

Letting Down Our Guard
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 28:1-15

I'll let you in on a secret. Just about a month ago I was having coffee and conversation with a clergy friend, and I said to him "*I just don't know if I've got another Easter sermon left in me.*" True story.

Think about it. How many different, engaging, challenging ways could you say, year after year, "Christ is risen!"?

It's challenging because the Easter Sermon often takes place when attendance (and expectations) are highest – despite how it coincides with school vacation this year. And it's even more challenging because resurrection is arguably the most central, distinctive, and confounding facet of Christian theology.

So, it is with some trepidation that we travel together once again to that empty tomb, hoping that what was originally an unexpected plot twist might still jolt us today.

Amazingly, despite my own doubts, something new does greet me at Jesus's tomb each year. Again and again that place of early morning emptiness allows me the space to see things anew.

This happens, in part, because something in our world is different every year, and the changes allow me to search the well-worn scripture, peer into the shadows of the tomb and walk away with a fresh vision.

Which is itself kind of the point of resurrection, isn't it?

Today we take an old, old story, dust off the cobwebs of ancient assumptions, bring it out again to the light of a new day and know that it continues to live.

Usually, I would find my thoughts lingering on Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the Angel... these are the characters that speak and take action in today's reading. They declare the hopeful message of Resurrection.

But this year, a minor character (or characters) has completely hijacked the story for me. They only appear in Matthew. Don't worry, we're going to get to the resurrected Jesus, I promise. But first, we have to get past the guards.

Let's picture the opening scene: it's daybreak at the tomb as the women arrive. They have bravely ventured there to honor the man who's been executed by the empire and whose body is now guarded by soldiers of that same empire.

What courage it took for these women to show up, to display their deep and abiding love. They feel the ground shake beneath their feet as they approach the tomb. To this day, there is a cleft in the stone at the site thought to be the hill Jesus was crucified upon, there inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

The women they see an angel descending like a lightning bolt, appearing like a man dressed in white. After moving the heavy stone away from the tomb's entrance, he sits upon it as if he's arrived to give the women full access. He assures them they have no need to fear. He focuses his attention on the women, trusting them to be the first messengers of the Good News.

All of this, as the Roman soldiers stationed at the tomb faint from their fear. These heavily armed, trained and combat-ready soldiers are completely disempowered. What I can't get over is how the soldiers are utterly incapable of completing their mission. Instead, these big tough guys crack under pressure.

We don't know how many soldiers there were, and we don't know their names or how they felt about the duty they were given. They were probably young, inexperienced and far from home – because guarding a door is the kind of assignment a new recruit is likely to get. We are told that later, when their courage returns, they try to describe to authorities what they saw. And in the end, they are given hush money to keep quiet.

Meanwhile the out of work carpenter, this travelling itinerant preacher and healer, the one who had never sanctioned violence, has conquered even death.

As a child, I never was a big fan of heights and I'm still not to this day, to be honest. I wasn't good with high speeds either, unless I was in control of the brakes and throttle. Needless to say, roller coasters weren't my first choice at the amusement parks.

But, having a younger brother to taunt me, I once found myself on a roller coaster. "Try it!" he said. "It's Fun!". And there I was, riding with white knuckles, my face a certain shade of green! And that was just on the kiddie-sized one that reached a height of about 20 feet, lasted about a minute, and reached top speeds of, maybe, 20 miles-per-hour.

As I grew older the challenges just got bigger. With peers to egg me on, it became about; who could climb higher into a tree, who would jump from the highest point of the cliff into a swimming hole or, until one summer the girl who was afraid of heights got a part time summer job painting houses.

I realized a great sense of satisfaction and liberation each time I conquered my fear. That new-found strength had nothing to do with impressing anyone else; it was something indefinable; something I felt deep within myself.

Sometimes Holy Week feels like a rollercoaster. We spend the year with Jesus. We see him being Baptized by John and then wander into the desert to fast and be tempted; climbing higher.

We see him begin his ministry and gather his Disciples; climbing higher.

We witness him healing the sick, casting out demons, telling hard stories, even raising people from death; climbing higher, higher!

We hear him facing off with the Scribes and Pharisees, turning over tables, silencing their every argument; climbing higher, higher!

Then we watch and participate in his glorious ride into Jerusalem with all the people shouting Hosannas; climbing higher, higher, and higher!

And, all of a sudden, just when we think there's no stopping him now; no stopping us now, we find ourselves crashing down the other side, screaming as we accelerate faster and faster straight toward the ground below as our Lord is betrayed, arrested, convicted, and executed in the most horrible way!

This is it; this is the end of him and of us, we're certain of it; just seconds before we meet our doom and... swoosh, we're on our way back up again as we find the tomb empty and see him alive, face to face!

Mary and Mary went to the tomb; which was scary and painful enough. Then, as the Angel rolled the stone away and the earth shook and even the tough guy guards are so overwhelmed with the sights and sounds they pass out cold. But the women; the women stand firm. In spite of it all.

Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, I have also known that the very things I've once feared have often given me the greatest joy.

You might not expect that fear and joy can go hand in hand, they can.

It's in facing our fears and stepping out in courage that we experience life's greatest exhilarations.

A similar feeling can happen when we finally come to face our priorities and prejudices.

Or when we strike out on a brave, new path.

My deepest experiences of God have not been about certitude but rather about stretching,

never about finding answers but always in lingering on the questions.

Sometimes, that can leave me feel like I've just been on a roller coaster – thrilled to the core, heart-rate up, and slightly nauseous.

Some of the early Jesus followers named him the Christ because they were hoping he would be the Messiah, the anointed one from David's line who'd lead the Jews into a new Messianic era.

But others took that title and expanded upon it. They saw in him a new way of being human, and a new face of the Divine. And the best part was that the oneness Jesus experienced with God and with other human beings (even his enemies) was something he taught was available to everyone else.

Jesus of Nazareth—prophet, healer, rabbi—became the Christ, the one who helps us live out our deeper connections with one another, and live in a way in which we intentionally take down walls, live vulnerably, let down our guard. God with us... Emmanuel... until the end of the age.

What are you standing guard over today?

What in your spiritual or religious life is being carefully guarded so you don't have to change or risk?

What is your heart guarded against right now?

Where are you willing to go, despite fear, to find your joy?

Remember the guards at Jesus's tomb remained stuck in their fear.

But the Mary's moved forward in fear AND joy.

Christ is risen! *Christ is risen indeed!* Amen.