

Easter, 4/24/11  
The Partial Way to Resurrection, Matthew 28:1-10  
preached by Kelly D. Turney at ELUMC

Reading from the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel as translated by Peterson in *The Message*.

<sup>1-4</sup> After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move.

<sup>5-6</sup> The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

<sup>7</sup> "Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message."

<sup>8-10</sup> The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there."

*Resurrecting God, you conquered death and opened the gates of Alleluia living. In the power of the Holy Spirit, raise us with Christ that we, too, may proclaim healing and peace to the nations. Amen.*

A film crew in Japan were filming a story about a shoe store giving away shoes—they were documenting how one businessman was dealing with loss. The tsunami had made the entire inventory un-saleable so the owner opened his doors and let people in off the street to take what they wanted. While the cameras were rolling, in walked a couple the shop owner recognized—his sister and brother-in-law, who were thought to be dead, they hadn't been seen in 8 days. They reunited in a rare show of emotion, with hugs and tears of joy— all caught on tape, and a story of loss and coping, became a story of resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

The gospel writer Matthew, takes a page from a film-makers' book and begins the Easter story with an impressive display.

"Suddenly there was a great earthquake," says the gospel, "for an angel of the Lord had descended and came and rolled away the stone, and sat down on it. His face shone light lightning, his clothing could blind you. At the sight of him the Roman guard shook with fear and fainted dead away." (*That's a paraphrase but you get the point.*)

Even Cecil B. DeMille or Stephen Spielberg would be impressed with that opening sequence. Former Harvard chaplain, Peter Gomes, says<sup>2</sup> "*The resurrection is God's way of getting our attention. It is God's way of getting us to look, to listen and to live.*" Resurrection isn't subtle, it doesn't come on like the gradual dawn. It's unnatural and confrontational and Gomes says that's the way it has to be for folks "*like you and me, preoccupied with our own thoughts, worried perhaps about the roast or the guests or both. Those of us with private griefs, personal agendas, memories, expectations and fears*"<sup>3</sup>—it takes the violent shaking of the ground beneath our feet, and dazzling angel messengers, and nature contradicted—all this extraordinary activity to open a channel so we can hear, "**Do not be afraid.**" It is not however, that God sends the quake or

the tragedy but that God will use the tragedy and even the death on a cross just as God uses the sublime and the beautiful, the mysterious and the rational. All of these are used to get through to thickheaded but goodhearted people, "**You have nothing to fear.**"<sup>4</sup>

The gospel writer Matthew doesn't tell us the conversation of the women on the way to the tomb but Mark does and he has them worrying about the piece of the plan they haven't accounted for. They've not made arrangements for the stone to be rolled away. They come bearing only their grief and preparations for the body, no equipment or persons able to move heavy objects, so they should expect to get to the tomb and not be able to do anything with the spices they have so carefully prepared and yet, they go to the grave anyway. I don't think my grandmother would be impressed with their planning. She's known for her colorful language so I can't say what she would've called this effort — let's just call it —partial — not quite fully thought out. And here's the most amazing part, according to Matthew's version of the story, because they went to the tomb (even with only a partial plan) they were the first witnesses to the resurrection, they were invited to see the empty tomb. And whether they understood it or not, they acted upon it, Matthew says. "*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*" [Gomes says] New life began for them "*not simply when they heard the message of the angel but when they acted upon it.*"<sup>5</sup>

What is this ability? To dare to act when the way is only partially known at best, what is this willingness to respond even while fearful? I know myself well enough to realize that if I encountered an angel who asked me to go and tell a story of resurrection. My first response would not have been, "Sure." It would be, tell me a little more about what you expect me to accomplish. I would've taken some notes. Perhaps, I would ask for a class, with some continuing education credit, perhaps even with a paper to prove some mastery of the subject. I certainly would've ask how much time was involved and if there were others who might be more willing or able to help, or who were in better shape to respond. I'm pretty sure I would at least taken time to stretch before I took off running to Galilee.

But for Matthew, "Life begins when we are able to take hold of what has been given to us and to run with it." Gomes says "Life begins when fear and joy, that odd couple of human existence, enable us despite the one and because of the other to get on with the serious and glorious business of living and of loving. . . . Perhaps they stopped being afraid both of what they did know and afraid of what they did not know, or perhaps they just decided not to let their fear stop them. Life began for them when they could dare to believe that the risen Christ, made a difference in their lives; and life began for them when they believed this to be true even if they could neither explain it nor understand it."<sup>6</sup> And when the women are willing to go and do on behalf of the kingdom of God, when they leave the graveyard of their grief on the way to something new, notice they encounter Jesus, who again reminds them to let go of the way things used to be.

<sup>Vs 8:</sup> So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

I suspect there's not always some linear progression from grief to boldness but rather a jumble of complex human responses all mixed up together. At least, that's what I've experienced in the mission trips to New Orleans. The volunteers who keep going

down are a mixed bag: we have questionable motives, some were completely lacking in faith, and others, like me, have limited skills. But it is amazing what can be accomplished with volunteers willing to go and do what an angel, or in our case, a project manager tells them. [When you can lay down the fear of not doing everything perfectly or up to some standard you've imagined your parents or boss or God has determined for you, you'd be amazed at what can be accomplished.] And the faithful followers of Christ living there have found amazing ways to live into Easter's Alleluia in the aftermath of the storm. They've discovered it's not a matter of waiting until some future time when things are secure and houses are rebuilt that joy will arrive. For the faithful, joy is remarkably present in the midst of the mud and the muck, in the debris and uncertainty, in the midst of the suffering and grief. We have our own storms—of relationships that fail us and addictions that bind us, of frail bodies betraying us, of debt and economies that drags us down, but we cannot wait until our beliefs systems have more clarity, our schedules are less hectic, or when life is less complicated, or dreary. The truth in the resurrection story is that you can't wait to act until you have your act together, 'til all your ducks are in a row, that's not how the story goes. The opportunity is now to decide where we stand and how we will respond in this new and frightening resurrection reality. For in the light of resurrection, things are different. Matthew scholar Thomas Long says:

The way the world used to be, if something troubling got in the way, like a call for racial justice or a worker for peace or an advocate for mercy, the world could just kill it and it would be done with. But Jesus is alive, and righteousness, mercy, and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. We have to decide where we stand and what we will do in this new and frightening resurrection world.<sup>7</sup>

It's not a matter of the specifics of what you believe about the resurrection but how you will act as a result. This last week, our Bishop, Peter Weaver, told the story of Brooklyn Dodger General Manager Branch Rickey, who was the man who decided to hire Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in a major league baseball game in 1947.

Actually his full name was, Wesley Branch Rickey, he was born and raised a Methodist, and had made the decision to follow Christ in all that he did. He was never afraid to stand up for what he believed. A graduate of Ohio Wesleyan (one of our UM universities), he traveled the country as a part of the temperance movement, encouraging people to give up drinking because of its damage to so many lives and families. He was hired to play for the Cincinnati Reds, but later fired because he was committed to keeping the Sabbath and would not play on Sundays. But, other teams hired him and he eventually rose into the ranks of baseball management starting innovations such as the "farm club system" and "knot-hole clubs" for kids who couldn't afford to attend games. Rickey's concern for "loving our neighbors as ourselves" led him to struggle over the racism in baseball and society. One of the first inklings that he might actually do something about it came in a sermon he preached as a Methodist lay preacher. Later, he went to see his pastor in Brooklyn and spent nearly an hour in conversation and prayer with him before making the final decision. He said, "This was a decision so complex, so far reaching, fraught with so many pitfalls, but filled with so much good. ... I had to talk to God about it and be sure what He wanted me to do." On the day before Jackie Robinson was to take the field playing for the Dodgers, a sports reporter approached Mr. Rickey and said, "Tomorrow, all hell is going to break loose!" Rickey replied, "I believe tomorrow all heaven will rejoice!" The film maker Ken Burns called it "one of the finest moments in all of American history...not just sports history." Rickey went on to be general manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates and hired Roberto Clemente, one of the first Latinos in the major leagues. He continued all his life as an active Methodist, known for his deep faith and commitment to both "personal holiness and social holiness."

In spite of his place in the world of baseball, as long as he lived, he never played, attended or coached a baseball game on the Sabbath, nor used alcohol or profanity. He was noted for his commitment to justice and equality as an expression of his Christian faith. And heaven rejoices, and the world is different.<sup>8</sup>

When this congregation wanted to find some way to be a part of Methodism's international efforts to change the world—Tom McGowan envisioned helping those who are mobility-impaired experience the new rail trail in town. Off he ran with that small bit of good news and a rag-tag team of folks sent out into East Longmeadow (our version of Galilee). Who could've known that this small idea in our little corner of the world is shaping up to be a community-coming-together event complete with an art installation by the scouts, music by high school Celtic band, I-spy games for the young and grown, civic organizations participating, and businesses cooperating. It was just a partial idea—but it also echoes Alleluia.

As is the district mission trip to Cheshire. A need was identified—there's a church sharing property with an elementary school but who has no relationship to its students. Enter a Volunteers in Mission group (5 people from this congregation) with little more than a willingness to donate a week of their lives to the project.... and that act of generosity had led to others stepping forward from various congregations, and now there's a electrician donating time, and another donating 7 fixtures, there's a couple of artists willing to make the space inspiring, a Habitat for Humanity high school group willing to paint, and a leader who usually takes teams down to North Carolina willing to organize it all. Each act of someone willing to do what they can inspires another to try also. It's a do-not-fear attitude, a willingness to do some part, however, partial, trusting that gifts shared will meet up with others on the way.

I pray we will embrace the fullness of life offered to us, that we will refuse to be ruled by our fears and instead choose the boldness of new life—resurrection life that no longer fears death. For we need not have full understanding, full confidence, full assurance to move forward.

It's Easter and God's trying to get our attention, God's calling us to respond, to offer our hands and feet to the Maker's business in this world. When confronted by resurrection, will you respond and be part of the Alleluia?

1. From ABC News Good Morning America, March 19, 2011.
2. From Peter J. Gomes Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 73.
3. From Peter J. Gomes Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 74.
4. From Peter J. Gomes Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 75.
5. From Peter J. Gomes Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 75.
6. From Peter J. Gomes Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 76.
7. From Matthew by Thomas G. Long (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 323.
8. From Peter Weaver's Partner in Ministry email, April 20, 2011.