

Although relatively brief, the Gospel of Matthew’s is one of the more *detailed* and *colorful* resurrection accounts. What with the earthquake and the lightning-brilliant angel with his white-as-snow clothes, and guards who quake so hard from the shock that they freeze up rigor mortis-like. ...As though the empty tomb alone weren’t *dramatic* enough... But, 50 to 60 years after the fact, the author was building a case, shoring up evidence against decades of rumors and outright lies designed to put Jesus back in the ground once and for all. And so it was necessary to engage the senses, to *see* and *hear* and *touch* the resurrection.

Jesus’ enemies had a lot invested in his death. You see, the Romans killed lots of people...often right on the spot. No time consuming, expensive trial; no flogging, mocking, marching off to Golgotha, stripping naked, nailing to a cross, more mocking and taunting, and poking with a spear to make sure he's really dead. Beyond that, the bodies of those subjected to crucifixion were typically left hanging for extended periods of time and finally retired to a mass grave. Here, too, Jesus got special treatment: a speedy exit to a private, sealed tomb, complete with soldiers to stand guard. Why the showy death and burial for Jesus? Because his detractors wanted to kill more than *the person* of Jesus. They wanted to kill *what Jesus stood for* and any thought in any followers of *carrying on*. They wanted to kill *any future; any hope*. And they’d heard loud and clear when Jesus proclaimed that in three days he would rise again. The chief priests and the Pharisees weren’t about to let that—or any manufactured version of it—happen. And so they approached Pilate and requested that his grave be secured until those three days had passed. And Pilate complied, sending a group of soldiers to oversee the grave.

That plot was foiled not only by the earthquake, the angel, and the resurrection itself. But by the presence of witnesses: two women disciples who saw that it was indeed Jesus crucified upon the cross and laid to rest, who saw his tomb, guarded and sealed; then, moments later, the open, empty grave; who recognized the resurrected Jesus' face, heard his voice, and touched his feet; who followed his instructions and ran to share the good news with his followers. Of course, the guards witnessed all of this as well, and *some of them* returned to Jerusalem to tell *the chief priests* so. Well, this wouldn't look good for *any* of them. And so the priests gathered the elders and enacted a scheme to bribe the soldiers, telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." According to Matthew, the soldiers took the money and, as directed, spread the alternative version of the story such that it was still told among the Jews in Matthew's day.

And so here we are, 2000 years later. Thanks in part to Matthew's *detailed evidence and colorful imagery*, even now we are able to reflect upon Jesus and his resurrection, to grasp that both were laden with historical and cosmic significance and power, causing as they did *angels* to descend from heaven, *the depths of the earth* to tremble, and *soldiers and priests* to scramble!

...But what difference does Jesus' resurrection make for us today? What difference does it make to know that God entered fully into our human life – our joys and sorrow, hopes and disappointments, loves and losses--and therefore understands us deeply? What difference does it make that God suffered *even death* as one of us? What difference does it make that God raised Jesus from the dead, signaling a new reality and new life that death cannot overshadow?

...There is no single answer to these questions. And in our God-is-still-speaking-and-acting world, there will *always* be new and unique responses. We can look to the trajectory of history-- *the world's and our own*--for clues...

One of the most powerful examples in my personal history dates back to 1989, when I was 25. I was home from New York City, visiting my parents for one holiday or another, when my grandmother came for a meal. During that dinner, she and I had a disagreement, which so upset me that I sulked through the rest of her visit in silence. And when it was time for my father to drive her home, I disappeared so that I could avoid seeing her off with the usual farewell hug and kiss. I assumed this would blow over, that we'd be fine by the next time I saw her. It would all be water under the bridge.

But I was wrong. A few short months later, my mother phoned to tell me that my grandmother had suffered a heart attack in her home and died. I was shocked and devastated, not only by the news of her death, but by the realization that I had lost forever my chance to make amends. I could never make it up to her or even say a proper farewell. It was incredibly difficult to grieve in the midst of such profound guilt.

But, as it turned out, again I was wrong: That was *not* the end. For when I returned home for the memorial service, God began to intervene. First in my grandmother's bedroom, where I slept the night before the funeral to ward off potential thieves who might have seen her obituary in the local paper and anticipated an empty house. While I'd anticipated this would be a mission creepy at best and downright scary at worst, nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead, all night long a warm, loving presence enfolded me. When I pored over mementoes in her hope

chest the next morning, that same presence hovered over my shoulder ever so gently. It whispered--it all but spoke aloud to me--that I was forgiven, accepted, and loved...

Later, at the service, my eyes were drawn to smoke hovering around the cross that hung from the sanctuary's high ceiling. *Don't ask me how*, but I knew this was my grandmother's spirit, and it felt both *welcoming and peaceful*...

...Then, several nights later, my parents' phone "dinged" once as we watched TV together. It had long been tradition for my grandmother to let the phone ring a single time so my mother, for whom it was not a toll call, would phone her back. And so we looked around at one another, laughing knowingly and a little nervously. Apparently it was still a toll call!

...That was the last of the encounters, but it was *enough*. By that time, the redemption, the *healing and reconciliation*, was complete.

You are welcome to surmise that any or all of this was coincidence or the product of an overly active imagination. But I'm here to tell you that, independent of me, my eternally skeptical father, who had had his own run-ins with my grandmother, reported a very similar experience with the smoke in the sanctuary. And when I returned to the church some 15 years later for another memorial service, I double checked to see if perhaps smoke from the communion table's candles *just happens* to rise toward the cross. There was no smoke... Perhaps most convincingly of all, I'm told that my grandmother, who had often been dissatisfied and bitter in life, was ultimately found with a contented smile on her face.

Not only did these encounters teach me about the eternal *power* of love, which is stronger even than death, and about the eternal *reach* of God's healing. But they spoke to me of second chances, of grace and forgiveness. And of God's remarkable creativity, that even the most profound grief and suffering can be redeemed and made into something beautiful, relational, and life giving. Our scripture for today ends on a similar note. For as the two Marys were touching Jesus' feet, he commissioned them to go on ahead and tell *his brothers* to reunite with him in Galilee. These would be the same "brothers" who disappeared as Jesus was headed to the cross. These would be the same "brothers" who, forgiven and reconciled, would carry on his mission. The empty tomb, you see, is full of possibility, full of opportunities to, in the words of poet Wendell Berry, "practice resurrection." We can begin by heightening our awareness to all the redemption, big and small, that happens--or needs to happen--around us. Where do we see God making a difference in our own lives or in the world? Where is God's transformation needed?

...I'd like to take a few minutes for us to ponder these questions for ourselves. When some ideas have formed, I invite you to pull out the tags inserted in your bulletins and write down a place where you *see* new life and would like to give thanks. Or a situation which you believe *needs* new life and would like to commend to God. Then, when you're ready, you may come forward, as you are willing and able, to hang your prayers of hope and thanksgiving from the branches of our "tree of life." If you would like some help bringing your prayer forward, please raise your hand and an usher will assist you. Either way, if you'd like to make a brief statement about your contribution, I will be standing by with our portable mic for you to do so.

I'd like to close this sermon and ritual with a favorite poem by e.e. cummings:

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

Amen.