

Easter

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Cemeteries are never the quiet peaceful places they seem. I grew up within blocks of a cemetery. It seemed like it was a good place for folks to consult the spirits, most of them, I think, came in a bottle. There were groups of folks who every day would stroll the cemetery and others who came frequently to talk to loved ones. The cemetery was a busy place more often than a place of quiet, rest and peace.

I thought about all the unfinished business that lingers in cemeteries. The things left undone, promises not kept, secrets that rest with the dead. I have seen visitors to cemeteries plead for absolution but none comes from the grave. I have listened as relatives talked of wanting just a word of assurance but there is only silence in response. I am aware of the desire of some people for just a little more time, but there is no more time. Cemeteries make it seem so final, death that is.

Matthew tells us that the Sabbath was over. Jesus followers had asked that Jesus' body be removed from the cross before the Sabbath. Since final burial preparations could not be completed until after the Sabbath, they had taken him down and placed his body in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. At the request of the religious authorities, the Roman governor Pilate ordered the tomb to be sealed with a large rock and guards were posted to prevent the followers of Jesus from stealing his body and claiming he was risen as he had promised.

Matthew writes that Mary and Mary Magdalene went to see the tomb. They had witnessed the horror of the cross; perhaps they just wanted to know where Jesus had been laid. Maybe they had something to say that was still unsaid. Maybe they had regrets that they had not spoken up when Jesus was being tried by the Romans. Matthew says they went "to see" the tomb using a word that suggests more than just looking. The word that Matthew uses is perhaps best translated "studied." The two Mary's went to study the tomb. Perhaps they were wondering how anyone was ever going to properly prepare his body for burial now the Sabbath was over.

They could not get close. There was that huge rock and soldiers guarding the tomb. What were the officials afraid of? The official word was to prevent body snatching and a phony resurrection story. What if this radical Jewish teacher did reappear? Was he dangerous? Might he come back and harm

those who accused him or devise some retaliation on those who executed him? What would he say if he rose from the dead? Would they have to kill him again to hide what they had done?

Jesus' own disciples had their reasons for not wanting to see him again. They had fled when it seemed following Jesus was dangerous. They left Jesus to face death alone. If he came back, would Jesus say to Peter, "Hey, Peter, do you know me this time?"

On this day heaven and earth did not rest in peace. The earth shook and like lightening a messenger from God came. He pushed aside the huge rock and sat on it. The guards were so frightened they fell over as if dead. "Fear not," the angel said to Mary and Mary Magdalene, "Jesus is not here, he is raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

"Now, go and tell his disciples what you have seen. Tell them to go to Galilee and you will see him."

Matthew says that they left with fear and great joy. Soon they met Jesus for he appeared to them on the way. After all that transpired Jesus had not returned to get revenge or even to condemn anyone. He came to gather his followers. "Go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee." "My brothers" after the betrayal and denial; after the trial and horrible execution on a cross, "go and tell my brothers." We are still family.

Easter is more than a promise of life beyond the grave. Easter is a promise that life is good now. God's power is active at all times and in all places. Easter tells us that eternal life begins now and goes on through death into God's future. Easter tells us that nothing separates us from God's love for us.

Yes, at times our lives can be full of difficulty. Hurricanes and floods come and destroy what we have. Wars drag on and friends are killed. Relatives get sick and die. Jobs just don't turn out to be what we expected. Politicians, teachers and even preachers turn out to be less than they seem. Life, all of life, is subject to the painful reality of death and decay. However, Easter reminds us that God has a response. The response is God's love, God's forgiveness, God's power, God's calling to us.

Jesus reminds us that joy is for sharing. That it is dangerous to keep our fears to ourselves. His followers support one another, respect one another, love one another, serve one another, his followers are family. "Go tell my brothers and sisters to meet me in Galilee."

Today Jesus invites us to leave our fears in the cemetery and as we march together to Galilee to join the joyful song: Our Lord is risen! Alleluia! God has won the day! Our Lord is risen indeed! Nothing will ever be the same again.