

Call to Worship – **Jesus is Risen. He is Risen indeed.**

“A New Dawn of Fear and Joy, Worship and Doubt”

Before the reading of this scripture:

In any legal proceeding, the “chain of custody” or “chain of evidence” is critical to prove that what is found at the scene of a crime is what is actually presented at court. Matthew is very concerned about the chain of evidence when it comes to Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection!

Women were there throughout Jesus’ ministry, supporting his work financially and in other ways, including Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. (vv. 27:55-56)
These were witnesses when Jesus was crucified and died.

Two Marys were witnesses to the tomb in which he was buried, in Joseph of Arimathea’s new, rich man’s tomb. (v. 27:61)
Now these same two Marys will be witnesses again, to the most startling event at all, The Resurrection of Jesus.

Of course, in that time and place, women could not be legal witnesses at all. The testimony of women would not stand in a court of law.

So, if Matthew, or any of the Gospel writers wanted to invent a story about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that would have been compelling to the people of their own time, they would never have concocted women witnesses.

All the Gospel writers, however, speak of women witnesses, because they were the first witnesses. The male disciples had forsaken Jesus and fled at his arrest.
The women provided the chain of evidence:
That Jesus really died on that cross.
That he was buried, and where he was buried was exactly known, and that this Jesus rose from the dead
because that exact tomb was empty
and because these women met the crucified Jesus himself
while following their angelic mission.

Now, let us listen for the Good News in Matthew 28:1 – 20
The Word of God for the People of God! **Thanks be to God!**

Matthew is the only Gospel writer that reports about the tomb of Jesus being guarded by soldiers. The reason it was guarded was so that the disciples could not steal the body away. Then, the story circulated among the Jews by the leadership that the body had been stolen was begun by these very soldiers who were bought off with silver to be silent about the truth and to spread the lie.

Matthew has a little fun at these soldiers expense.

It should be an easy job to guard a corpse, but not when it is the body of Jesus.
Jesus was raised on that first Easter morning, and those soldiers
“became like dead men” when the angel rolled the stone away. (v. 28:4)

Let us focus our attention on the more important characters . . . the women, the two Marys.

As mentioned, these women had been there from the beginning.

They had followed Jesus in Galilee and supported him.

They were witnesses to his crucifixion and death.

Witnesses to his burial.

And now at dawn, miraculously, they are witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection,

Not to the event itself. No human was a witness to the actual moment of that glory.

But they are the first witnesses to the empty tomb and the angelic good news.

Note that in the first chapter of Matthew, an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream (v. 1:20)

Here the angel of the Lord speaks to the women face to face.

He tells them “Do not be afraid.” (v. 28:5) Which seems like an impossible order.

The angel shares the transformative testimony: Jesus who was crucified has been raised.

“Come and see” Then, Go and Tell!

Whenever we are given Good News,

we are also given a commission to share that good news with others!

The women go, they are moving fast.

They are simultaneously utterly afraid and more joyful than they have ever been.

Isn't that exactly how we are feeling on this Easter morning?

We are utterly afraid for our health and safety, for our livelihood and economy.

We wonder if anything of our pre-COVID 19 lives will ever return

You know, will we ever handshake and hug at the Passing of the Peace
like we did at the beginning of Lent ever again?

And yet, and yet, like the earliest Christians under the threat while in their house churches
we feel that joy bubbling up in us – the tomb of Jesus is empty, no corpse, not stolen,
Resurrected.

Then the women meet the Resurrected Crucified Jesus on the road.

Please note how often all the Gospel writers reveal that disciples most often meet Jesus
when they are on the path of the mission they had been given to perform the Lord's work!

Jesus is there, “Greetings” Such a normal welcome, like he might of said just a week earlier,
before he was crucified, dead, and buried.

They grab onto his feet and worship like they have never done before.

Jesus reaffirms the angelic words of comfort AND the women's mission.

“Do not be afraid; go and tell . . .” (28:10)

There is one big shift, however.

The angel had told the women to go and tell Jesus disciples,
those men who had deserted Jesus and fled at his arrest.

Jesus tells the women to give the message of his resurrection and return to Galilee
to his “**brothers**”

There is forgiveness scenting that morning on that first Easter morning,
and forgiveness is a more beautiful aroma than any fragrant flower in full bloom.

Now the eleven disciples receive the word of the women.

Eleven, because Judas Iscariot, the betrayer had taken his own life.

The eleven go to Galilee to “the mountain”.

Remember everything of real import in Matthew’s Gospel has happened on a mountain.

The Sermon on the Mount,

The feeding of the 5,000

The Transfiguration.

Even the crucifixion occurred on a mound outside of Jerusalem.

Of course, this reunion between disciple brothers and their crucified-risen Lord would occur on a mountain.

And then we have the most surprising, and maybe, the most honest verse in Matthew’s gospel:

“When they saw [Jesus], they worshiped him but some doubted.” (v. 28:17)

Some doubted? How many doubted?

Was it one disciple who doubted? Two? Which ones? Was it five out of eleven?

What did they doubt? Why?

I would surely like to know, won’t you?

At this point, an understanding of the Greek language is very helpful.

Doubt, the Greek word “Distazo”, is only used by Matthew, and only here and at verse 14:31.

Matthew does not mean that some of the disciples had perfect faith and some doubted.

NO, the point is that ALL of the disciples were worshiping Jesus,

prostrate on the ground, like they had never worshiped before,

AND they were doubting, wondering, questioning, simultaneously.

Please let me quote the biblical scholar M. Eugene Boring on this important point:

“Whatever the nature of the resurrection event, it did not generate perfect faith even in those who experienced it firsthand.

It is not to angels or perfect believers, but to the worshipping/wavering community of disciples whom the world mission is entrusted.” (*Matthew*, NIB, Volume VIII, pages 502-3)

Sisters and brothers, if you remember anything from this Easter message, please remember this:

Doubt is NOT the opposite of faith. Doubt is the cutting edge of our faith!

No one can have a real, living faith in Jesus if she or he is not struggling with some doubts.

We will always have questions. We are expected to have questions,

until that moment when we meet the Resurrected Jesus face to face,

when all our fears will be washed away,

and all our doubts evaporated.

So now, the culmination of the Gospel according to Matthew!

The final words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel are a

A Profound Proclamation

A Great Commission, and

An Eternal Promise.

The proclamation is: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (v. 28:18)

Remember at the temptations in chapter 4 the devil offered Jesus the authority over the earth,

IF Jesus would just worship him. (vv. 4:8-10)

Jesus refused, for it was not the devil’s right to give such authority,

and Jesus knew that such authority over heaven and earth would only come

from walking faithfully through the fire of the cross and the coldness of the grave.

Now God the Father has given Jesus all authority on heaven and on earth,
For Jesus has fulfilled his baptismal promise:
“This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased!” (3:17)

So Jesus gives the Great Commission to all his disciples on that mountain,
and all his sisters and brothers ever since.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (v. 28:19)

Making disciples is relationship work.

To make a disciple is to be in a real relationship with a person,
so they know you and can trust your testimony.

It is not dropping a tract in the public rest room.

It is being a living, breathing tract of testimony to the love of Jesus,

To all nations – which is Matthew’s way of saying to everyone --

No matter what race, creed, or color they are.

No matter what gender or socio-economic condition they are in.

Christians are to be relationship making people.

We are all brothers and sisters of Jesus,

seeking to have everyone everywhere adopted into the family.

We enter into this family through baptism,

specifically through baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

These are dynamic, family terms for Matthew, not strictly defined theological terms.

The book or film that most closely resembles

the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Matthew intends

is the book: *The Shack* by William Young (2007).

During this pandemic, I encourage you each to read or reread,
to listen to or re-listen to this book, *The Shack*”

And then to watch the film too if you want to. For it is timely to do so.

But, baptism is not the end of our initiation, it is only the beginning.

Sisters and brothers of Christ are always learning, always teaching and being taught.

We do not stop learning from the Bible until we meet its ultimate Author face to face.

And finally, the Promise. The eternal promise that we most need to hear today!

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (v. 28:20)

Jesus never promises life with him will be easy.

No, he tells us to pick up our crosses and follow him.

Jesus never promises we will not know times of pandemic, of fear, of pain, of death.

No, we are not immune to any of the disasters or diseases of human life.

Then what is the point? The point is one made in that old poem

Footprints in the Sand (by Margaret Fishback Powers, 1963).

Jesus is always with us, whether we know or acknowledge it or not.

And when we need it most, he carries us.

And that is enough! That, sister and brothers, is enough!

He had Risen! He has Risen indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen and amen!