

“Holy Uncertainty”

Sermon from Matthew 27:57-28:15

Given Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary of Magdala came with Mary to inspect the tomb. Suddenly, there was a severe earthquake, and an angel of God descended from heaven, rolled back the stone, and sat on it. The angel's appearance was like lightning, with garments white as snow. The guards shook with fear and fell down as though they were dead.

Then the angel spoke, addressing the women: “Don’t be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified, who is no longer here. Jesus has been raised, exactly as it was foretold. Come and see the burial place. Then go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Jesus there. That is the message I have for you.”

The women hurried away from the tomb with awe and great joy and ran to carry the good news to the disciples. Suddenly Jesus stood before them and said, “Shalom!” The women came up, embraced Jesus’ feet, and worshipped. At this Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see me.”

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests what had happened. The chief priests in turn held a meeting with the elders and, after working out their strategy, gave a considerable amount of money to the soldiers, with these instructions: “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ And if any word of this gets to the governor, we will straighten it out with him and keep you out of trouble.” The soldiers took the money and carried out their instructions. This is the story that circulates among Judeans to this very day.

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H. L. Mencken wrote for many years for the *Baltimore Sun*. We probably wouldn't quote most of what he wrote in this sanctuary, for this congregation – much of what we stand for, he criticized; much of what he would avow, we would speak against. But in an article in the *Christian Century* a few months back, Peter Marty told readers that Mencken – Marty called him an “influential curmudgeon” – received lots of letters from outraged readers of his columns – people who couldn't believe he'd put his offensive opinions in print. And he replied to every one of them, sending back a pre-printed postcard he kept a stack of in his office. Every postcard bore the same message:

Dear Sir or Madam,
You may be right.
Yours sincerely,
H. L. Mencken

And the genius of that postcard, says the article, is that in addition to its being an abrupt dismissal, it is also an acknowledgement, and a hint of affirmation. If people had sent their responses to Mencken hoping for a fight, they weren't going to get one. Their anger, their ire, their conviction, would be met simply with, “Maybe so.” He would come to their

certainty with his own acknowledgement of uncertainty, which is, in some real ways, an act of generosity, and humility.

Marty quotes the author Marilynne Robinson, who once wrote, “There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian.” She wrote, “I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence.”

And I wonder if uncertainty might be the sort of reverence we’re called to this Easter morning.

I mean, first, maybe it wouldn’t ask too much of us. Because we can’t really handle that these days. Have you ever lived through a more uncertain time?

My mother is not that old. But whenever I call her these days, she tells me, “I’ve never seen days like these. And I’m old.”

Has there ever been a time when we have been this unsure of one another – not knowing who might be sick and not yet know they’re sick; not knowing whether we ourselves are sick; wanting to care for and comfort and be present for one another, but restricted from nearly all of the ways we know

how to do those things? Has there ever been a time when your path has been so limited – from home, to the grocery store, and back again? Does it leave you wondering about the world outside of those eight blocks?

We come to this Easter Sunday through Matthew's gospel, which, to be honest, doesn't help, if we're looking for a sure thing to embrace.

There are four tellings of the story of Jesus' burial and resurrection. A few things are common to all of them. In all of them, a man named Joseph petitions for the body of Jesus, and receives it, and takes it to bury it in his own tomb. In all of them, women come early in the morning on the third day, and some combination of fear and awe and wonder overtakes them when they learn that Jesus is not where they expect him to be. In several of the tellings, his followers are confused, or skeptical, or unaware, when they first meet him again: they don't recognize the one before them as their resurrected friend.

But only in Matthew do we get this conspiracy theory. Only in Matthew do we get this story – this really detailed, really

carefully preserved plot about the rumors circulating after the crucifixion, hinting that Jesus wasn't in his tomb because his followers came in the night and stole his body – only Matthew tells us how those rumors started.

And it's just enough, I think, to leave readers a little uncertain.

I mean, Matthew clearly wants the people he knows will have heard those rumors to read this story and think, "oh, it was a cover-up. This is why we've heard that..." But in doing so, he introduces that conspiracy theory to every subsequent generation, and I gotta say: it almost sounds... plausible.

I don't know about you, but there's nothing that leaves me more uncertain than the Easter story. It is the most unbelievable story in our sacred text, which is, to be fair, chock-full of unbelievable stories.

But it is also the one we need in days like this.

While we stay home; while we mourn that we cannot visit our loved ones; while we weep for those who die in isolation, not abandoned by those who love them but to protect them; while

we tune in each morning, to see, as Rolf Jacobson put it, “what work death has done in the night” and we watch those numbers climb – especially while all of this defines our reality, we need a story that tells us that sometimes, on the other side of an unknowing, on the other side of a tragedy that upends the world as we’ve known it; on the other side of this waiting that doesn’t feel particularly hopeful or promising – we need to hear the story that tells us on the other side of all of this can be both continued uncertainty *and* transformed, even abundant, life.

And Matthew’s good for us there. Commentator Richard Swanson says Jesus’ death in Matthew isn’t heroic, or loving; it isn’t the death of a martyr. He doesn’t sound at all like a faithful servant who knows that this cross must be his end and trusts that God will meet him on the other side. In Matthew, Jesus’ last words are an accusation: he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and he dies with that question still hanging in the air.

Swanson says Jesus, in Matthew, is a moral rigorist – saying things like “be perfect, like God is perfect” – and yet in these last moments, Jesus cannot live up to his own standards. It’s

not surprising, given his humanity, and the realities of what he's endured, but it does complicate things.

Jesus dies in despair and abandonment. He no longer trusts God. He is ashamed and afraid. How can he come back from that?

Swanson suggests that maybe on Easter morning, nobody is more surprised to find Jesus alive again than Jesus. Maybe on Easter morning, Jesus is shocked that after the blasphemy he spoke with his last breath, his breath would be restored.

Easter doesn't deny that death does it work, and it doesn't try to make it ok. It just promises that by some mystery, God is at work, healing, shaping, transforming, bringing new life even from deepest despair. In days like these when we so long for explanations, for any information we can cling to that might give us some direction, some timeline, some specifics, a story that says, "just trust this" can feel unhelpful.

Layton Williams relays a story of a public reading by the fantasy author Madeline L'Engle, where a girl in the audience stood up during the Q & A time and told the author she'd read

A Wrinkle in Time. L'Engle was impressed because the girl was so young, and she asked her, she asked, "Did you understand it?" And after a pause, the girl said, "I didn't understand it, but I knew what it was about."

Maybe sometimes that's all the conviction we can muster. And maybe that's alright. Maybe that's more than enough even, because it leaves room for some holy uncertainty – some generosity and some humility, some acknowledgement that the author of creation is active in ways beyond what we can know; among the sick and the dying, the scared and the lonely, and even among those not so affected by this time but still wondering what life might look like on the other side of it.

Bishop John Shelby Spong told us, "True religion is not about possessing the truth. No religion does that. It is rather an invitation into a journey that leads one toward the mystery of God."

Easter is unfolding mystery. In this story, Jesus who has been persecuted comes speaking peace; women who have sat vigil with death are greeted with new life; their friend who cried out in abandonment now promises his presence with them always.

This Easter, even as death saturates not just our news but all of our knowing, we are invited to sit with that knowing in a new way, to be still with it, to meet God in it.

This Easter, not in spite of my uncertainty but from deep within it, I want to say to Matthew, who gives us the rumors but also this unbelievable story of the persistence of life and love and hope, I want to say to Matthew and to the story he tells, "You may be right."