

## **Things Are Not as they Seem**

**Easter 2017**

### **Matthew 28:1-15**

I opted to return to the gospel of Matthew this Easter morning. We have been reading his account of the birth and life of Jesus and for some reason the lectionary took us to John for the final Sundays in Lent. It is John's account that is customarily read on Good Friday and on the first two Sundays of Easter. I have preached John's account of the crucifixion and resurrection many times; and I daresay you have heard many sermons on Mary in the garden; blinded by grief such that she did not even recognize the risen Christ until he called her by name. I admit that it may have been easier to go to a cash of crafted sermons on John's gospel, but then you would only be hearing what you have heard before. And the resurrection of the Lord is the very foundation of the Christian faith and must not be treated lightly.

Today is not business as usual and "same old same old" and I believe that it behooves us to revisit the text as recorded by Matthew and perhaps ponder things that we may not have considered before. Too often the Good Friday/ Easter Sunday experience is reduced to a few words: He was "crucified, dead and buried and the third day he arose." And while we accept this on faith, so ponderous an event deserves more than ten words. And true to his flair for the dramatic Matthew's account reminds us that dead is not really dead. Despite the efforts of soldier, priest and elder to have the story of Jesus end in the garden, it begins again. Such is the good news of the resurrection.

It begins in the predawn hours with two women, Mary Magdalene and another Mary coming to the tomb. Matthew does not suggest that they have arrived with spices and ointments to properly

prepare the body that had been hastily wrapped and placed in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea before the Sabbath work restrictions came into effect. According to Matthew the two Mary's go to the garden to see the tomb. There were soldiers there too.

The previous chapter closes with Chief priests and members of the Pharisees going to Pilate and reminding that Jesus had prophesied that he would rise on the third day. In order to prevent the possibility of his disciples stealing his body in the night from an unsecured grave and claiming a resurrection, they request that the tomb be sealed to guard against such a travesty. A contrived resurrection would be a "last deception worse than the first." All possibility of resurrection must be nipped in the bud and priests, elders and soldiers truly believed that they had the power to enforce such an end. This may be the first thing that is not as it seems.

Too often the created have an inflated sense of self and believe that their power is greater than the will of God. We assume that we have the power to control all things even those things which are decidedly beyond the realm of the temporal.

The tomb has been secured and a guard posted. Enter Mary and Mary in the pre-dawn and the earth begins to shake and an angel appears and rolls away the stone. This phenomenon appears to frighten the guards into a catatonic state, but not so much the ladies. Any fear that may have been welling is quickly dissipated when the angel tells them to not be afraid. The angel goes on to inform that the resurrection has already taken place. They can enter the tomb and see that there is no body inside. This is now the second thing that is not as it would seem.

The tomb had been sealed shut and a guard placed to keep watch. When the stone is removed there is no body inside.

The women are not told how the resurrection took place; only that it indeed has and they must hurry to Galilee to inform the disciples. And they do. No questions asked. No reservations. And as they make their way they meet Jesus mid task. He greets them like friends and unlike John's gospel where Mary is restrained from touching, these women embrace and worship. Meanwhile, back in the Garden the guards have shaken off their stupor and realize that they have an enormous problem on their hands.

Their prisoner has escaped...and a perceived dead one at that! They have been guarding a tomb and it is empty. What to do? Would their superiors really believe that the earth had quaked and an angel removed the stone, revealing an empty tomb? They must take action to save face and guard against possible accusations of dereliction of duty. So they make their way to the temple and share their story. Now it is the priests and the elders who have the problem.

Their worst fears have been realized; it is a final deception that is worse than the first. Bad enough that Jesus performed deeds that defied explanation. Worse that he had turned heads with his teaching on a new way of living and believing. But to somehow cheat death; to be immortal; this would be the catalyst that could very well mean the end of their power and control over the people. This too needed to be nipped in the bud. So they bribe the guards to lie about it. This would be no simple lie despite the fact that Matthew takes up no literary space to spell it all out. This is yet one more thing that is not as it seems.

To truly say that the body had been stolen by his disciples would mean that they had been ineffectual in the discharge of their duty. The seal was not strong enough to keep poor fishermen from mastering it. They had fallen asleep at their post and were absolutely unaware of the theft. The priests may have been able to persuade the governor that the disciples had been successful in

stealing the body, and though it is mere speculation on my part, I make the assumption that the military careers of the soldiers was over.

Who would trust them with even the simplest of responsibilities when they had fallen asleep at their post and lost a perceived dead prisoner?

It would seem that they were effective in telling the lie because Matthew says that many believe that the body was stolen to this day. It was all a hoax to save the faces of those who had conspired to silence his voice in the first place. Implicit is the final thing that is not as it seems for we have come to believe in the resurrection not having seen as the two Mary's and the disciples were privileged to see.

We have not held the feet of Jesus in worship although many would share that they have felt the everlasting arms when the way is challenging.

We have known those who find it easier to believe the lie of his stolen body over the truth of the resurrection.

Like the soldiers there are those who will lie and take the fall if the price is right to save the faces of those holding the purse. And this may be where things get reversed and things are exactly as they seem.

The world has not become suddenly perfect because of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Governments continue to abuse their citizenry when Civil War rages. Violence and terrorism are on the rise and we are witnessing protectionism akin to a time that we all thought was over for good. We may even find it easier to relate to the pain of Good Friday more readily than the alleluia of resurrection because the world seems perched on the very brink of destruction. So

perhaps, even on this Easter Sunday, we may be too focussed on the worldly to really grasp and embrace the hope of resurrection.

All that is wrong with the world is so much easier to see than is the tiny glimmer of hope that spells victory. And maybe that is at should be.

We cannot be blind to all that is wrong in the world. But we need to look for the glimmer of hope that spells life and new life. Despite its sham, drudgery and broken dreams it is still a reflection of God's grace and creative genius.

I had gotten to this point in my sermon and was decidedly stuck; had been stuck for days if truth be told. I scoured through myriad resources to find an illustration that would capture the agony of suffering eased by hope but to no avail. So many seemed same old, same old. And others did not convey the profoundly simple truth that we have gathered together to celebrate. More as a diversion from my writer's block I checked my email and there was the hope that I had been seeking.

A friend of our daughter Lesley whom I had married in September 2015 had sent me a photo of her brand new baby daughter. This young mother had known too many partners who neither valued nor treated her with much kindness. A tubal pregnancy a few years ago had put her chances of conceiving far higher. She married a truly devoted man who is the father of two growing sons and resigned herself to the possibility that this would be her family. Against incredible odds and despite emotional and physical scars her little miracle entered the world on April 5. Along with pictures of baby Violet, her birthdate, time and weight was the message Happy Spring!

Life has a way of appearing despite the odds against it. Despite the condition of the world and political and social unrest in many of its corners the good news of he is not here he is risen as he said refuses to be silenced. Naysayers will still deny the possibility and proof will yet and still be demanded but we continue to be among the blessed who have not seen as the two Mary's saw and have come to believe.

The two Mary's went to the tomb expecting death. So by all means when you are sorely pressed return to the story. Go to the garden in the darkness and see the glimmer of light. Go to the tomb and hear the angelic reassurance to not be afraid. Listen for the same counsel to issue forth from the lips of Jesus who meets us mid task. "Do not be afraid. Go and tell."

The resurrection of Christ creates the possibility for joy and hope because it changes everything. Life is still stronger than death.

Love is yet and still greater than hate.

Mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are temporary - real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure,-but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

Things are not as they seem. It is not all bleak and hopeless. He lives. Babies continue to be conceived and carried to full time and delivered despite the odds. Happy Spring! Amen.