stunning Easter news:

⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. (Matthew 28:5-6, RSV)

What a mixture of hope and perplexity this must have created in them. “Can this be real? Is our grief leading us to imagine things?”

But when the angel bids them go, and tell the good news to the disciples, off they go, with their intense mixture of joy and fear:

⁸So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. (Matthew 28:8, RSV)

Now comes the great scene. Now comes the scene when confusion and mixed emotions give way to clarity and joy. Not a word do they speak. No emotion in them is mentioned. They simply dash to Jesus, fall at his feet, and worship him:

¹ And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; (Matthew 27:51, KJV)

⁹And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Hail!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. (Matthew 28:9, RSV)

God bless these two women! The time of uncertainty is done. Now is the time for living life with a whole new slant on things, with the conviction that, as Martin Luther put it, “a champion fights at our side.” Now, reality has changed for the better in a way that nothing can undo, for even sin, death, and the devil have met their match in our Lord Jesus.

Earlier this past week, Carol and I attended an annual liturgy called “The Blessing of the Oils.” This refers to the oils we use for Baptism, for the Prayers for Healing, and for Confirmation. In fact, when our Confirmands receive their Holy Confirmation later this springtime, on Pentecost Sunday, they will be marked with the sign of the Cross using some of the oil from this week’s liturgy.

The liturgy was held at Redeemer Lutheran Church up in the Bronx. The pastor of that congregation is The Rev. Deon Taylor. He is one of my favorite young clergy. He is a phenomenon. I hope to get him to visit here at Immanuel someday. He preaches up a storm, like Jeremiah or St. Paul. Then he hops down to the piano and plays a bluesy version of a hymn and leads the congregation in singing. We sang a real rockin’ version of “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” for example, at this service. He is learned in theology and liturgy, and Carol and I point to his church as a marvelous illustration of adapting the historical catholic liturgy to a particular local setting. Nothing was missing. Nothing was amiss. It was just fun and moving.

Well, when Pastor Taylor is preaching and playing the piano to some spiritual, or when our Immanuel Choir is singing, it is *easy* to believe. It is easy to have faith. It is easy to fall on your knees and praise Jesus.

You might have known someone like that -- someone in whose presence it was easy to have faith. My mother was like that. When she prayed, when she taught the faith in her gentle way, it was easy for me to be a believer.

Someday, this is going to be true for each of us. If we are not blessed in this present life with folks who uplift us and make it easy to believe, nonetheless, that day will come, for Jesus is risen, and we are bound to see him ourselves with our own eyes. And then we will follow the example of the two Marys in today’s Easter story: we will simply fall to the ground, grasp his feet, and worship him.

Meanwhile, please notice this: When Jesus called his disciples, he didn’t ask them to believe a blessed thing - not at first. As the Bible tells the story, they were simply minding their own business, casting their nets into the sea or sitting at their table collecting taxes, and Jesus said to them, “Come, follow me.” They followed, and in the following they found their Saviour. In the following, they came to faith.

So I say, let us follow Jesus. With the years that remain to us, let us follow him. Let us be undeterred by our doubts or feelings of inadequacy to explain ourselves to a skeptical world. Let’s just follow the One who is worthy above all others to be followed. In the process, we will do much good in this world. And in the end, all will be clear: we and all the world will fall at his feet and worship and

adore him, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:

℟ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☩ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!