

Back to Basics

A Sermon for Worship on EASTER SUNDAY
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 16, 2017
Text: Matthew 28:1-10

So, did you ever have one of those weeks when it felt like the forces of the cosmos were conspiring to drive you over the edge? You know what I mean. It's a busy week to begin with, lots of stuff to take care of but it's manageable. You know you're looking at one or two long days but no biggie. You can handle those. Just keep making your way through the week, one day at a time, one step at a time. You're holding your own and then, WHAM, something happens that knocks the pins right out from under you and you're left with your week in shambles, or so it feels. But, all that stuff needing your attention is still there. It hasn't magically disappeared in the midst of whatever happened. Then what? Well, your first instinct, as mine was, might be to crawl back under the covers and wait for things to settle back into some semblance of order. But, that is seldom, if ever, a real option. Instead, you have to "pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again" as the old song says. Yeah. Right.

As I said, that happened to me this week when I was forced to make a change in my email service provider by my current email service provider who decided to get out of the email business. *Real* helpful. I was notified in a glitzy announcement

which popped up on Thursday when I attempted to open my email to begin the day's long to do list of email correspondence. I had been experiencing problems with my email for the past few weeks so I had figured something was up. That's why when this notice to make the change popped up I decided to just do it, hoping it would solve these annoying issues. Only after I had clicked "proceed with change" did I receive the second notice that I would not have access to my email while the change was in process – only a couple of hours I was assured. I was also promised an email notification when the change was completed and I could access my email again. Little red flags started waiving around in my head at this point because how could they send me an email to tell me the email was ready to use if I didn't have access to email? But they had asked for a second email address as "back-up" so I figured the notice would show up there. It didn't.

Two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours passed. Nothing. Six hours, seven hours, eight hours. Still nothing. Finally, in desperation I checked my old email access and after a series of convoluted screen instructions involving old and new passwords, I finally had access to my new email account. 12 hours later. And that notification email to tell me I was all set? Never showed up anywhere. Grrrr!!

As you can imagine, for this to happen to me, a pastor, during Holy Week, was not a good thing. I use email constantly,

especially this week, to coordinate with Deacons and readers for the services and with Dav about the music. Susan and I send revisions of the order of worship back and forth for editing. The Weekly Email Update I send out was going to go out early this week to remind folks of the Maundy Thursday service and the Good Friday Vigil here in the sanctuary. But it didn't get out until Friday afternoon. I was annoyed, to put it mildly.

That's when I heard it. A little voice trying to get my attention. "Aren't you forgetting something," the little voice asked, barely above a whisper. "Of course, I'm forgetting something," I screamed in my head. "I can't check my email to see what I'm missing, what I need to be doing!" "No, no, no," the little voice persisted. "Something else."

"Well, honestly, I don't know. I can't even think straight!" I responded. "You're forgetting me," the voice said, sounding very small indeed. That's when I recognized the voice. It was Jesus. I know, I know, that sounds crazy. The pastor is hearing voices in her head that she claims is Jesus. Poor thing. She's working too hard. Well, that's true. I was working too hard, focusing on the wrong things, and that was Jesus' point. I had forgotten all about him in my anxiety about the things I couldn't get done. I had forgotten about the somber beauty of the Maundy Thursday service and how much I love to tell the story of the Last Supper as the Words of Institution at that service. It's my favorite service of

the year! I'd forgotten about Jesus' horrible death on the cross as the reason for the Vigil here on Friday afternoon. I'd forgotten about the ways in which the Thursday and Friday of Holy Week make the joy of Easter morning possible. I'd forgotten how much I love getting the sanctuary ready for Easter morning, straightening the pews and the teddy bears, thinking about how to fit in all the plants during the processional. I'd forgotten about all of it, and that was just plain wrong. My focus, my priorities had gotten all mixed up and confused, well intentioned though they were. And, dear friends, if that can happen to a pastor during Holy Week, it can happen to anyone, even you. And it does, all the time. Right?

That's really what the story of that first Easter morning is all about. In a garden outside a tomb sitting somewhere outside of ancient Jerusalem Jesus himself pushed the reset button on priorities for everyone and nothing has been the same since. We know the story and we know what it means, sort of. At least we know what it's supposed to mean, we think. But, a dead guy coming back to life? Really? I mean, how? Did it really happen? Or did something more plausible happen that just got everyone confused? Like, he wasn't really dead to begin with. It just looked like he was dead because the wine they gave him at the last moment was spiked. That is one of the theories that has been proposed by a few scholars whose life work is to reconcile all the stuff in the Bible that doesn't match with what we know about

history and science. These tend to be more fundamentalist types who want to prove the bible is 100% true and accurate as a compendium of history. With all due respect to folks who feel that way, I think they're missing the whole point of the Resurrection. It's not supposed to make sense within the realm of human experience. God always intended it to be outlandish, surreal, confusing and impossible to explain. An explanation of the how isn't the key part of the story. It's not important. The why is all that matters. Hence Jesus and the reset button.

Matthew's version of the Resurrection is our text for this morning. Each of the Gospels recounts the Resurrection in more or less the same terms. But I've always been partial to Matthew's. For one thing, his is the only one with an earthquake. He begins with Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" on their way to the tomb. We always assume they were on their way to anoint the body because it had been buried in such a hurry on Friday, but that's not what the text says. They were just going to see the tomb, the same way many of us go to visit the grave of a loved one the day after the funeral. The two Mary's would have known they would not be able to get in to the tomb because it had already been sealed with a huge boulder and Pilate had ordered the tomb guarded as well. They were just going to be there. That's when the earthquake happened and an angel rolled the boulder away from the entrance to the tomb. Seeing this brilliant figure, the

guards fainted. That leaves the two Mary's alone with the angel at the now opened tomb. Not waiting for them to say anything, the angel tells them not to be afraid and that he knows why they have come. Jesus isn't here, he says. He has been raised. Then he tells them something else: Come and see where Jesus' body had been laid and then go and tell his disciples what has happened.

Apparently, they did go into the tomb to look because the text says they left the tomb in great fear and joy then took off running to find the disciples. They didn't get too far when they encountered Jesus' himself who said "Greetings!" I have to wonder how they reacted in that moment. They recognized him right away but what did they see? Could they see the nail marks and the marks from the scourging and the crown of thorns? Could they see where his side had been pierced? Was he still damp and dirty, streaked with the dust of the tomb? Was he wrapped in the shroud? Or, did he just look like he always did? We don't know, but I wonder. You have to wonder because this was such an extraordinary occurrence. But truthfully what he looked like didn't matter. It's beside the point. His message to them is the point and it's the same message the angel told them. Go and tell "my brothers" what has happened, he said. My brothers. That was important because he wanted the two Mary's to let them know not only had he been raised but that he had forgiven them for deserting him in the end. Jesus still loved them.

Come, see. Go, tell. These are the instructions the angel gave to the two Mary's. And they did just that. As soon as they did they encountered the Risen Christ, who told them to keep on going to do what they had been told to do. Come, see. Go, tell. Very simple, very basic instructions. No doubting their intent. No wondering about the details. Come, see. Go, tell. The "Dick & Jane" version of the Resurrection story is how I always think of Matthew's version. Remember "Dick & Jane" books? Some of us who are a certain age do. Dick & Jane were the main characters in a whole series of books which were our entry point into the world of reading. Dick & Jane had all kinds of adventures that we got to read about, in simple one syllable words we could understand and spell and print. Therefore, we could "own" the story by ourselves very quickly. We could share what we were reading with other classmates and with our families when we got home. We could find connection points between our lives and the lives of Dick & Jane which made their stories all the more real to us. In a very real way for a whole generation of folks, Dick & Jane unlocked the door to understand the world in which we lived each day and our lives were changed as a result.

That's exactly what Matthew is doing in his version of Jesus' Resurrection and what happens as a result. And the results of the Resurrection are the why of the Resurrection, that "why" we talked about earlier when we said the how of the Resurrection

doesn't matter but the why does. That why is found in what happened after the Resurrection. Matthew doesn't go into a lot of detail about the immediate aftermath of it but he doesn't need to. Jesus emerging from that tomb changed everything for all time. What exactly made this possible beyond a sheer act of God, we don't know. It's a mystery and dear friends, that was always the plan. The how of the Resurrection is beside the point. What matters is that something did happen. That is beyond doubt because the disciples came out of hiding and starting spreading the word about Jesus far and wide, risking derision, desolation and even death in the process but none of that stopped them. Heck, it didn't even slow them down. The disciples – the two Mary's and everyone else who knew and loved the earthly Jesus – did exactly as the angel told them to do: Come, see. Go, tell. Come and see what God has done for us. Listen well and then do as we do. Go and tell the wonderful Good News of Jesus who changed everything about how we know and love God, about how we live our lives as the beloved people of God.

Come, see. Go, tell. Four words that are why we are here on this Easter morning. Four words that are the basics of the life of the Christian, any Christian. Every Christian. Even me and you. Time to get back to basics for us all. Are you up for it? I sure hope so. Let's give it a try together. My email is back and ready to go. And then there's always just talking to folks. Amen.

