

After-Easter Sermon on Matthew 28: 1-10

It is the 3rd Sunday of Easter today. And of course we are not done with the resurrection thoughts and stories. They accompany us throughout the year and make us wonder over and over again.

I've heard Matthew's Easter gospel many times, but this year I was caught by the angel sitting on the stone. I remembered the angel - of course - all four gospel writers talk about an angel or sometimes two. But only Matthew draws this particular picture -- "...an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it."

Can you see it?

The angel rolled back the stone and sat on it!

Sat right down as though the stone were a bench in the park, or the cemetery.

I can almost hear the angel laughing...

"Do you see this stone?

This great stone was rolled in place to close the tomb.

This great stone not only closed the tomb, but was later sealed by soldiers sent on Pilate's authority.

This great stone was a sign of finality, earthly authority, power, and death.

And now look!

I'm sitting on the stone and the tomb is empty!"

Only Matthew gives us this particular picture of the angel sitting on the stone.

Some people are troubled by this, by the differences among the resurrection stories in the four gospels.

We can be so troubled by the differences that we attempt to make all the stories the same. And I must admit, in my memory there is often a mix of all the Easter narrations...

But what if we stopped being troubled and paid attention to what is different in each story?

Did you ever think of looking at the Easter stories that way?

If the early Christian community wanted to prove the resurrection as historical fact, they surely would have chosen one Easter story as "true" and tossed the others out.

Or they would have merged all four stories into one story.

Instead, they left all four in as though to say to us:

"Pay attention! Listen for what is different, even odd.

Each story has something very important to say."

So for today: Don't miss the angel sitting on the stone!

What does this angel sitting on the great stone of death have to teach us?

"Do not be afraid," – to start with...

It's the same word the angel had for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary that early Easter morning.

The ground is shaking.

The guards are shaking.

You may be shaking, too, but do not be afraid.

The angel sitting on the stone isn't finished.

"I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."

Now, here's an odd thing.

Jesus didn't come walking out of the tomb when the earth shook or when the angel rolled back the stone.

Jesus was already gone.

"He is not here," the angel said.

Resurrection had already happened.

"Go quickly and tell his disciples, "he has been raised from the dead...."

The angel didn't roll away the stone to set Jesus free - Jesus was already gone, headed for Galilee.

The angel rolled away the stone so the women could see what had already happened. The women ran off shaking with laughter and fear.

As far as we know the angel was still sitting there on the stone when Jesus met the women on the road.

Maybe the angel sat there until the guards awoke - the guards who had been sent to guard the dead, who had become like the dead themselves.

If the angel spoke, would they dare to listen?

Or would they believe only in what they had known - the power of Rome, the rule of fear, the keeping of good order, the protection of the status quo.

"Do not be afraid."

Could they have heard such a word or would they try to get the stone back in place? We'll never know for the story doesn't stay at the tomb.

Before the guards woke up, before the women got to Galilee, Jesus appeared to them on the road.

"Do not be afraid," he said, as though he knew they needed to hear it again.

It is not easy to believe in the power of life over death.

Indeed, Easter can be the hardest day of the church year for us.

The birth of the baby Jesus at Christmas is easier to take in than the grown-up Jesus rising from the dead. But the baby would have been forgotten if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead.

Jesus might have been remembered as a wise teacher or a peasant revolutionary, but Easter transforms memory to presence.

I know from my many years as a preacher that Easter can be the hardest of all. No doubt that's why the gospel stories all say, "Do not be afraid."

That is the angel's word.

It is also Jesus' word to us – now after Easter - for he knows we need to hear it again.

What else does the angel sitting on the stone want us to know?

One thing for sure we will not see Jesus staring where the stone had been.

Maybe that's why the angel sat on it - to direct our attention elsewhere!

No amount of research at the empty tomb will reveal Jesus.

The women who came to the tomb didn't see Jesus there.

Jesus didn't come walking out of the tomb leaving his grave clothes behind.

The earliest witnesses bear testimony to Jesus who was transformed - who was alive in a new way beyond the limits of time and space.

The gospel accounts move back and forth between pictures of Jesus who was physically present eating, touching, talking and Jesus who appeared suddenly on the road or in a locked room, not bound by physical limitations.

Jesus does not live in their memories; Jesus is somehow present.

The angel wants us to see that the very stone of death has been rolled away, turned over, transformed into a space for proclaiming the resurrection gospel, not only at Easter but all the time...

Jesus is not memory but presence, presence which continues to transform the forces of death all around us. Sometimes when we dare to start walking toward Galilee we begin to see.

Jesus is presence – the power of God has conquered the forces of death!

The love of God has defeated the hatreds of humanity!

We know the first part of the angel's message so well.

But this part which speaks of Galilee is just as important.

I believe the angel is saying something about this place Galilee that is more than geography.

Galilee in the first century was known for political unrest, banditry and tax revolts.

It was a hotbed of economic uncertainty, political instability, and cultural confusion.

Galilee was often the breeding ground of rebellions against Rome.

It was a place of anxiety and fear.

Jesus leaves the garden and returns to Galilee with all its uncertainty, the unpredictability, the anxiety...

And he invites his friends to go there too.

Galilee in the 1st century was probably the last place where one wanted to be...

And this understanding takes us a bit closer to answering the questions which Galilees Jesus would ask us to go to today.

Think of our present world:

global economic & political instability,

personal uncertainty,

threat of terrorism,

the nightmare of natural disasters – we are in Galilee.

Hostility towards strangers,

extreme right-winged politicians,

the break of unions once seen as a blessing to the world,

poverty, hunger, the lack of medication and education...

We are in Galilee.

Think of your own life:

the uncertainty of what will come,

the search for a better job,

the worries about your children,

the illness that can't be cured,

the weaknesses,

the old age,

the limited resources you personally have...

The pains we bear, the fears we fear – we are in Galilee.

And this is where Jesus goes with us – goes ahead of us.

This is where Jesus is there for us.

Not on the mountain, not in the garden, but in the harsh and exciting reality of everyday life. There he feeds us with bread and with wine and other stuff which we may desperately need to keep going...

"Do not be afraid!"