

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28:1-10, “Who Are You Looking For?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, April 9th, 2023

Who are you looking for today?

When I was a kid, I remember coming to church on Easter
and looking at the hats that the women would wear.
I always wondered, “What’s with the hats? Why hats on Easter?”
And I came looking for decorated eggs and the flannel graph
empty tomb in Sunday school.
And of course, I came to look for candy to add my stash at home.

Easter often focuses on “looking.” We symbolize this with bright colors,
flowers, things that have to do with light
and the bright glory of God
after the darkness of Good Friday.

Who are you looking for? Who are you expecting to encounter today?
I don’t expect you to know exactly how to answer that question right now,
so I will offer some options as we go along.

I invite you to walk with me through this passage
as we pay special attention to all the language of looking and seeing
that Matthew gives us.

Are you looking for other seekers? Others who dare to hope?

On the *first* Easter two women named Mary came *to look* for something.
They came looking for Jesus’ sealed tomb, guarded by soldiers.
In Matthew’s way of telling the story,
they did not come with any other stated expectations.
Mary Magdalene and the mysterious “other Mary”
simply came to look at the tomb of Christ.

But this was not dry or formal religious activity.
For Mary Magdalene was not just any woman.
She was perhaps the most faithful of all the disciples of Jesus.

When the “chosen 12 disciples” were scattered during Jesus’ last days,
Mary Magdalene was still there among other women—
through his trial, through his death,

at his burial, and now at his graveside.
This was an act that came out of deep devotion and faith.

These two Mary's who arrived just as the sun was about to rise
came to see *a grave* sealed from up
on high by the Roman government.

In verse 2, the first thing the women experienced was a great earthquake.
The King James version renders this announcement with the words,
"Behold! And Lo!" This language takes the reader
into the action of the story
so that we, too, can look for what is happening.

This earthquake took place because
an angel of the Lord came from heaven, went to the tomb,
and rolled the stone away.
And Matthew tells us that this angel, "Sat on it."
What an image of power and control,
this huge boulder that was sealed and guarded by soldiers
is just a stool for this angel to rest on.
(Was it only the angel who caused the quaking?)

Verse 3 says the angel was like lightning,
and his clothes were white as snow.
Did any of you come looking for an angel?
A sign of power? An affirmation of faith?

The angel says,
"Don't be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus,
the crucified man."
There are no fancy titles for Jesus here.
He is quite plainly, the crucified man.
The stark reality of Jesus' death is in no way sidestepped here.
He was a dead man.
But then comes verse 6, which says, "He is not here, he has risen."

The guards were petrified—laid out like they were dead.

The resulting scene flips over all expectations. Think about it:
The women came looking for the tomb of a crucified dead man,
that would be attended by living guards.

Instead they find guards who are like dead men,
and hear that the one who was crucified...is now alive.
It's a total reversal of expectations.

And so the angel invites the women to see something much better
than a sealed tomb. "Come and see" he invites them,
"see the place where he lay."
This is past tense—he is no longer laying in the tomb.

Next, the angel's invitation to "come and see,"
become an invitation to, "go and tell."
The angel says, **"Go quickly and tell his disciples,
"He has risen from the dead and look!
he is going ahead of you into Galilee.
There you will see him! Look!
I have told you."**

All this language of *seeing* and *looking*.
The angel was emphasizing to the women
and Matthew is drilling into the readers of his gospel
that this was a true historical event,
that the risen Christ was a person to be *seen*,
not merely an idea to be hoped for.

Jesus' body was, of course, wrapped in strips of linen.
A few years ago "the Onion," a purveyor of *satirical* news,
had a Holy Week headline which read:
"Shroud of Turin Accidentally Washed With Red Shirt,"
The Vatican says it's far too late for club soda.

This kind of a joke reminds us that the bodily resurrection
of Jesus of Nazareth is a *scandal* in the modern world.
I mean we live in the 21st century.
Science has taken us a few steps closer
toward knowing about how things work.
We don't explain things with the activity of angels and demons today.

How do we know these “resurrection appearances,” aren’t
simply psychologically motivated visions
created by the deep guilt and confusion felt by Jesus’ disciples?
That these delusions weren’t then latched onto by others
who also wished such things could be true?
*Perhaps all that really matters is that
the idea of Jesus lives on in our hearts.*

If we didn’t need the resurrection to be historical,
we wouldn’t have to feel so awkward at Easter, right?

Did you come here looking for an escape hatch that makes faith easier?

It’s an intriguing idea at first.

I certainly want to affirm the compatibility of science
with faith!

But in the end, an Easter without a physical resurrection is an Easter without
any power over death, not just for Jesus but also for us.

So I move the other way. I look for the physical details of this moment.

John Updike wrote a poem to awaken our imaginations
to the physical necessity of Easter.

It is entitled, “Seven Stanzas at Easter,”
but I’ll just read four of them.

*Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.*

*The stone is rolled back, not papier-maché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow*

*grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.*

*And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.*

It's an embarrassment for scientific people to believe in such a thing.
But if it's true, then it is an embarrassment that changes
the course of human history.

Dale Bruner writes that "**He has risen** is the word
that the whole of Christian faith balances upon
like an inverted pyramid."

**Have you come to see physical evidence of the resurrection?
Is that even possible?**

... "so the women hurried away from the tomb,
afraid yet filled with joy."

Afraid, yet filled with joy. They, too, understood the scandal of this claim.
They were to go to Galilee, tell the disciples,
and there they would see Jesus.

Dare they believe it? Is it even worth getting their hopes up for?
They were afraid—either afraid that it *wasn't* true,
or, perhaps, afraid that it was.

But they also saw in the empty tomb that if Jesus *had been raised*,
it would be cause for great joy.

And without warning, Jesus himself interrupts their journey.

He meets them suddenly, surprisingly,
when they were least expecting it.

He sees his anxious friends and says, "Hi!"
Can't you see him smiling on them?
And the women, they fall on their faces

and cling to his feet, and they worship him.

They have found the one they were truly looking for.

Are you looking for the risen Christ today?

It is not insignificant that the first humans
to *see* the risen Christ are **women**.

The first century Roman historian Josephus

had this to say about the female half of the human population,

**“From women let no evidence be accepted,
because of the levity and temerity of their sex.”**

This is the attitude the two Marys were up against.

Women were sidelined, assumed to be inconsequential, untrustworthy,
and too giggly to be trusted with real evidence.

But the risen Christ who died out of love for the whole world

is not ashamed to be seen first by two women,

and not only that, but to send *them*

as the first messengers of the evidence that Jesus is risen.

And the message in this for every one of us,

no matter how discredited or sidelined we may feel by the world—

is that *this truth*...this most central and earth shaking truth

is *also for you!*

Some of you know this truth deeply.

Sitting in this room there are people here

who would not be here if Jesus were not alive.

In this room there are people here whose lives

have been radically transformed

by the truth proclaimed today.

We encounter the risen Lord every day in the faces of those

who have been changed by his love.

We see the risen Christ in all who know the forgiveness

of his grace.

The risen Jesus greets us in the faces of our neighbors in their time of need.

I don't know who you came looking for today,

but I came looking for the risen Son of God.

[PAUSE]

I can see him in you: for the church is the body of Christ.

On Easter, the gathering of the church in worship is a physical manifestation
of God's power to bring life out of death.

Look around – the one you are looking for is here!

Christ is Risen!

He is Risen indeed!