

“Paying Attention to the More Subtle Signs”

Matthew 28:1-10

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A minister of music Warren and I know well is a fine choral musician who studied at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Roger is also an accomplished organist, but when I was on staff with him, his wife Jenny was the organist, and she was quite gifted. That sort of marital arrangement in music has been known to work... I should also note that Dr. James Good in our church was organist before Jenny at that church, when I was a youth there, quite a few years ago...

Roger played the organ occasionally, and when he did, he always played something big. Jenny mixed in those pieces, like the Widor toccata Maureen will play today, but when Roger played, it was always something big and boisterous, somewhat like his personality...

As a Gospel writer, Matthew is a bit like this. His Easter story is big and boisterous, compared to the other accounts in scripture. All the accounts are similar. They have minor differences, but the central reality of Jesus being raised is common to them all. Mark's Gospel is the most reserved. In its original form, it ends with the disciples fleeing the tomb in fear and amazement after being told Jesus has been raised. Luke and John are more direct. There are appearances of Jesus, though also confusion and questioning. And we are talking about resurrection. So, the essence of the story itself is pretty big and loud!

But Matthew alone says there is an earthquake, and this is no surprise, there are many earthquakes in this Gospel. They are part of Matthew's apocalyptic imagery, as they are the other synoptic Gospels' imagery, but Matthew alone uses earthquake language to describe a storm at sea, he alone mentions an earthquake at Jesus' death, and he alone refers to an earthquake at Jesus' tomb. His story is big and loud!

He is like some sports announcers who have a loud catchphrase for things that happen in games like a three-point shot being made. “Bang, bang,

bang!” one announcer says. “Earthquake, earthquake, earthquake!” Matthew says. And it is earth-shaking in many ways, this business of resurrection!

Earthquakes in biblical narratives are signs of something or Someone beyond us being at work, and this earthquake is attached to a couple other signs — an angel coming and this angel rolling the stone back from the entrance of the tomb. There are angelic figures in the other Gospel accounts, but this angel sits on the stone. His appearance is like lightning, and his clothes are white as snow. And he speaks to the women who have come the tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, telling them not to be afraid, that Jesus is not there, he has been raised and is going ahead of them to Galilee where they are to meet him. They depart in fear and joy — both emotions making perfect sense — and meet Jesus on the road whereupon they fall to their knees and worship him.

There is none of Mark’s restraint in this version of the story. There is no confusion or questioning as in Luke and John. It’s all very big and loud, very flashy and bright! God’s Son, just crucified, has come back to life! What is to hold us back from joyous celebration? Jesus is alive and this means not only that there is life beyond death, but that love has overcome fear and hope has transcended despair! All of the signs and all of the joy and all of the noises seem appropriate!

The challenge is many of our experiences with resurrection are more subtle. Many of our encounters with the Risen Christ require us to pay careful attention. Many of the signs we see that a Power greater than us is at work and thus life and love will ultimately prevail depend on careful discernment. The sacred realities to which these experiences point are no less transformative. In fact, they are the very same realities. But if we are expecting the spectacular, we may miss these signs and the hope they bring. It takes effort and intentionality to pay attention to the more subtle signs of resurrection present in our world today.

Some signs that the Risen Christ is still at work come not in a sanctuary like this but in the great sanctuary of God’s creation. Episcopal priest Heidi Haverkamp describes a conversion experience she had on Easter Sunday when she was twelve (*The Christian Century*, April 2023, p. 26). She was standing on a hill behind her grandparents’ southern Indiana home in her Easter dress,

looking at an incredible view of the Ohio River when she suddenly had the sense that everything she saw was suffused with the presence of God. All in a moment, she knew God was vividly a part of everything around her; indeed, God was a part of her, and thus her life changed forever.

Haverkamp goes on to say that she must have gone to Easter services later that day, but she doesn't remember anything about them. God became real to her while she was standing on that hill. It wasn't exactly like Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in a garden, but she heard God speaking to her through creation, saying "I am alive!"

That God speaks, even on Easter, in ways beyond the sermon, and perhaps even the music, is okay with me. It is liberating, in fact, to know that it doesn't all depend on us. Why would it? God speaks through all of life. We see evidence of new life in the emergence of spring flowers and tree foliage. We hear indications of resurrection in the singing of birds... We may even sense God's recreative powers in the smells of this season, if they do not cause us to sneeze. But there is evidence all around us, signs of God's transformative work, if we have eyes to see.

Other signs of the Risen Christ are found in our interactions with others, often with those in need. Tom Are, Jr., pastor of the Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, describes an encounter with a man near a church he served in Jacksonville, Florida (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2023, p. 15). The church was across the street from a public park, and while walking to or from the church, he would often be approached by someone asking for spare change or a sandwich. One day, a man approached him as he was on his way to a coffee shop and said, "Sir, can I come with you?" "Sure," he said, "Come on."

Tom ordered his coffee and asked what the man wanted, but he said he just wanted water and would pay for the minister's coffee. "I don't understand; you're buying my coffee?" Tom said. "You're the pastor of that church, right?" "Yes." "You have a really nice choir." "Yes, we do." The man said, "I used to sing in the choir when I was in college." "You were in college?" "Yes, until my mom got sick, and I had to drop out. But I love the music, and your custodian lets me in the balcony when the choir is rehearsing on Thursday nights. I lie in a pew and listen. Rev, it's the best part of my

week. For an hour I'm surrounded by beauty. Don't you love it when moments come along and you are just surrounded by beauty? So, I just want to buy you a cup of coffee and ask you to thank the singers at your church."

"I'm sorry, what's your name?" the preacher asked. "I'm Gabriel," the man said. "Your name is Gabriel?" "Yes, sir, it's a name from the Bible." "Gabriel, would you like to come and sing on Thursday?" "I don't sing anymore," he said, "but I love to listen. Tell them last week's anthem by Rutter is one of my favorites. Enjoy your coffee." And at that, the man disappeared into the crowd.

Reflecting on this encounter, Tom Are recalls how difficult and discouraging that church's ministry with unhoused people could be, how hard they worked for a better day, but how little seemed to change. But this day he caught a glimpse of what was possible, a sign of hope. He met an angel named Gabriel who reminded him that the Risen Christ is still at work today. Whether the man had unmet housing needs or not, his spirits had been lifted, and that mattered.

If we have eyes to see, we see evidence that the Risen Christ is still at work too — in the people among whom we serve, in the people who show up for us when we are devastated by life, in the children who lift our spirits with their energy and curiosity. I think of preschool children who came to see RPD Chief Patterson when she spoke to the Thirty-Niners. They were bubbling over with so much joy that you could not help but have your spirits lifted by watching them get their stickers, ask questions, and hug the chief. I also think of the children who distributed palms last week, moving up and down the aisles. And I think of the children who brought me an Easter Bunny cake this morning... There are signs all around us that the force of resurrection is alive!

There are other forces in this world. And it often seems like they are winning. The unjust war of aggression in Ukraine continues, trouble is brewing in Israel, shootings continue in this land, racism and antisemitism are on the rise; for goodness sakes, the SBC is now booting churches that have female pastors, in the year 2023! What reason is there to believe that change is possible? The Spirit of the Risen Christ may be at work, but so what? If hatred, injustice, violence, and poverty persist, what difference does this make?

There are no easy answers. And simply pointing to the next life is an inadequate response. This life matters to God. Does change ever happen in regard to any of these issues? It does, but it often begins in small ways, with individual hearts that are provoked by the Spirit of Christ and the suffering of humankind.

A man in another church I served had been a campaign manager for the George Wallace for President campaign in 1968. In fact, the founding pastor, Jack Noffsinger, told me there were leaders from all three presidential campaigns that year at Knollwood. It must have created tension very much like what we face these days. But this man was always kind to me. He brought me vegetables from his garden and came to Sunday School and worship.

Yet forty years after that election, he hadn't changed his thinking. He still held on to bigoted ideas about persons of color being inferior, and he still expressed these ideas... until one day he shocked me at a social event, saying over an hors d'oeuvre that he had changed his mind, that my preaching expressed a different view — I suppose about all people being children of God — and somehow he found that compelling.

How that was new I could not imagine. That message had been proclaimed there since the beginning of that church. And he later said some things that let me know he was still wrestling with this idea. But he was wrestling with it, and somehow his heart had been stirred, I suspect by the Spirit of the Risen Christ, and he had changed. If this man could change in this way, anything is possible!

It often feels like we are living between the cross and the empty tomb, with all the suffering and injustice we see. But while all things are not yet subject to God's reign, the resurrection already has happened. Christ is risen today, alleluia! This means the future is certain, it belongs to God! There are signs of this reality all around us, if only we have eyes to see, and because there are, we have all the motivation we need to keep laboring faithfully one day at a time.