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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Matthew 28; Psalm 46

1 May 2022

I Am with You Always

*Opening Greeting and Prayer:*

Please join me in prayer: Lord of hosts, our refuge and strength, through earthquake and terror, you appear to us and roll away the stones that separate us from you. Turn our fear to faith, our doubts to delight, as Jesus becomes for us an abiding presence. Raise us to new life in your kingdom family. Empower us with your Holy Spirit, your new breath, to reach out and share the hope of resurrection with our neighbors and enemies. In Jesus name. Amen.

*Message:*

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! On this third Sunday of Easter, we return to the empty tomb again. Two weeks ago on Easter Sunday, we read from John's gospel as Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the beloved disciple all witnessed the empty tomb, but Mary was the first to recognize the risen Jesus when he called out her name. Last week, we left Mark's account bewildered and wondering at the challenge that Mark offers us: unlike the disciples who abandon Jesus and the three women who leave the tomb in silence and fear, will we share how we have witnessed the empty tomb and the presence of the risen Jesus in our own lives?

This morning, we walk through Matthew's gospel account of the resurrection. To put these stories in a little bit of perspective, scholars speculate that Mark's gospel was probably the first written around 70 CE with Matthew and Luke not more than 10 years later and John's

gospel to follow by another 10-20 years. The length of each gospel's resurrection account seems to correspond or correlate with how much later the account was written as each author gathered written or spoken materials while still using pieces of the gospel before them. Luke, Matthew, and John all seem to use pieces of Mark's account, while adding some of their own material and all the while shaping it to their particular purposes. Remember that these gospel letters were not historical nonfiction, meant to tell the story of Jesus's life exactly as it happened. While much of the message that each gospel tells lines up with the others, each book is still quite distinct, which is why we are studying each one and how it highlights the meaning of Jesus's resurrection maybe a little differently than the others did.

So let's look at Matthew 28. While all three gospels that we have studied thus far have Mary Magdalene going to see the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week or the day after Sabbath, we are not entirely certain of who else might have gone with her, if anyone. From Matthew 27:56, we know that Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, who was also mentioned in Mark's version, joins Mary Magdalene. Rather than taking spices to anoint Jesus as they were in Mark, these two women seem to be anticipating what Jesus had already said would happen: on the third day, he would be raised.

As they arrive at the tomb, another earthquake rocks the countryside as it did when Jesus relinquished his final breath on the cross just two days before. On this occasion though, an angel moves the stone from the tomb, terrifies the soldiers guarding the entrance, and sits on top of the stone to speak to Mary and Mary. Just like the powers of Rome and the religious leaders did their best to destroy Jesus not long before, this time, God's representative, the angel brings the representatives of Rome's power, the soldiers, to their weakest state; they faint in fear and

become like dead men. The story is turning; what had appeared to be victory for the powers of evil, violence, domination, and empire is beginning to unwind and fall apart.

From his place on top of the large tomb stone, the angel then tells the women that Jesus is not there but has been raised and will be meeting them and the other disciples in Galilee. This time in Matthew's gospel, Mary and Mary leave the tomb, not in silence but in joy, only to be met by Jesus along the way who reiterates to them that he will indeed meet them in Galilee. The women cling to Jesus legs and worship him, overwhelmed by his gracious presence. Jesus is no ghost or apparition or hallucination. His body can be touched and held, his voice can be heard, his actions seen, his presence appreciated and felt. Once Jesus leaves them, the women run to tell the other disciples.

While they are on their way, the Roman soldiers wake up, aware that something needs to be done; otherwise, they will pay for whatever has happened to the dead criminal whose body is now gone from the tomb. Remember too that it was a gracious act for Pilate to allow Jesus's body to have a proper burial; criminals and political enemies were often either left on the cross for the birds to eat, or their bodies were tossed into mass graves, which is why this particular hill outside of Jerusalem was called the hill of the skull, Golgotha. Everyone knew what happened there, what it smelled like, and what it meant for anyone who tried to assert their own authority without approval from the empire. Overwhelmed by what has happened, the soldiers run too but not to share good news. They need to cover up whatever has happened, so they tell the religious leaders first all that they had experienced at the tomb. Like Judas, the religious leaders pay the soldiers to say that the disciples came and took Jesus's body while they were asleep, a rather silly explanation: how would they know who had come and done anything if they were asleep? This

explanation for the empty tomb continues even to today in our time just as the author of Matthew mentions for his readers when the gospel was written.

This moment of contrasting narratives or stories created to counter any notion of resurrection or new life for an enemy of Rome should come as no surprise to us. The powers of empire, both in Pilate and the religious leaders of Jerusalem, have tried their best to exterminate Jesus of Nazareth for a host of reasons, and they will continue to do so at all costs, no matter how silly or nonsensical the explanations might become. We should not be surprised by this because we see the same thing today as politicians take stories of new life, redemption, restoration, and hope, and they twist them or discredit them to their advantage so that they do not have to change whatever might be revealed in the truth and possibility of resurrection.

But we don't necessarily even have to look to the distorted political world of our own country to see this kind of action take place. How often will you or I try to come up with any other explanation for what God is calling us to or revealing to us so that we can go on living our lives as we always have? If we follow the Easter Sunday path of resurrection from certainty to openness, then we might have to begin looking and seeing what we have desired not to see or experience all along. Will I have the strength and wherewithal to begin looking for new life and hope in the very places or people that I have written off or cut off from my point of view? Will we respond differently than the religious leaders when we hear of the power of resurrection today in those around us, especially when we have witnessed to resurrection's power in each of our own baptisms, for going into the water, we have died to ourselves, and coming through the water, we have been raised to life in the risen Jesus?

If we do look, if we listen closely to the witness of the women at the tomb, we, like the disciples will meet the risen Jesus on the mountain in Galilee, taking on the mantle of Jesus's

great mission to share the possibilities of resurrection with the entire world, with all nations, which was the original vision that God had for the ancient people of Israel. It is in this moment on the mountain Matthew 28:16 that the author of Matthew becomes overtly political, even though thus far, the author has implied already that the current political structures of empire are no match for the love and grace of Israel's covenant god.

In this moment on the mountain, like the Roman god Jupiter, whom we know better as Zeus, sending out the Roman emperor to conquer the nations, Jesus sends out the disciples. But, Jesus turns the whole story on its head, for it is not by conquering with the sword, the chariot, the spear, or the shield that Jesus's empire or kingdom will take the world. Jesus's followers will spread the words of life through water and the word, common symbols of the promise of resurrection. Jesus's disciples will draw even more followers not by forcing them to join by threat of death, but through the example of Jesus' sacrifice that in giving one's life, not taking another's, one will bring peace and hope to the world. All authority does not lay at the feet of the Roman emperor, nor at the feet of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, but it lays at the feet of the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers will make more followers through baptism and teaching, not through threat, manipulation, fear, or violence.

What will sustain us in this mission is not that we will conquer people who will become our servants as the Roman empire did, but that we will be servants of the people that we seek to invite into the family of the risen Jesus. When we go as Jesus has told us in Matthew 28, we go in the promise of Jesus's resurrection presence, the reality that there is never a place where hope cannot be found, where new life cannot spring from death, where restoration cannot sprout from destruction. When others say that there is no hope, we carry on welcoming the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit, working for the restoration of all people, for no one is ever too lost or too broken.

*Closing prayer:*

Please join me in prayer: Risen Jesus, living Christ, in these times as the disciples felt too in their time, when we fear we are losing hope or feel that our efforts are futile, let us see in our hearts and minds the image of your resurrection, and let that be our source of courage and strength. With that, and in your company, help us face the challenges and struggle against all that is born of injustice. In Jesus name. Amen.