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Year A, Easter Vigil, Matthew 28:1-10
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

This Easter, we are reading two of the four accounts of Jesus' resurrection—we read Matthew's account tonight and on Easter morning we'll read John's account. There are definite differences in these two accounts and, in fact, in all four of the Gospel accounts. There are differences in where Jesus first appears after the resurrection (graveside, in Jerusalem, or in Galilee); differences in how many appearances are recorded; differences in the appearance stories themselves—none of them overlap, that is, they are all unique; and, finally, differences in how many women and angels were there. And this is to name just the obvious ones.

But there is also a remarkable consistency running through the four accounts as well: they agree that Mary Magdalene was present at the tomb; they agree that the stone was a major problem for Mary and any of the other woman who may have been present with her, and they agree that this problem was somehow solved for them; and, finally, they agree that a stranger or strangers (an angel or similar messengers) spoke to the women. Beyond this, Matthew and John agree that Mary Magdalene then met Jesus; all except Mark, who's original ending has likely been lost to us, tell us that Mary went to the remaining male disciples with the story of what she'd seen; and Luke and John agree that when Peter and another disciple arrive, they enter the empty tomb to see for themselves.

Tomorrow morning I'll discuss how the resurrection of Jesus may hold a number of genuine surprises for us, and perhaps even for Jesus, but tonight we'll

linger a while with Matthew, who perhaps has the oddest story of the all the four Evangelists to tell —with bodies rising from their tombs and walking around after Jesus’ death but then dropping out of the narrative completely and with his worries about rumors the body of Jesus might be stolen and his disciples blamed—though, again, Matthew is remarkably consistent with the other accounts in his discussion of the resurrection itself. For me, the most interesting aspect of Matthew’s account is in the final appearance story which, unfortunately, we are not reading in this Easter season. It concerns what happens at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus meets his disciples on a mountain in Galilee.

As we heard tonight, the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” At the end of the Gospel, we pick up the story and Jesus appears to the disciples as he said he would. We are then told, “...when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted.” We’ll hear, as we always do on the Second Sunday of Easter, the story in the Gospel of John concerning Thomas and his doubts, but Thomas is different than those disciples mentioned in Matthew—he hadn’t yet seen the risen Jesus. What is interesting about this appearance story in Matthew is that the eleven remaining disciples are all looking right at the resurrected Jesus and, again, we are told, “some doubted.” Remember I said a few weeks ago how, in John, “seeing is believing?” Evidently, that was not the case for Matthew.

There are a number of interesting aspects to this short comment, that “some doubted.” First, it is remarkable that Matthew includes it all. There is raging debate among Biblical scholars over whether the authors of the four Gospels essentially made up the story of the resurrection to help explain their

faith in the risen Christ or, granting that all four authors of the Gospels put their own spin on the resurrection story, whether their stories were at least a fairly accurate representation of what Mary and the disciples actually saw and experienced. Some scholars believe the fact that Matthew includes the observation that some of the disciples doubted, even when they were faced with the risen Lord, suggests that he didn't make up the story—if he were making it up, they argue, he would have omitted such comments.

Second, such comments also suggest, as I'll discuss tomorrow, that whatever happened to Jesus in the resurrection, the disciples were not prepared for it. This gets at another debate among Biblical scholars—which came first, the appearance stories or the resurrection stories? If some scholars are having a hard time believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, perhaps, they suggest, what really happened to the disciples is similar to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. He had a vision of the risen Jesus that changed his life, and that may have been what these first disciples experienced. But the disciples were quite able, as was Paul, to distinguish between a vision and a man standing in front of them and, in some cases, eating with them. As I will suggest tomorrow, both the empty tomb, implying a bodily resurrection, *and* the appearance stories are necessary to persuade the disciples that Jesus is truly risen and alive. Matthew's comment about doubt suggests that the disciples both needed this confirmation and that Jesus provided what they needed. It also suggests that it's "okay" if we need such convincing as well. But it also tell us that Jesus' resurrected body was not like anything the disciples were expecting—I'll elaborate on that tomorrow, as well.

I will end tonight with this, reiterating what I just said in passing. If we have doubts about the resurrection even as we're here celebrating it, we are not alone. The disciples themselves had their doubts. There are those among us for whom such faith comes easily, and those folks should simply thank God for such a gift. But there are others among us who are here because they see something in Jesus that draws them in, and yet they wonder about this central conviction of the Christian Church—the he was indeed resurrected and that resurrection included a body (of some sort). All I can say is that the stories of the resurrection and the appearances make it plain that some of the first disciples had their doubts as well, and that they are not condemned for it.

So, we also should not gloss over our own doubts or pretend we don't have them when we do. But, also, we should not miss that the disciples eventually, somehow, resolved their doubts and, with their faith, changed the world. That is the power of the resurrection at work, and it is our role to pick up their mantle, their mission, in bringing the kingdom of God to completion on earth. But, again, more on this tomorrow morning. Amen.