

“Going Forward”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

Matthew 28:1-10

April 4, 2010

We are being richly and deeply blessed, aren't we? Our life together as church, our lives in Christ, are simply being divinely blessed. It has been more than a pleasure serving as your interim-before-the-Interim. It has been a deeply moving experience for me to witness God at work among us.

It may be overstating it to say that we have been having something of our own “resurrection” experience over these last seven weeks or so. But you know, putting it that way on Easter simply seems to be appropriate!

So, let us rejoice: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

When last we left them, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting opposite the tomb wherein Joseph of Arimathea had laid the body of Jesus, and rolled a Great Stone across the entrance.

They must have left at some point, gone home, or simply wandered away, holding each other up, finding comfort in each other's company.

Now, Matthew, who is the most *Californian* of all of the Evangelists, tells us that the Two Marys were going back to see the tomb again—when suddenly there was a Great Earthquake! The Big One! *Bigger* than The Big One!

And the Two Marys saw an angel descend from heaven, roll back the stone, and sit upon it. Matthew says, “His appearance was like lightening, and his clothing white as snow!”

Wasting not a word on the armed but no longer dangerous..., the soldiers who were shaken and paralyzed with fear,

The angel speaks only to the Two Marys. “Do not be afraid,” he says.

Then he tells them that he knows why they've come. "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." Maybe...

Maybe *they* did not know they were looking for Jesus who was crucified. Maybe they just came back to his grave because they didn't know where else to go. Maybe they were stuck there. Maybe they simply were going in circles, wandering around in their disbelief.

Maybe they were awaiting further instructions—for that is what they got.

The angel says, "He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." My guess is that he let those words sink in a little bit. Not here... Raised.... Like he said...

Maybe the Two Marys were like the two blind men whom Jesus healed, as Scripture records, a story you and I talked about a couple of weeks ago. Maybe the Two Marys were as dumbstruck as the guards, only not with fear, maybe just with trying to take it all in.

So the angel prompts them: "Come, see the place where he lay." Matthew doesn't say that either of the Two Marys went to look. My guess is, they just stood there, awestruck, staring at the lightening figure in the whiter-than-snow clothes! The women's eyes, darkened by grief, now have to take in more light than may be humanly possible. They've crossed one of those spiritual thresholds, from deep darkness, into the brightest of bright light.

Now we can hear the angel get a little impatient. OK, he's thinking, you two are not moving, you're not saying anything, you're not even coming forward to look in the tomb. So he says, "Then, Go! Go quickly! Tell his disciples—the *men*, the ones who fled and scattered and were completely useless when Jesus needed them most—tell his disciples: 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will meet him.'" Then, as if to punctuate it, he says, "This is my message for you."

It's only at that point that the women "leave the tomb quickly, with fear and great joy."

In their heads, they are having this conversation: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

Only, while they are running to tell the disciples what the angel said, lo and behold, "Suddenly Jesus met them!" He not only *meets* them, he *greet*s them.

If Matthew were writing his gospel today, being the Californian that he is, he wouldn't have Jesus say, "Greetings!" How boring! No, he'd have Jesus say: *Whassup! Or: How're ya dewin'!* Or something else, very contemporary, and in the vernacular.

The Two Mary's have no trouble recognizing that this man greeting them on the road is Jesus. (This isn't John's gospel!) They come running up to him, take hold of his feet, and worship him.

For his part, Jesus reiterates the message that God had given the angel to give to the Two Marys: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my *brothers* to go to Galilee. There they will see me."

That was a nice touch: Go and tell my *brothers*... We can hear it, can't we? We can hear the forgiveness in it, the tenderness, the acceptance, the encouragement, the invitation. Go and tell my brothers...

Now, with that turn of phrase, maybe the disciples will *want* to hear the story that the Two Marys tell. Maybe the disciples will *want* to leave Jerusalem, and go back to Galilee. Maybe they will want to return to their home towns. Maybe they will *want* to see Jesus there. Maybe they won't be too ashamed.

Maybe, when they hear that Jesus called them "brothers," the disciples will join the Two Marys when they say to them: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

And so it was on the first Easter, the tomb empty, the stone rolled back, the message given first to two women, then from them to as many of the eleven as were gathered, then from them to more of Jesus' disciples, many of whom were in the "multitude" Luke reported cheered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

And from that first Easter, the stone rolled away became like a stone dropped into the sea of human consciousness, the ripple spread out, touching more and more and more people,

Until today, we as a congregation join with millions of other Christians all around the world, when we proclaim: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

Ah, but now the *work* of Easter is to begin.

You remember how, in one of my first sermons with you, I told you of a song I'd heard at a Christmas concert of a woman's chorus? Its title was, "Now the work of Christmas is to begin"? (Something like that...)

Well, today, for us as a congregation, for us in our life together as church, the work of *Easter* is to begin. Today we hear the proclamation. Tomorrow we let it inspire us to continue to become the church that God is calling us to be in the 21st Century.

When we first began this "interim before the interim," we were like the disciples: grieving; wondering what had happened; not sure what it all meant; confused about where to go from here; maybe full of more feelings than we knew.

I don't know what would have happened if I had come at that time, like the Two Marys, and told you what the angel and Jesus had said: Don't be afraid. Jesus is "going ahead of you." Jesus will *a/ways* be going forward! Jesus will *a/ways* be going ahead of us, guiding, leading, both the One giving us a sense of direction, AND the Direction itself. I don't know how you would have responded then.

But I don't *have* to know, because I have every confidence in how you will respond NOW! Now you can hear: "Don't be afraid!" Now you can feel more certain in yourselves: Jesus is already "going ahead" of us! Jesus has not left us. He's simply

waiting for us to catch up with him. And when we do, we will see him again. And again. And again.

For: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

The thing is, the Two Marys had it easy. To them was given the angel, the lightening, the bright whites... To the Two Marys was given the enough Light to open the darkest of eyes. To them was given the Story to tell—a Story that changed their lives, a Story that changed the disciples' lives, a Story that has changed the lives of countless people down through the ages, as the ripples rippled out...

For the Two Marys, what they saw happened *outside* themselves. The Two Marys were the first witnesses—but for them it was an event outside of themselves. For them, it was an event in history.

But for us, we are no longer concerned with the Jesus of history. For us, we are concerned with the Christ of Faith. The story that the Two Marys told was about the Jesus of History—but it was also about how the Jesus of History became for them the Christ of their own personal faith.

This is how it must be for us, both individually, and in our life together as church. We cannot start with the historical event outside of us, as the Two Marys did, as if we were reading about an obscure item in the second section on the back page of the Jerusalem Times. No, we KNOW the historical event.

What we are challenged to do, today especially, THIS Easter especially, is to **let the Christ of faith be raised in our hearts**. What we are being challenged to do this Easter is to allow all of the ways that we would entomb Jesus to be earth-shakenly opened.

When we would entomb Jesus in our discouragement or ennui, the earth shakes—and the Christ of faith rises in our hearts.

When we would entomb Jesus in our habits and even in our traditions; when we would seal the tomb of Jesus in our resistance to change, with sayings like, “we’ve never done it that way before”—the angel comes and rolls the stone away, and the Christ of faith rises in our hearts.

When we would entomb Jesus in our grief and confusion; and when we would entomb Jesus in our doubt and despair—the angel speaks, and says, “Do not be afraid.” And the Christ of faith rises in our hearts.

When we would entomb Jesus in our standing pat, in our refusals to move, in our insistence on the ways things always have been and in our blindness to how things can be, even MUST be, for us to BE Church in the 21st Century—then the angel tells us, “he is not here” and “he is going ahead of you.” **And we realize that the Christ of faith has already risen in our hearts—and we must run to catch up with Him!**

In the days and weeks and months ahead, we will face many challenges as a congregation. But none of those challenges will be as great as this:

We will be challenged to keep faith in the Christ who this day would come to life in our hearts.

When this happens -- when we feel discouraged, or intimidated, or resistant, or at odds with one another -- let us remember this day. Whenever we get down, within ourselves or with each other... Whenever we wonder where God is leading us, or why, or how... Whenever we simply need strength for the journey, and to remind ourselves how truly blessed we are as a people of God...

Let us simply turn to one another and say: HE IS RISEN! (Response: He is risen indeed!)

May this affirmation of God's resurrecting power continue to reverberate among us in our life together as church. And may the blessing of this Easter continue to ripple among us, as we follow our Lord to where he will meet us, to where he is already waiting to fulfill God's Promise in us.

Amen.