

“Something Happened”  
Matthew 28:1-10  
Easter Sunday: Liberation  
April 9, 2023  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And look! There was a great earthquake, for a messenger of God, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. Its appearance was like lightning, and its clothing white as snow. For fear of the messenger, the guards shook and were as though dead. But the messenger responded to the woman and said, “Fear not; I know that you all are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, just as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and see, he is on to Galilee ahead of you; there you all will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples the news. Then all of a sudden Jesus met them and said, “Shalom!” and they came to him, took hold of his feet, and bowed down worshipping him. Then Jesus said to them, “Fear not; go and tell my sisters and brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

On this Resurrection Sunday, we embrace the theme of “liberation,” a fitting theme that is most appropriate for a day when we proclaim that the grave could not hold our Jesus.

As I prepared for this Easter sermon, I found myself asking a question that I’m sure many among you have asked, and one that was echoed in our weekly Thursday noon Bible study on Zoom. The question is this: what *\*really\** happened on Easter morning? Not just what the gospels say, recognizing there are inconsistencies among the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What do we think happened? What do we, with our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds and experiences, think to be true about that Easter morning near Jerusalem?

Honestly, I reflect on this question around Easter every year. This is one of the beautiful gifts of the liturgical calendar that cycles year after year through the stories of Jesus’ life...we get to encounter the stories again and again for the first time, as beginnings and endings weave over and into each other, bringing us in the fullness of time to be engulfed in story.

This year, I found myself wondering why it is so important for us to *\*know\** what happened on that Easter morning?

So much of our faith is not knowing—if we knew anything for certain, it wouldn’t be faith, but certainty. For myself, I am comfortable saying, “I don’t know exactly what happened around that tomb that morning in the garden... but I know something did happen.”

Something happened. Something worth paying attention to. Something we are still talking about two thousand years later. Something that is deeply disconcerting and yet deeply comforting to millions of people all over the world and across time. Something that continues to unmake and remake our visions of ourselves, our communities, and our responsibilities to and for one another.

But humans are uncomfortable with uncertainty. We like far more to have answers, to have concrete examples, to have a pattern for living that is tried and true—and safe and secure.

And the resurrection is none of those. Easter provides none of those certainties—it only raises more questions.

But isn't that also the beauty of it? That, as we follow Matthew's version this year, the women at the tomb had each other to exchange glances with and to hold in their arms and to say, "that wasn't just me, right?" "You saw that, too?" And then they were left with a story...and they had to go and tell that story. And they did.

It is through this telling and retelling that the resurrection of Jesus continues to live in and among us, continues to change and challenge us, and continues to be on the move in the world.

This story of Holy Week is one that Tennessee state Representative Justin Pearson from the 86<sup>th</sup> district in Shelby County, the home of Memphis, told as his last words on the House floor on Thursday evening, directly prior to the vote being taken that ultimately expelled him from his elected office.

Rep. Pearson said this:

"I remember that on Friday the Government decided that my savior Jesus, a man who was innocent of all crimes except fighting for the poor, fighting for the marginalized, fighting for the LGBTQ community, fighting for those who are single mothers, fighting for those who are ostracized, fighting for those who are pushed to the periphery, my savior, my Black Jesus, he was lynched by the government on Friday. And they thought that all hope had been lost...Let me tell you it was a sad day on Saturday. All hope seemed to be lost...But we have good news folks. We've got good news that Sunday always comes and resurrection is upon us. And it is a prophecy. A prophecy that came out of the cotton fields. It is a prophecy that came out of the lynching tree. It is a prophecy that still lives in each and every one of us...I still have hope because I know we are still here and we will never quit!"<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jesus through Holy Week has such power for Representative Pearson that he called it forth for strength as he was silenced for supporting his constituents who called for an end to gun violence in the wake of yet another tragic school shooting.

I'm not sharing this story to suggest that Rep. Pearson be identified with Jesus, but to remind us of the power of the resurrection story. Easter is not just a day to hunt Easter eggs, or an excuse to eat a lot of chocolate, or wear a special hat to church—it is a day that we celebrate because the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rep. Justin Pearson, Tennessee State House of Representatives, April 6, 2023.

story can be a beacon of hope to people who confront systems of power and are knocked down, time and again.

Cole Arthur Riley ends her book *This Here Flesh*, which we have been journeying alongside during Lent, with a chapter on liberation. She says liberation is “an unending awakening.” And dear church, this is hope! That it is possible to awake again and again, that it is possible to have a second and third and fourth and more chance. And when we are wondering what to do, when we are feeling apathetic, when we have been sleepwalking and are finding it hard to stay awake to hope—Cole writes this: “Whenever I become uncertain of which direction liberation lies in, I ask myself to tell the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

Dear church, what truths must be told today?

One truth that must be told is that there is no such thing as individual liberation—but individuals have the power and opportunity to begin liberating themselves, and then others. Again, Cole Arthur Riley: “to have the audacity to be and love and know yourself in a world content to have you live your days in hiding—this is bliss. This allows you to move in the world in a way that isn’t jealous of other people’s freedom but desires it for them. You begin to crave it for those in your midst, because liberation loves company. It is not threatened by another person’s identity, because liberation is not a scarcity. It can only affirm itself in another person.”<sup>3</sup>

Dear church, like the poet Wendell Berry says, we must “practice resurrection.” And I would respond that we practice resurrection by pursuing liberation...for ourselves and our loved ones and the whole Creation.

But we each must ask, how do I sustain a liberative life in myself and in the community around me?

Liberation is a process. It is not a simple here-to-there. It’s not a linear process, it’s cyclical. According to psychologist Bobbie Harro’s Cycle of Liberation model, steps in this cyclical process toward liberation are: empowerment of self, dismantling previously-held beliefs, reaching out to others, coalescing, building community, creating change within institutions and cultural change, and maintaining change. All of these steps cycle around a core, which Harro says contains “self-love, hope, self-esteem, balance, joy, support, security, spiritual base, authentic love of others.” Harro writes, “Liberation is the practice of love... [it] is taking charge of our own destiny and creating the world we want to live in, together with all the others we need to survive...[it] is based in something far bigger than me as an individual, or us as a coalition, or our organization as a community, or any one nation, or any particular world. It’s about that force

---

<sup>2</sup>p. 186

<sup>3</sup>p. 190

that connects us all to one another as living beings, that force that...binds us by the vision that there can be a better world and we can help create it.”<sup>4</sup>

Easter is an opportunity for us to embrace resurrection through engaging with the cycle of liberation. And though there are some out there who are comforted by the passing of time, convinced that humanity is on an upward spiral of progress and improvement that will continue regardless of what we do individually, liberation is not blandly inevitable. Cole Arthur Riley writes, “Each generation may seem more liberated, but there are always new forms of bondage—virtue signals, digital radicalization, activism perverted by a disordered appetite for influence. It is much better, then, to learn what freedom sounds like. Just because you’ve found it once doesn’t mean you will never wander again. We must teach our children and our children’s children what it means to be free. What it feels like to be whole. To exhale. And stories are our greatest teachers.”<sup>5</sup>

So church, what stories do you have about what it means to be free? What it feels like to be whole? To exhale the things that oppress and confine and belittle? What do you know about your worth and the worth of your loved ones, not just in a head-knowing but in a heart-knowing, in a bone-deep level knowing?

Just here in this church, I can tell stories about people speaking the hard truth and being listened to. About people calling on each other to reflect on harmful behaviors, and then doing so, and moving forward in love. We can tell stories about kids teaching us to meditate when a friend is having big feelings; about generations of a family preparing apartments for new formerly-houseless residents; about tweens preaching the Word of God and inviting us to change our perspective on well-known stories, because there is something new to learn about the Sacred.

Sometimes we don’t even know how to tell the stories we must voice, thinking that we are worried about getting details wrong or misspeaking or tripping over our words—but we know that something happened and we must share it.

Something happened when we buried seeds in the soil last autumn and waited and waited until spring.

Something happened when the patient that doctors thought had no chance of making it fought hard to stay alive.

Something happened when the fractured family all came together to celebrate a wedding.

Something happened when a transgender child had space to proclaim their truth.

Something happened when a community demanded accountability for police violence after years of organizing by Black mothers.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://geography.washington.edu/sites/geography/files/documents/harro-cycle-of-liberation.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> p. 194

Something happened when Indigenous communities told the truth about missing and murdered women and trans and two spirit people.

I think of the women at the tomb on Easter morning. They didn't know what they were getting into as they entered the garden that day. And probably even after they heard the angelic message, they didn't quite know what was going on. But they knew that something happened, and it was up to them to share.

And beloved church, something happens every time we gather, every time we share our lives with one another, every time we recall a story, every time we tell the truth. Something happens that is worth paying attention to, and worth remembering, and worth fighting for.

Friends, like the women at the tomb, we know that salvation does not come from governing bodies, many of whom are too corrupted by wealth and power and status to truly listen to everyday people. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Said, "change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continues struggle."

And for what vision do we persist? A world where the old powers of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, white supremacy and capitalism no longer define our bodies and our lives, and where all are free to live and love with justice at the center of communities. Liberation toward this vision is not a destination that we will get to one day, it is a process that we engage in by making daily choices to love ourselves and others, to wonder, to reflect, to alter behavior, to support each other and shoulder each other's burdens so that others may rest a while, to choose a way of living different from the death-dealing powers and principalities that too often hold sway.

And so we pursue liberation by going to the garden on a foggy morning to perform the ritual cleansing for our loved ones killed by empire's force. Taking in the visions we see of impossible happenings. Courageously listening and considering in our hearts what we have experienced. Witnessing to each other even though the voices of power, patriarchy, white supremacy, and militarism threaten to drown us out. Telling the story of the empty tomb and the One freed from death's ironclad grip and the community that continues justice work over again and again until a new world is created.

Cole Arthur Riley concludes her book with this, and it's where I'd like to leave you today: "People think liberation is a future unfolding before us. But the path to freedom stretches out in both directions. It is what you've inherited, your first and last breath. Walk backward and graze your gramma's face, unshackle your father from the bathroom floor. Go ahead and cry, flip the table, and then repair it in time for the feast. If it's freedom you're after, go marvel at the sky, then look down at your own marvelous hands. Rest your souled body with another sacred body and tell each other the truth: your dignity cannot be chained."<sup>6</sup>

May it ever be so as we go forward from this place to live lives proclaiming resurrection and liberation. Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup>p. 195