

“Details are Sketchy”

Matthew 28:1-10

April 24, 2011

April 24th seems so LATE for Easter! Do you ever wonder why Easter can be in March one year and all the way at the end of April in another? Well, in brief, the early church wanted to keep the observance of Easter linked to the Jewish Passover. Because the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ happened after the Passover, they wanted Easter to always be celebrated after the Passover. And, since the Jewish holiday calendar is based on solar and lunar cycles, the Passover dates shift around. So, our Easter dates shift around.

But, the date is just one Easter thing to wonder about from year to year. Today we celebrate the Resurrection – the central, mind boggling truth for our faith. It is the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT reason we EVER GET TOGETHER any Sunday of the year or any day of the week. The resurrection is the heartbeat of Christian community. It is the HOPE to which we cling and the PROMISE on which we stand. It is the very essence of Christian faith.

So, for something that important, you would expect that the Holy Book would do a better job of resurrection investigative reporting. First, God did this and then Jesus did that and the angel flew there. Something like, well, it was really dark in that tomb, but at 1 AM on Easter morning, Jesus began to stretch and stir. He did not open his eyes, and that’s when a dove flew down from heaven, and you could hear God’s voice saying, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased, and it is time for him to GET UP. And, then God shook Jesus by the shoulders until Jesus said, “I’m up, I’m up...what do you mean I have to go back? I saved the world already – ‘crossed’ that off my list.” A little Easter punny for you. Then, God explained it all, and Jesus threw off the death shroud and pulled on his brand new sparkling robe, and used something like the Star Trek transporter to get out of that tomb. Now, THAT’s a story! But, we get nothing like that. The resurrection itself – what happened between God and Jesus in the dark of the night - is not described in the Bible – details are sketchy as they say. So, I DO wonder.

What really happened behind that stone? We ALL know that SOMETHING happened because of the stories of followers who showed up AFTER the fact. Something happened, because according to Matthew’s report, Easter morning was anything BUT peaceful. Something happened, because all heaven broke loose! It starts with the two Mary’s up early, creeping into the dark to the tomb. Each gospel gives a different reason for why they went – Mark and Luke tell us they went to anoint Jesus’ body with spices, after all, he had been buried very quickly with no time to take care of the usual business; John tells us only that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb – and we don’t have a reason; and Matthew says Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to SEE the tomb – maybe for the same reason people traipse out to Sunset Memorial Park to see Ava Gardner’s grave? To pay their respects? To grieve? To ponder the meaning of a life lost? Cemetery visits even on Easter morning are usually at least a little somber.

Unless it’s the cemetery that’s trying to be the eternal resting place of Jesus. In the stillness of THAT cemetery, an earthquake got those graves all shook up. Wouldn’t you love to know where heaven breaking loose falls on the Richter scale? 3? 5? 8? The dishes rattled in the cupboards. Pictures crashed to the floor. Late risers fell out of bed. The dew covered ground shook beneath the two Mary’s wet feet. The earth trembled and with good reason. The floor of heaven had just ripped open to spill out an angel of the Lord who swooped onto the scene. In Matthew, angels have been missing in action since the birth. But, this one has come out of

retirement and he arrives with so much force that the earth quakes. When he gets there, he sees those big, bad guards –like they are going to do anything – and he rolls his eyes at them and then rolls away the stone – plopping himself down on top of it as an obvious sign of divine triumph as if to say, “Death, you LOSE and I am taking my victory seat right here on this stone.”

And, he did. And, the audience holds its breath in anticipation. We wait for Jesus to come running out – heere’s Jesus! - making an even grander entrance than on Palm Sunday. But, nothing happens. I said, “heeere’s Jesus!” Jesus? But, Jesus is nowhere to be found. When that stone rolled away, Jesus wasn’t chomping at the bit to be released. He was gone. The tomb was empty. Hmm. Details are sketchy, but it seems like the angel brought us drama, he did not bring us Jesus. Jesus was long gone which lets us know that this whole resurrection thing – however it worked – was not simply a matter of Jesus starting to breathe again in the grave. He was not another Lazarus - Lazarus was resuscitated and had to walk out of his tomb and be unbound. But, with Jesus, something happened INSIDE the tomb that got Jesus OUTSIDE the tomb. Something happened that stirred the angel of the Lord back into action. Details are sketchy, but Easter, as least as Matthew reports it, is NOT the absence of a dead body in a tomb. Easter is the presence of a living Jesus out on walk-about on Easter morning.

Easter is about the day God shook up the dead and those who live in death’s shadow! Easter is the day God demonstrated that love does indeed conquer the meanest evil. Easter is the day God had the last word over the death of His Son and the death of all of us whenever the life gets knocked out of us. Made like him, like him WE rise.

Details are sketchy on the HOW of that morning, but not the WHAT. WHAT happened is that God kept his promise - to RESCUE the world from sin and death! Details are sketchy, but what happened is “He is not here! He is risen!” The veil between us and God is ripped into, and God has watched us stubbornly fall and have the breath of life knocked out of us, but that is not the final answer. In effect, God says, “I hear you, and death comes...in many ways, but that was Friday, and now he is not here. He is risen. On Friday, you nailed him to a cross – we know those details, but on Sunday, he is not here. He is risen. On Friday, you silenced his words – we know those details, but on Sunday, he is not here. He is risen. On Friday, you ended his life – we know those details, but on Sunday, he is not here. He is risen. On Friday, he died – we know those details, but on Sunday, he is not here. He is risen. His heart is beating in all of you. Details are sketchy on this one, but he lives...in all of you.

So maybe you haven’t been in church for a while, or maybe you are here every Sunday, and you came today AGAIN looking for Jesus to pay your respects. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but he’s not here. He is not confined to this sanctuary, nor is he baked permanently into that loaf. He is certainly not in our cemetery, nor is he imprisoned in the word. I can’t even tell you HOW it all happened. Details really are sketchy, but I can tell you that the world is a different place because of this day. You may not feel it yet, but you will...like, the two Mary’s who go to the garden – they did not feel different when they woke up, but there was a power already at work.

The few details of that power that the angel gave them were enough to send them running with fear and great joy until they meet Jesus himself! They fall to the ground, they take hold of his feet and they worship him –but he will have none of it for too long. He tells them two things. Do not be afraid and GO! Go! Those are the only details we need. Do not be afraid, and GO! I am going ahead of you. I will meet you there. The Good News of Easter is that when the earth shakes beneath your feet and you feel as though your life has fallen out from under you, when you have crashed through all your safety nets and you have fallen as hard as you can fall . . . the good news is that you cannot fall farther than God can catch you.

That is the world you live in because of this day - a world—because God is stronger than death—where it makes sense to GO and keep working for peace and justice and goodness for all in spite of the long odds; a world where it makes sense to GO and hold on and never abandon hope no matter what; a world no longer in the grip of meanness and death, but a new world where we could run into the one whose love will not let us go at any time. We don't need details to understand that. Faith in God is not in the details – God is in the love that came back for us.

There is a movie called “Wit” about a woman, Vivian Bearing. Vivian is an English professor, a demanding scholar whose specialty is John Donne, the sixteenth-century poet and clergyman. Vivian is also dying of cancer and she is virtually alone, dealing with doctors and nurses and hospitals and researchers who convince her to submit to a powerful and painful experimental treatment. It doesn't work. Her tumor shrinks but the cancer spreads. She is going to die. Throughout the story, John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," her academic specialization, keeps coming up in memory, in conversation. Donne wrote: *Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so . . . Why swell'st thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.* As Vivian becomes weaker and sicker, John Donne's words keep emerging as she floats in and out of consciousness. But then, someone speaks her name. Her own mentor, the one who taught her that sonnet, now an elderly woman, seeks her out, finds her, alone in her hospital bed and says, "Vivian—is that you? Oh Vivian" and then she does the most remarkable thing—removes her shoes, climbs in the hospital bed and holds Vivian – cradles her. She begins to read a book she has brought – to this great literary scholar. It's not John Donne; it's a child's book about love that will not let us go. It is about what John Donne wrote about. It is about love more powerful than death.

Once there was a little bunny, who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, I am running away. *If you run away*, said his mother, *I will run after you, for you are my little bunny.* If you run after me, said the little bunny, I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you. *If you become a fish in a trout stream*, said his mother, *I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.* I will become a rock, *and I will become a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are.* I will become a bird and fly away from you. *If you become a bird and fly away from me*, said his mother, I will be a tree that you come home to."

"And death shall be no more," John Donne wrote. "Death, thou shalt die." Nothing little bunnies or little people can do can escape the love of God. If you need the details, you'll have to go. You will have to go bury yourself in that love. Go to the person who hates you the most. Tell them you're sorry for your part in the broken relationship, ask for forgiveness, and he will meet you there. Or, go to the people who live on the margins turned away by most, and welcome them into your life, and he will meet you there. Go to the hungry, the imprisoned, the misfits; go to the thing that makes your life cold and dark, that drains your heart of its life blood, and bury yourself alive in the love of God... and do not be afraid. It is April 24th. It is Easter morning, and details are sketchy, but Christ the Lord is risen today! Let's go find him. Alleluia!