

Easter Message: April 21, 2019

When Matthew tells the story of the last week of Jesus's life, it's as if he is shaking us and saying, Did you see what happened there?? Are you paying attention? Only in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus dies on the cross, the temple curtain is torn in two. An earthquake opens graves and people are raised from the dead.

Only in Matthew's Gospel an earthquake rips open the tomb as an angel rolls away the stone. Only in Matthew's Gospel are there Roman soldiers guarding the tomb, and they drop to the ground as if they are dead. Matthew asks, Are you paying attention? Something is happening here.

Mary Oliver has written a poem called *Sometimes*. There are three lines in it that come to mind as I hear Matthew's story of Easter. This is in a portion titled, Instructions for Living a Life- Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

Sometimes I have trouble paying attention. Susan has learned she'd better be able to see my eyes when she's telling me something. She wants to be sure I'm tracking. The women who had followed Jesus had been paying attention for three years. They had heard Jesus say at least three times that he would be killed. They had been tracking. And they didn't want to hear that. But in that prediction they had heard a whisper of hope: "And on the third day the Son of Man will be raised." (Matt. 17:23) They had tucked that away. Jesus' teachings had taken hold of their hearts and had shaped their expectations. "On the third day the Son of Man will be raised."

One of the reasons professional athletes watch so much game film of their opponents is because they want to know tendencies. They want to see how a player makes a move to the hoop so they can watch for that move and defend it. They want to pay attention to the details. These women have been listening to Jesus and paying attention to Jesus for three years, and they remember that at least three times, one of his moves was to talk about resurrection. So early Sunday morning they come to the tomb to see what's going to happen. Matthew says they come to *see* the tomb. That word *see* for Matthew means to comprehend, to believe. They come to *see* with eyes of faith. They come to look for the possibility of resurrection.

St. Paul has a chapter on the resurrection of Jesus in the First Letter to the Corinthians, and he says this: “If there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ himself cannot have been raised.” (1 Cor. 15:13) Paul makes an assumption that even before Jesus is raised, *resurrection is the cosmic pattern*. If resurrection wasn’t happening all the time, then Jesus could not have been raised. Paul says, God is *always* causing new life to come out of death, because that is the way God has set up this world. That’s God’s job description: God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Romans 4:17) God loves making sure that happens in all of creation.

If you want to see resurrection, just look outside of my office window. This is a kwanzan flowering cherry tree that for two weeks every year blows my mind. We’re seeing resurrection all over the Willamette Valley. And you say, Oh, pastor, that’s not resurrection, that’s just Spring. And I say to you, Resurrection is happening all over in this God-infused world. New life is always emerging out of death. The cosmic pattern *is* death and resurrection.

On that first Easter, God follows the cosmic pattern of death and resurrection and transforms the body of Jesus into some new form of being that we don’t understand, some form of light and physicality beyond the limits of space and time (see R. Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, pp. 177-178), but in a way that the disciples can say, He’s with us again.

When you tuck away resurrection in your mind, you start looking for it. Pay attention, Mary Oliver says. Two days before, on Good Friday, the women had sat opposite the tomb, paying attention. They remembered that he would be raised from the dead. And now they have come back Sunday morning because they had remembered the game film and tucked that word of resurrection in their hearts. Pay attention. Watch for it. Keep your eyes open.

When they get to the tomb as dawn is breaking, they are astonished. Back to our instructions for life: Pay attention. Be astonished. An earthquake rattles the ground; an angel rolls back the stone. The Roman guards shake and become like dead men. There is plenty to be astonished about.

Notice that the empire can't keep God's plans from being accomplished. Not the military might of Rome; not the sealing of the tomb. Pilate tries to maintain order, to keep things "secure." The empire cannot keep new life from happening.

The angel gives them a message: "Do not be afraid (how many times do we hear that in Scripture? Apparently I need to keep hearing it) Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said (and they probably look at the angel and say, Yeah, we know, we've been paying attention) Come, see the place where he lay." (Again, come see, come comprehend, come believe. You're entering into new possibilities.) Then, go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

So we've covered Pay attention. And Be astonished. And what was that third idea? Tell about it. Notice that at the start of the Christian story, God only calls people to tell about it who have something to tell. They are witnesses to the resurrection. They need to have experienced resurrection, change, growth, new life. Otherwise, what kind of good news do you have?

So the two women leave the tomb in fear and great joy to go tell the disciples. I love that they leave with fear and joy. They are still afraid. That gives me hope. I hear people say sometimes, Be a non-anxious presence when there is conflict and tension. I don't think I could ever be totally non-anxious, but I tell you what, God helps me to be less anxious. If I can't be completely fearless, at least I sometimes don't let fear get in the way of me doing what God wants me to do.

The women go to tell their friends this great news about resurrection, with both fear and joy in their hearts. Where does joy come from? I've been preaching a series of messages on Wednesdays these last six weeks about letting go- letting go of the illusion of being in control; letting go of judgmentalism; letting go of trying to change people, letting go of stuff. Like Marie Kondo, I've been holding up these things and asking if they bring me joy, and they don't. And I'm realizing I have a lighter spirit. There's room in my heart for more gratefulness. There's more room in my life for imagining what God might be up to. The women had to let go of whatever dreams they had centered on the earthly Jesus. They had to let go. But now they know the joy of a new chapter with new life they had never imagined.

And when they head out to go find their friends, that's when Jesus comes to meet them. The angel had said that Jesus had "gone ahead" into Galilee- go and *see* him there. And when they obediently go, they see Jesus. The message for us is that Christ is present in all of creation, when we have eyes to see, when we pay attention.

The empire strikes back, of course. The Roman guards go to the chief priests and tell them what happened, and the chief priests say, We can't let that story get out. We'll pay off the guards to tell everybody that the disciples came by night and stole the body. Yeah, that's the story we'll plant on social media. We can't have people sharing this story that Jesus came back, talking more about the power of love and forgiveness. You can't run an empire that way.

Now let's remember there can only be resurrection if there is death. Barbara Brown Taylor says this: "Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the broken pieces and make something holy out of them- not from a distance, but right close up."

Let me tell you a resurrection story about God picking up the pieces and making something holy. In 1993, 16-year-old Oshea Israel got into an argument with 20 year-old Laramiun Byrd at a party, and he shot and killed him. Laramiun was Mary Johnson's only son. Oshea was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Twelve years later, in 2005, Laramiun's mother Mary went to visit him, full of hatred because of the murder of her only son.

They shook hands. Mary just said, I don't know you; you don't know me. You didn't know my son; my son didn't know you. But we need to get to know one another. And for two hours they talked. Oshea said this about that first encounter: I found out that her son's and my life paralleled, and we had been through some of the same things, and somehow we got crossed. And I took his life—without even knowing him. But he said when he met Mary, her son became human to him.

When it was time to go, Mary broke down and started shedding tears. And then she started to fall, and Oshea was able to catch her and hug her like he would his own mother.

After Oshea left the visiting room, Mary said, “I just hugged the man who murdered my son.” She said, That’s when I began to feel this movement in my feet. It moved up my legs and it just moved up my body. When I felt it leave me, I instantly knew that all that anger and hatred and animosity I had in my heart for twelve years was over. I had totally forgiven him.

When Oshea was released from prison, he moved into an apartment in the same complex as Mary. They watch out for each other. Here’s what Mary says to Oshea at the end of the interview: You know, I didn’t see Laramiun graduate, but you’re going to college, and I’ll be able to see you graduate. I didn’t see him get married. But hopefully, one day I’ll be able to experience that with you. Our relationship is beyond belief. He says, I love you, lady. And she says, I love you too, son.

That’s resurrection. That’s new life out of death. That’s God putting the broken pieces together. That’s God’s job description.

I heard a pastor some years ago tell the story of his 10-year-old niece. She contracted a terrible illness; only three in a million people contract this disease. Eventually all the organs are affected, and there is catastrophic organ failure.

This little girl spent much time in the hospital, and she started a prayer journal. She would pray for herself, and her health, but she would also pray for her family and friends at school, and for the little baby in the next room who was also seriously ill.

When she passed away, the family looked at her prayer journal. The last entry before she died, the last thing she wrote, the last thing she was thinking about, was expressed in these two words... “also touch.” God, please also touch.... She was touching the world through her prayers, imploring God, “also touch....” As many problems as she had, she was concentrating on being a witness of resurrection. She was praying for new life to come.

I hope and pray that you want to be a witness of resurrection. And I believe it happens as we pay attention, as we are astonished, and as we tell about it. I invite you to pay attention to resurrection all around you. I invite you to pray and watch

for resurrection in your relationships, for resurrection in this congregation, as we build bridges and bring people together and welcome all people into new life, for resurrection in our nation and in our world. Resurrection is happening all around us. It's the cosmic pattern. So let's declare again, because this is what God does: He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.