

A Matter of Life in Death

Matthew 27:45-56

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An overlooked and under heard text

When some of us consider how often we have heard the stories in the gospels about Jesus' crucifixion, it seems as though there should be no surprises left for us. Yet, a pair of verses in Matthew's version of the story and Matthew's alone—are ones which I have never heard nor personally mentioned in a sermon. Admittedly, most of us who know they are there are not quite sure how to read them, let alone know what to do with them. Matthew is the only gospel writer who associates a general resurrection with Jesus' death.

Gospel writers construct their stories in their own ways for their own hearers

Just as every family has a brother or aunt who tells a story in their own way—sometimes with seriousness, hilarity, or with a stutter or lisp—every gospel has its own flavor and flair as to how the story is told. Details for each narrator are important. These are less about “facts” and more about how they tell the story and what is important in their telling. Only John, for example, tells us that the stalk used to raise a sponge to Jesus' mouth is from the hyssop plant. When he does, he is reminding us of the Passover and a sacrificial lamb. John is the only one who tells us that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” was at the cross. Other witnesses say only the women were present.

Luke is the only gospel to suggest that Pilate and Herod hated each other before meeting Jesus. Somehow in the strange constellation of crowds, politics, and shared headaches, these two rivals become reconciled. One wonders if Luke had other impassible conflicts in his congregation in his mind as he included that little tidbit. Was he making a historical point? More likely he may have been suggesting that Jesus can bring old enemies together, particularly ones whose memories are long and whose fuses are short. Gospel writers also share some details in common. Today's text follows Mark's lead and observes that not only are particular women present at the execution, but many other women as well.

Gospel writers are like any other storytellers. If we were to ask any four members of the congregation to write down what happened in church last Sunday, there would be many similarities, but differences as well. If you were asked to try that exercise, your spoken or written response would likely depend on who was asking you as well as what you know about their situation. It is not just news reporters, parents, or pastors who select details and then emphasize some and minimize others; everyone makes choices about what to share and does so according to their needs or the perceived needs of hearers or readers.

Gospel writers do this too as they construct the stories they tell out of the real world needs of the church, some of which we read in the Epistles. The question that might be on our minds today is “Why would Matthew include the detail about a general resurrection at Jesus' death?” Why would this feature be important for this

gospel writer and not for any of the other ones? What might have been going on in his congregation so that he saw fit to include this? The truth is, none of us knows. In light of that, we who preach tend to steer clear of texts like this one because many of us are prone to want to explain texts rather than explore them, or better, let them explore us. Texts like this one deserve to be lingered over. When we stop pondering these texts, we no longer hear them. We either skip right over details as significant as a resurrection(!), or we are astonished that somebody crept in and snuck those verses in our bibles when we weren't looking!

Signaling early

Since we are hard-pressed to answer challenging questions historically, we tend to do the next best thing and answer the question as to "why is this in there?" with theological answers. If we speculate theologically, we can say that Jesus' death triggers a resurrection for saints who sleep in death. Creative preachers could say, "Matthew is giving us a sneak preview of coming attractions. The main event, however, is still to come on Easter morning." If a preacher or congregation is grounded in the Old Testament, she might read the signs Matthew gives us. The *sign language* of the tearing of the temple veil signals the end of the boundary between God and humans. The sign of the earthquake signals the end of the power of death. Holy places like sanctuaries and cemeteries erupt with new life when the Voice of God speaks from the cross (John 5:25: "The dead will hear his voice and come out of their tombs to new life").

These things may be true and may be fine theology, but some may legitimately ask, "So what?" and by the way, "What really did happen there, and when were these dead raised? Was it at the earthquake or were they made alive at his resurrection? You know, the text isn't really clear on that." Rather than trying to solve those problems, I want to return to the question we've had from the very beginning: "Why might Matthew include this story as he shares it with hearers?" Why might this be important to him? Rather than answering this question with any kind of certainty or proofs, I would prefer to answer the question from experiences that many of us have had.

A text for and from experience

At least once a year, one of my kids asks me about what it is like for me to be with people when they die. They know that their father is a pastor and one who is "acquainted with grief." They also know deep in their own skins what it means to lose people close to them. "Dad, what is it like to be with someone who is dying or who has died, especially when you love them or care about them deeply?"

I think that question is as fine a point of entry into this text as any I could muster. So what happens when we think about this text through the lens of our experience of watching a loved one die? The reality is just what the women named in our text, and the many others, were doing: they were watching a loved one in the final hours of his life.

Some of us know that experience all too well. It is a sacred and painful place for some of us. If you have been there, you know that the hours can turn into days. You find yourself wanting to be anywhere but there, but you also find that you don't want to be anywhere else. Being in that spot is a difficult and horrible intersection. As I have watched these dramas unfolding in my family and church family, I am always

intrigued at the faithful watchfulness of women. Wives, sisters, and mothers often remain longer and more constantly than husbands, sons, and fathers can. While I could only speculate as to why that is, I marvel at how tirelessly many women stay and often, even need to be there to see the dying through.

Many of us know this drama all too well. During the long hours, darkness falls. You find yourself present, paying attention to moans, watching as breathing changes, and quenching thirst with a small pink sponge on a stick that innocently looks like a lollipop; its necessity however is so grown up. In those moments, you find yourself grateful for the narcotics that take the edge off of raw pain. You find yourself with new attentiveness you never knew you had for every change in temperature, every drop of sweat, and every change in breathing. All of these things matter much as you keep watch through the night. Then, *finally*, the breaths space themselves far apart; eventually, their distance is so great that they stop. And it is finished.

For a moment, you are astonished, and you wonder in sheer disbelief. In another, you are relieved. Then, a heavy darkness born of deep sadness falls because you know that s/he is gone. Some of us don't need to see this; others cannot be anywhere else.

God knows

This week, I have come to wonder if the author of Matthew's gospel knew this experience and knew it well. Matthew tells the story of the devoted followers of Jesus who journey with their loved one until he dies. It is the journey that every pastor knows well and s/he knows it because every congregation and every community is acquainted with grief. Maybe the story that Matthew speaks into our own narratives of loss and pain is laced not with narcotics, but with a small yet unmistakable signal of hopefulness.

While other gospel writers are preoccupied with other details, Matthew spills the beans early. Other gospel writers wait until Easter to talk about resurrection, but Matthew gives us a sneak preview of things to come, not just for Jesus, but also for those who are *in him*. A close read makes it hard to discern exactly what is going on; grief and relief will do that. Matthew does it in 26:12 at Jesus' anointing when he signals that this loving act *prepares him for his burial*. Matthew does it again in our text when he speaks a word of resurrection into the hospice hallway. These moments should not go unnoticed by those of us who read and find ourselves living into these texts.

How resurrection goes in our text is not entirely clear nor should one try to answer it. It is not unlike the parishioner who will say to the pastor after the death, "So, is s/he raised right now with the Lord, or is that still coming?" Every pastor knows that there are multiple questions in that inquiry. The reality of the text seems to tell us that a definitive answer may be off limits or out of reach. Nonetheless, resurrection abounds for "saints" and "holy ones" who line themselves up in Jesus.

We can know it too

Pastor Matthew wants us to know that whatever happens, Jesus' death undoes death. His death has grave-opening power for those who have watched a loved one die or who have seen far too many of these kinds of deaths. The Voice of God that called whole worlds into being out of darkness, chaos, and death is the same voice

that reactivates, reanimates and re-energizes life out of death. The voice of God cries out in death; that voice speaks a new word of life for those once dead.

The truth is that life can be difficult and heavy. Darkness often looms large and near, and many of our places of engagement with life are cross-shaped. Matthew allows us to see a little light breaking through into our darkness. God's light and God's life come to us and we cannot create them ourselves.

Easter is not just a day, but a way of looking at the world differently. We look at that world through tear-stained eyes of pain and loss, but also through tears of hope. God knows death and life from the inside, and from those places, God does what we cannot do for ourselves. We can imagine Pastor Matthew knowing this well in the narratives of his own congregation. Perhaps this is why he tells the story the way he does. He reminds all of us who watch the dying of loved ones that the death of Jesus means life for others—even us.