

Matthew 28:1-10 Easter 4/24/11 Pastor Bill Uetricht

Well, they are at it again. These folks who are convinced that the world is coming to an end are hitting the streets again, bringing their message to downtown Grand Rapids this week. Their message is simple: May 21st is the date that the faithful will be raptured, and the world will come to an end 153 days later on October 21st. It's time to get on board their particular faith train, these folks are claiming.

It always intrigues me how many religious people seem so preoccupied with the end of time or with life after death, as if the religious journey is simply about what happens next, where we all are going next. This life, well, it's just a waiting station for the great "next." It's a matter of preparing for the next life. Get on board, or be left behind!

It's an interesting view, but admittedly it is not particularly Biblical. You would think on a day like today, **the** day in the church year when we celebrate the overcoming of death we might have our attention focused on what happens next, on life after death. But Matthew doesn't take us there. Truthfully, Matthew takes us right back to this world, to the place where the complexity of life and the diversity of people come together.

It was the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. Why they went to the tomb we are not sure. They for sure were still in grief. Maybe they just want additional time with the one who had meant so much to them. Who knows? But when they arrive at the tomb, suddenly the earth trembles as an angel descends from heaven. This angel rolls back the stone that had covered the grave. Interestingly enough, in the Gospel of Matthew an earthquake occurred after Jesus had died. These little special effects

are Matthew's attempts to communicate that what is going on here is big. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we are meeting God; we are encountering the end, what in the end truly matters.

The appearance of the angel, as every appearance of God story does in the Bible, frightens the big old powerful Roman guards. They become like dead men. These controllers of life and death are themselves. "Do not be afraid," the angel says to Mary and Mary Magdalene. "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised, just as he said would happen. Now, don't hang around here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him."

So the women ran off with fear and great joy, hoping to tell Jesus' friends about what they had heard. While running toward the disciples, Jesus meets them. "Hello," he says to them. Wow! They are overcome. They fall on the ground, grab Jesus' feet (this truly is a physical body), and they worship him. And then Jesus says to them, "Don't be afraid. And don't stick around here. You need to go tell my *brothers* (those guys who just abandoned me) to head toward Galilee. There they will see me!"

Galilee . . . where many of them came from. Galilee . . . what was often called the Galilee of the Gentiles, the nations. In other words, Galilee, the doorway to the world. Jesus is sending them off not to heaven, not to a spiritual cloud some place, not to the rapture, not to the next life. The resurrected Christ is sending them to where they came from, a place that had the possibility of connecting them to the rest of the world. I don't know if you know what happens next in the gospel of Matthew, but immediately following what is reading for today the disciples show up in Galilee where Jesus is, and Jesus then

commissions them to go into the world with the gospel, baptizing and teaching. He doesn't send them out of the world. He sends them into it, all of it.

The center of the Christian faith, the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ, is not first and foremost about what happens to you after you die. Yes, the Gospel of Matthew would have us know, the Easter proclamation is about the end—that's why the earth shakes. What has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus is about what in the end really matters, what in the end really wins. Love and life win. Life is triumphant. You were afraid that death had done away with all your dreams. You were afraid that death had fractured the community that you had valued so much. You were afraid that nothing meant anything anymore. Christ is alive. Life wins. It's time to get back together with your brothers and sisters. It's time to live and breathe with your brothers and sisters. This movement is not dead; it is alive. The resurrected Christ has reconstituted community.

The message that we proclaim today is not a once-a-year reminder about where you are going to spend the next life. The message that we proclaim today is the power that changes **this** life, the power that brings people together not once a year but regularly, if not daily, for the sake of mission to the world, for the sake of our common work. The proclamation of the resurrection of Christ is the power to get to work for the sake of this world. Death cannot kill God's dream for the world. Death must not be allowed to cripple us, to lead us to despair, to cause us to give up on life or people. Life wins. Life reigns. Therefore, get to work. Get to work feeding the hungry. Get to work tending to the sick. Get to work caring for the old. Get to work mending relationships that have been broken. Get to work trusting

forgiveness and living out of it. Get to work bringing peace. Get to work making this a more just world. Get to work bringing joy, shaking the tambourines and dancing with the partiers. Get to work planting vineyards and enjoying the fruit from them. Get to work making disciples and sharing life with them.

I was really struck this week by something that I read by Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson. Gene was reflecting on the time he was consecrated as bishop. Because of his sexual identity Robinson faced many death threats. Listen to what he wrote about his experience:

[Plans]were being made for the consecration security, and I was asked for my blood type, so that preparations could be made for immediately beginning medical treatment at the hospital, should something violent take place. I remember saying to our two grown daughters, who were worried and anxious about my well-being, “You know, there are worse things than death. Some people actually never live—and that is the worst death of all. As I strapped on my bulletproof vest just before the service, I remember feeling blessedly calm about whatever might happen—not because I am brave, but because God is good and because God has overcome death. That is the power of the resurrection. Not in what happens after death, but what the knowledge of our resurrection does for our lives and ministries **BEFORE** death. I am not worried nearly as much about life after death as about whether or not there is life before death! We know the end of the story. God reigns. Death is vanquished. Believing that, knowing that empowers us for ministry in God’s name.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see the end. We see what in the end wins. Life wins. Therefore, get to work in this world trusting and living out life and resurrection.