

Called to be an Easter People

Matthew 28:1-10
April 9, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
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For 40 minutes one Saturday in 2019, a series of pink see-saws – or Teeter Totters – bridged the gap between the US and Mexico. An architect named Ronald Rael created the Teeter Totters out of steel beams with seats on each end, and then he slid them through the slats of the tall fence that separates Sunland Park, N.M. from Ciudad Juarez at the Mexican boarder.

You can still see online pictures and videos of children and parents from opposite sides of the boarder playing with each other on the Teeter Totters, a Mexican citizen on one side and an American on the other. No one seems concerned about their different nationalities, as long as there's someone on the other side to play with.¹

For several minutes one Saturday in the year 33 AD, the Risen Lord bridged the gap between life and death, forever. He changed that huge stone sealing off the tomb from a wall of separation into a circle of life and faith. No more would Jesus be walled off, not from Mary Magdalene or the other Mary or anyone else throughout the world.

Matthew sets the scene, saying, “After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” They went to see the tomb; that’s what they were expecting – an unmovable barrier between them and their beloved Lord Jesus. “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

Can you imagine? One minute you’re facing the stone sealing off the tomb of Jesus, and then the earth starts to shake and all of a sudden you’re seeing right into the tomb. And it’s empty, and yet full of hope. The two Marys did not expect to encounter something like that.

Sometimes, that’s the way life is, isn’t it? We go someplace or do something with certain expectations only to find that things are not as we thought. Now, that’s not always a bad thing. Sometimes a trip to the store brings an unexpected meet-up with a friend or neighbor that brightens your day.

Other times, the unexpected is not so pleasant, like when you get to a doctors appointment to find the needed paperwork never arrived. That can be almost as unsettling for us as the sealed tomb was for the two Marys. But there is hope.

¹ Bill Chappell, “See-saw diplomacy lets people play together along U.S. border wall,” *npr.org*, July 30, 2019. *npr.org*. Retrieved September 2, 2019.

Opening the tomb, the Angel says to them, "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." Here we see that what comes to us as an unsettling encounter can be transformed into a time of joy. As Matthew says, "... They left the tomb ... with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples" that Jesus has been raised from the dead, that new life comes to us through surprising encounters with Jesus, even in our darkest moments.

Why is it that some people can face dark moments in life and still have a sense of peace and even joy in their hearts- even amid their fears- while others are left paralyzed by unexpected setbacks?

Matthew says the guards "shook and became like dead men." When they saw the stone rolled away, they knew their hearts were not with God. And this scared them, while for the two Marys it was a time of fear turned to joy, because they never gave up on seeing Jesus.

There was once a 5-year-old boy named Bobby who had to miss the Palm Sunday service because of a sore throat; he stayed home with a babysitter. When the family got back from church, they were carrying several palm leaves. Bobby asked what they were for. His father answered, saying, "People waved them over Jesus' head as he walked by." "Wouldn't you know it," said Bobby, "The one Sunday I don't go and Jesus shows up."

What is it to have Jesus show up in your life, for you? What was it like when you first encountered Jesus? Was it at a time of fear or joy?

As we've seen in the experience of the guards compared to that of the two Marys, encountering the Risen Lord and then coming to faith in Jesus is a very personal thing, resulting in different reactions from different people, depending on which side you're on.

To help us understand this, let's take a moment to look at what it means to be on different sides when it comes to the tomb, the stone and the cross. For those who lack faith like the guards, the tomb is empty and dark. For those who believe like the two Marys, the tomb is a place of new life and joy.

The stone for those who lack faith is an insurmountable barrier in life, but for those who believe, it's evidence of God's power. The angel "rolled back the stone," says Matthew, "and sat on it." He actually changes the stone from an instrument of death and confinement into a pulpit of Good News, proclaiming from atop that building stone, Christ is risen!

And then there's the cross. The cross for those who lack faith is just a piece of jewelry these days, but for those who believe it's the symbol of unconditional love, ultimate sacrifice, and victory over death.

So, ask yourself, what do the tombs, stones and crosses of your life represent -those empty places, those barriers, those signs and symbols of faith. And how can you use them to share the good news of Jesus with others? For those without faith, the Good News that Jesus overcomes the tomb, stones and crosses of life may seem meaningless. Even when we share it with them in life affirming ways, seeking to meet people in their need, some just don't get it. Not everyone we greet and serve in the Spirit of Christ will come to believe, but we do it anyway.

And we continue to maintain hope. We greet and serve others in the Spirit of Christ hoping they will come to believe in Jesus and worship the Lord, regardless of any doubt or fear we have that our message won't be accepted or appreciated.

The angel saw the doubt and fear of the two Marys. So he showed them the empty tomb – showed them the power of God's love and faithfulness. Then he sent them to tell the others about the Risen Lord, that he is going ahead of them to Galilee, that there, they, too, will see him.

And sure enough, as soon as the two Marys set off to tell others, Jesus himself meets them and says, "Greetings!" And Matthew tells us, "... They came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' It's the circle of faith. They see the power of God at work in this world – as he rolls away the stone – they hear from the angel about the Risen Lord, they go off to share the good news with others, and that's when they encounter the risen Lord Jesus in their lives.

And then, as they and others share the good news, the circle of faith grows larger. And it all began with the stone getting rolled away from the tomb, setting in motion a never-ending cycle of faith. Instead of a Teeter Totter of division God gives us a Merry-Go-Round of faith, a never-ending cycle of seeing God at work in this world, learning more and more about Jesus, embracing him in our lives, and sharing him with others, with those who would otherwise continue to be sealed off by the stone of darkness, fear and doubt that huge stone that God is ready to roll away from their lives, with our help, our witness, our expression love. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of glory, we gather to celebrate your victory over death and the power of sin. The empty cross and the promise of the resurrection are tangible signs of hope in our broken world.

We pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who aren't free to sing their alleluias out loud. We give thanks for those who glorify you this day in places where hope is in short supply – in regions recovering from tornadoes and other natural disasters, or devastated by war.

We pray for those who suffer in mind, body or spirit, who lack the strength to sing alleluia. We offer alleluias on their behalf, praying for healing so their voices can join in the joyful songs of praise. And on this Day of Resurrection, we give you thanks, O Lord, for the saints who have gone before us, those with you now singing in your heavenly choir. We are grateful for their lives of faith.

Help us live as Easter people throughout the year; let our lives be signs of your unending love. We pray in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, as he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.