

When Death No Longer Determines Our Living *Matthew 28:1-10*

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Just as the two Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke have become melded into one seamless “memory” in many of our minds and Christmas pageants, so the four Easter stories meld into one glorious “Alleluia! He is risen!” among us. Oh, there are some differences in detail, like Matthew’s description of the earthquake that rumbled as an angel of the Lord descended and rolled back the stone from the tomb. It is Matthew, too, that details the official cover-up story for how a dead body disappeared, despite the efforts of guards, chief priests and a governor to make the tomb “secure.” “As secure as you can,” Pilate ordered, which just goes to show that homeland security never has worked all that well. The four gospels do not agree on the number of angels or the number and names of the women at the tomb either.

Despite these subtle and occasionally jarring distinctions, most of us come to this morning waiting to hear the familiar and mostly seamless story of Easter. The story of how those sad women, carrying spices and worrying about the stone, were surprised by an angel (or two). And how they were even more surprised by an empty tomb and a risen Lord. And how they ran—away, to the eleven. We remember how the disciples thought the women were as crazy as the story they told. And that only after they had seen him for themselves did the disciples believe, and even then they were still scared...“terrified,” is how Luke puts it. They were scared to death...scared of death—thinking that when they saw him they were seeing a ghost.

This is the story I was ready to recall and re-tell this Easter morning. So, imagine my surprise when I opened a new commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Stanley Hauerwas and read how he begins his study of Matthew 28. Hauerwas does not begin with sad women carrying spices to anoint a dead body. He says: “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary believe what Jesus has promised, that after three days he will be raised.”¹ Because they believe what Jesus has promised, they go to see the tomb. Indeed, there is no mention of spices. No worry lines on account of the stone...they go, Matthew says plainly, to see the tomb.

Matthew has been training us to “see” throughout this gospel,² to see all the way from Abraham through the generations to Joseph and Mary and Jesus; to see from Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and Daniel to Jesus. These two women, along with many other women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Golgotha *saw* him teach and heal; *saw* his crucifixion; and because of all of that, at least two of them came *to see* the tomb. They came to see that it was empty—just as he had promised. Yes, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary left the tomb quickly, with fear but also with *great joy*. Fear and great joy combine here into something more akin to awe than terror. So it is no wonder that when Jesus suddenly meets them, these women take hold of his feet and worship him in awe. They know who he is: their risen friend; but more, the risen Lord.

If only our own “seeing” of the risen Christ were as keen. Even after all these centuries of hearing this story and being his disciples, too, we have trouble seeing him,

worshipping him in awe, or believing that the promised resurrection is real. Our eyes grow accustomed instead to the continuous video feed displaying death: another car bombing in Baghdad, a new round of mortar attacks in Afghanistan, the latest young woman missing and presumed a victim of foul play in one of our cities. It was a blind person who once pointed out eloquently that we who have “eyes to see” so often don’t. Helen Keller, who lived all but the first nineteen months of her life deaf and blind, wrote an article in 1933 for *The Atlantic Monthly*. It was entitled “Three Days to See,” and there Keller named all the people and places and objects she would see if somehow she were granted a three-day reprieve from blindness. After describing in aching detail how it felt to touch the smooth skin of a silver birch or the rough bark of a pine, she imagined what it would be like to *see* the face of her beloved Teacher, Anne Sullivan, and so to know her more deeply than touch can allow. Keller wrote, “It is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.” Keller “saw” more than most of us and lived remarkably therefore in the fullness of life. Strengthened by a faith of great joy, she once remarked that “Active faith knows no fear, and it is a safeguard to me against cynicism and despair.”³

Both the angel and Jesus say, “Do not be afraid.” What is remarkable in Matthew is that the women do not act afraid. Neither do the disciples for that matter, who get up and go to Galilee as they were directed to do. All through his life with them, Jesus had been teaching his disciples to *see*...to see the world differently from the way most people saw it and lived in it. Jesus showed them the world of the Beatitudes, where the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, the hungry and persecuted turn out to be the blessed ones. He showed them a world where people did not exchange an eye for an eye, but offered a cloak to the one who just stole your coat. He showed them the world where loving your neighbor is right, but loving your enemy is necessary. He showed them the world God intends, where diseases are healed and storms do not sink boats. He showed them active faith that knows no fear. Jesus showed them that even swords and high priests and false witnesses and denials do not have the last word.

So by Easter morning perhaps the women were ready to see that even death did not get the last word. And his disciples, who had been afraid often enough as they followed him, later on Easter day perhaps weren’t afraid anymore either. After all, what was there to fear? Jesus had been raised from the dead as he had promised! And Jesus—whom they had denied and abandoned—had sent for them and had called them (*them!*) his brothers.

Some people *are* afraid, of course. But in Matthew, the ones who are explicitly described as fearful are the governor, the guards at the tomb, and the chief priests. These people had placed their bets on the world they had mastered—the world of political power or military might or religious privilege and authority, all fueled by large sums of money. But Easter made it clear that none of those visible, oh-so-real sources of power had been enough to keep Jesus dead and buried and their world settled. It is terrifying when every idol you have trusted in to keep your life secure, comfortable and safe rolls away. Especially if the emptiness you are left to face looks like death instead of promised resurrection.

The best Easter sermon, then, preached by the angel who lit up the empty tomb and by Jesus who shattered death’s silence with his vigorous, “Greetings!” is short and to the point: “Do not be afraid.”

Not everyone gets the same thing out of the same sermon, however. The guards shook and fell over like dead men while the women ran to tell the joyful news to others. I have some sympathy for those guards, having been afraid and shaken and immobilized a few times in life when my own securities and idols were rolled away. The empty space before me, I feared for a time, was a place of death. But Easter has come to us—for us—so even ordinary days we hear the Easter sermon: “Don’t be afraid.” Resurrection announces that it is, that God is, more than a match for any emptiness we face. Resurrection announces that the grip of death is not the last hold on us, so death no longer determines our living.⁴

When death no longer determines our living, “when Jesus draws us into a way of life so compellingly true...then we have no time to be afraid.”⁵ So we step over those guards and go to Galilee or anywhere else we’re sent to see what is next for us now that Easter has arrived. We do not have to be afraid, for Jesus has taught us how to see the world and also how to live in it with an active faith.

In other years we are given the gospel room to be fearful, to doubt, to hide. But in this year of an ongoing war, a presidential election, economic struggles and religious squabbles where we must discern and decide who we are and where are going together, Matthew puts this bold Easter story in front of us. Now it is time to get on to Galilee, with fear and great joy—with *awe*—to worship him and serve him, unafraid.

Notes

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press), 245.
2. Hauerwas, 245.
3. Edward R. Murrow, *This I Believe* series, 1951.
4. Hauerwas, 244, 245.
5. Hauerwas, 245.