

Sermon
Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday-A, April 12, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

I love to tell stories. Maybe you've noticed.

I have a repertoire of stories I like to tell about my childhood, my friends, and some of the incredible things that have happened to me...I've got great stories about my mom's sweet, but crazy parents, about the time I ran over myself with my own car, and other stories about various misdeeds, foibles, and unbelievable encounters. I even have whole sets of friends that ask me to retell the same stories they've heard me tell dozens of times every time we're together. Okay, now I know how Don Bunyard must feel!

My partner, Carole, doesn't understand this. I had always thought that most people told and retold the stories of their lives. Clearly, this isn't her habit. She complains that I have a story for every situation or occasion. But my stories are a part of who I am. And while Carole doesn't exactly love the way I relate to anything and everything by illustrating it in the form of a story, she has learned to put up with the stories – and with me.

I think that I tell stories to help me remember my past and to keep alive the people who are important to me. Many of the people who star in my stories aren't around anymore so for me, my stories keep them alive.

The early Christian church survived and grew because of stories. People today are sometimes surprised to find that the stories we know of Jesus weren't written down until many years after the resurrection. Most scholars believe the Gospel of Mark was the first written account of the life of Jesus Christ and that it was written shortly after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. That's about 40 years after the first Easter. Both Matthew and Luke were written 10 to 20 years later, using Mark's gospel as a resource- Matthew, for a Jewish audience, and Luke for a non-Jewish, or Gentile, audience.

In the years beforehand, these accounts of Jesus' life were told over and over and passed down through the generations in families and in their communities. But even after these stories were written, they continued to be spoken in private homes and in the gathered communities of believers. Part of the reason these stories were repeated aloud is that most common people couldn't read or write, but also because the early Christians faced daily threats to their safety. Not only was the region still occupied by the Romans, whom they feared, but early Christians also hid from the Jewish authorities. To have been discovered with manuscripts telling of Jesus' resurrection would have meant certain death for the one holding them and the possible exposure of their whole community of believers.

One of the stories of the early church was not only scandalous, it was totally unbelievable.

In fact, it's an unbelievable story that has some of their own folks exhibiting total disbelief.

On that first Easter morning, the two Marys approached the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. They had come to do what was good and right and proper for the dead body of their friend. Completing their ritual was part of their devotion to Jesus. A New Testament scholar writes that, "in the Roman World, providing proper burial was one of the important obligations of contractual friendship. Throughout the Mediterranean world it was one of the strongest obligations of family members. Taking spices to a tomb was a part of what it meant to belong to a family.

So the women were dutifully serving Jesus in the best way they knew. But that morning was anything but ordinary. As they approached the tomb a great earthquake hit the land and an angel, descending from heaven, rolled the stone away.

They had expected to find the body of Jesus, but instead encountered an angel.

The angel reassures the Marys by saying "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. – And that's a bit nicer, I think, than the way Luke tells the story. In his gospel account, the angel tells the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

"Hey, why are you living as though your Savior were still dead?"

They hadn't come seeking the living. It seems they hadn't remembered Jesus' words about the resurrection.

Had they not been listening?

Had they not remembered?

It seems that Mary, Martha's sister remembered Jesus' telling them about his impending death in our gospel text a couple of Sundays ago, so why not these women?

Why not now?

In what ways do we continue to look for the living Lord among the dead today? Why are we living as though our Savior is still dead?

I think that some of us live as though Jesus is still in his tomb, because we still carry burdens that we should have let Jesus' carry a long time ago-like our salvation.

We forget — or fail to trust — that Jesus completed the entire work of our salvation,

so we still think things like, "Well, yeah, Jesus died for my sins — but now it's up to me to live a life good enough to get into heaven." That's thinking as though Jesus is still dead.

Or, like the women that morning, we struggle under heavy obligations and worry about things as though God expected us to handle everything on our own — as though God won't, or can't, work all things out for the good of those who love him.

We freak out over crime in our towns or terrorism too close to home, or we limit our families and overwork our jobs, not truly trusting that when God says God will take care of us no matter what, that God means we'll be taken care of no matter what.

When we live our lives not trusting God we are living as though Jesus is still in the grave.

But Jesus is not still dead. His tomb is still empty — there's no reason to be looking for him there.

And that's why the question, "why do you look for the living among the dead?" helps us remember to focus instead on God's promises. Let's not live as though Jesus were dead; we have a risen Lord.

But how do we live as though we have a risen Lord? If he can't be found with the dead, where do we find him? How can we meet him?

Sometimes we need to look back. The angels' statement, "Remember how he told you..." can be a starting point. When our lives are in crisis, when a loved one has died, when we have lost our job, when we have received bad news about our health or someone we love, the crisis has the ability to shut out all the rest of life from our awareness and to break off the connections between us and the past.

But by remembering God's presence in our own past, how God saw us through those times, we can, therefore begin to deal with the present. God has vindicated Jesus in the resurrection. Remember what Jesus has done and what he has taught. Remember the meals in Jesus' fellowship, his healings and his parables, the miracles and healings he performed.

Where else might we find the living one? Every time we are gathered together as a community of believers, the risen Jesus appears as the living Word and in the living Meal. We meet the living one by remembering his words and "doing this in remembrance" of him.

This "remembering" is more than just "thinking about," but "re-presenting" , retelling and re-enacting the historical events of Jesus' life, so that we, in the present, are also participants. Retelling the story keeps Jesus alive.

In the dawn of Christ's resurrection this Easter morning, we rejoice that death and evil did not have the last word: the tomb is empty! Christ is with us, living among us and through us! My seminary classmate, Pastor Amy Walter-Peterson, who was an assistant to Bishop Marie Jerge of the upstate New York Synod, likes to say that "the stories we tell are not the stories God ultimately tells. The stories God tells are stories of redemption."

Those words of redemption are those that Jesus spoke, where Jesus announces "good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind," freedom to the oppressed, and "the year of the Lord's favor." Christ is with us as whenever we hear words of forgiveness and whenever the sacraments are received. Christ is with us as we look for signs of Jesus in our churches and communities and remember his words: "And, remember I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And of course, the greatest redemption story of them all is the one we are here to celebrate today. That by his death and resurrection, Jesus not only redeemed all of humankind, but the entirety of creation. Jesus died so that we might live. Because he defeated death, we all will live with him in paradise for eternity.

Finally, though, Easter does not end with remembering or with the experiences of re-presenting the risen Lord; but with our telling others. The women, after being reminded and remembering, go back and tell what has happened to the apostles -- even though the men think their words are nonsense. After the risen Jesus explains the scriptures and breaks bread with the two in Emmaus, they also rush back to Jerusalem to tell others what had happened.

Can any of us say that we really believe in the resurrection of the Lord if we aren't willing to tell others about it? Because it is in the telling of our stories that we are helped to remember the important events in our lives. Is the story of Jesus' resurrection one of them?

Does the risen Christ have a place in your repertoire of stories?

Is the story of the Jesus' resurrection a part of who you are?

May it be so.

Amen.