

April 9th: Tomb

Good morning again, everyone! If you are joining us for the first time this Easter morning, we are so glad you are here! Our sermon series for this year is taking us through the whole Bible, from the beginning to the end, and we are in the middle of reading through the New Testament. We've called this series, A Family Story, because we believe that the Bible is the story of God's beloved creation, the people that he calls his family. So if you walk away with just one piece of information today, I hope that you know that God created you just as you, loves you just as you are, and desires to have a relationship with you just as you are. All of us, each and every person, is not only welcome in God's family, but actively embraced for their unique gifts.

During this series, we've been looking more closely at the Gospel of Matthew, which is a portrait of Jesus that was written primarily for an early Jewish audience. Composed in the late first century, likely as the second gospel account, it records many of Jesus' most famous teachings, including sermons and stories that fulfill Old Testament prophecies. This morning we look at Matthew's account of the Resurrection, which has some unique features compared to the other three stories found in Mark, Luke, and John. I know we're not supposed to play favorites, but Matthew's version is one of mine, for a few reasons which we'll get into in just a few minutes.

I'm excited to dive into this story, but before we do, let's pray together.

Victorious God,

As the Apostle Paul writes in your holy word, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Today we rejoice that nothing can separate us from you. We celebrate your ultimate defeat of death, and we gather at your empty tomb to marvel at your presence among us as our Risen Lord. Fill our hearts with joy, fill our mouths with your praise, fill our lives

*with your triumphant good news, fill our actions with your never ending love.
Amen.*

Have any of you ever been inside of a tomb?

Presumably no one here is dead or a zombie, so it's unlikely that many of us have a lot of first hand experiences with being placed into a tomb, but maybe a few of us have taken a tour inside a burial cave or been to a museum that has a replica of the Egyptian pyramids. Or maybe there are some of you that have laid family members to rest in a mausoleum and been surrounded on all sides by stone and graves. It's not exactly a joyous occasion, is it? In my experience, it mostly feels pretty somber, or at least serious and reserved. You might have to dress in more conservative clothing, you might have to cover your hair, or you might have to silence your phones and turn off your cameras. There's not normally a rowdy party, or a celebration or lively conversation.

This week, as I was reading our scripture text, I was thinking about a trip I took to Italy in the Spring of 2018 with a group of my undergraduate students. I was leading a college course with two colleagues, and we spent almost a week in Rome, a city that is a fascinating combination of ancient and modern. One of the highlights of those days was a tour that we took of St. Peter's Basilica, a tour which concluded with a walk through a place called the Necropolis. From the floor of St. Peter's massive sanctuary, we descended into the heart of the basilica via an elaborately carved staircase, until we were a few meters below Vatican City. In Greek, Necropolis literally means "city of the dead," and this historic graveyard was originally built on the southern side of Vatican Hill to house the tombs of deceased popes. Over the centuries, these ancient burial sites had been excavated and made available to the public, and today thousands of visitors per year stroll through these first century streets and pause to reflect at these sacred tombs. The most recent popes are buried in a section called the Grotto, all fine marble and gently flickering candles, but as you go deeper, it is like stepping back in time.

I remember how it felt to scuff my feet along those stones that had been worn smooth, I remember the slightly musty smell of the air in the crypts, I remember being amazed at how the church's history had been preserved for modern Christians to see centuries later. I stood in front of graves of people that I recognized, like Pope John Paul I, and in front of names that I have only read about in history books, like Pope Nicholas III, from the 13th century or Pope Pius VI from the 18th century.

In those moments, I felt connected to the larger story of our faith, but I also felt a little unsettled because so much of the story has been forgotten. It felt sacred to wander these passageways, but it also felt a little sterile in a way that I've since struggled to describe. While these graves were created to honor the memories of these leaders, it felt like all of the emotions of grief and loss were gone, because these individuals had been gone for decades if not centuries. There was no one left to miss them or mourn them. There might be a monument or an elegant sarcophagus, but everything that was human about them had long since decayed.

This is certainly not the case with our story this morning and the tomb that we read about in this passage. In fact, we find the exact opposite.

Our story begins with this opening verse: "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb."

Thousands of years ago, half a world away, two women got up on Sunday morning and made their way to the place where their friend had been buried, just two days prior. Only two days had passed, and on this third morning, they walked to his resting place, unsure of what they would find. It must have been an exhausting and terrifying weekend for them: their leader, their protector, their Messiah had been brutally killed, and now they did not know how to carry on. Their minds must have been swirling with confusion and uncertainty, their bodies worn out by anxiety and grief. They might have stayed up all night, waiting for the moment when the Roman authorities

would knock on their door, petrified that soldiers would come to drag them to Golgotha to await the same fate. Perhaps they anticipated that another angry crowd would be ready to attack them as they wept. Perhaps they wondered if Jesus' body had been stolen or if the site had been desecrated by vandals. And yet, they still had the courage to leave their dwellings and journey to the tomb.

But in that moment when they arrive at their destination, the two Marys encounter a dramatic and miraculous sight.

Verses 2 and 3 record, "There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow."

If you joined us for Good Friday, you might remember that Jesus' death was also marked by an earthquake—one that resulted in the curtain of the temple being torn, rocks splitting, and tombs around the city being opened to reveal resurrection people. So it seems fitting that our story about Jesus' resurrection would begin the same way. After this second earthquake, our gospel writer tells us that an angel came down and rolled the stone away from the entrance to Jesus' tomb—a clear sign of divine presence and power.

Even more astoundingly, the angel begins to speak. The angel says, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

The angel has some specific instructions for the two Marys—they have been entrusted with the task of spreading the news about this extraordinary event. We might skip over this detail, but in the culture of the first century, I think it's important to note that women were largely regarded as untrustworthy. In most cases, they couldn't give testimony in a trial, they were not allowed to

serve in positions of religious or political importance, and they were definitely not the bearers or messengers of spiritual truth.

But these two women were some of Jesus' closest friends. They were two of his most faithful disciples. They had walked with him for hundreds of miles, they had served alongside their male counterparts, and they had learned from Jesus' teachings firsthand. They had watched him heal others, they had wept with him in difficult moments and they had rejoiced with him too. They are the ones to receive this proclamation, they are the ones to hear the good news. So something has clearly shifted on this Sunday morning, something unexpected is happening. More earth-shattering than just an earthquake, more cosmic than just a stone being rolled away, more pivotal than just grieving women going to the tomb.

But the surprises aren't over yet. Matthew writes, "So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

On their way to carry out the angel's instructions, the two Marys come face to face with Jesus himself. Seemingly without any ceremony, he greets them and they fall down to worship him. And once again, Jesus sends them out into the world with a message for the other disciples—a message that they too will be able to witness this resurrection.

Because all of these events happened more than two thousand years ago, I think it is easy for us to approach this story with the same kind of sterility and emotional distance that I felt in the Vatican Necropolis. We might feel connected to this larger story, but because we are personally so far removed from these people and this moment, we can see this Easter narrative with detachment and a sense of lifelessness. I think a lot of our Christian sermons and bible studies and devotionals tend to focus on these big, overarching narratives about salvation and the victory over sin as a way of making up for

the fact that our modern lives feel so separate and different from first century Israel. If we focus on those things, we can intellectualize this story, and then we don't have to worry when we don't have a deep emotional reaction to our text. But the way Matthew tells this story, I think it would be a mistake to forget that this isn't just a supernatural miracle.

This is what I love about this particular story.

We've gotten all the divine drama, the grand gestures, the earthquake, the angel, the stone rolling away—but this story is also more than just those things. Jesus' resurrection isn't just a cosmic celebration about triumph over death, it's also a very human moment, an intimate reunion between Jesus and his disciples. Of course, it's about overturning cultural norms and rejoicing that empire has been defeated, but it's also about these personal relationships and the deep love that is shared between God and his beloved creation. We all know that it's about resurrection, but it's also about close friends being reconciled, brothers and sisters brought back together, relationships that had ended being given another chance.

I love that this story can be both. Dramatic and intimate. Cosmic and emotional. Divine and personal. And I think that's worth highlighting. I think that's worth remembering. I think that's worth celebrating.

If you've gotten in the habit of reading this story and remaining distanced from it, I want to invite you back into the human-ness of this moment. If you've gotten used to hearing about it as an ancient narrative and nothing more, I want to invite you to embrace the emotion at the core of this passage.

I want you to imagine the feeling of coming to a tomb expecting nothing but grief and sorrow, only to be surprised with connection and joy. I want you to imagine that it is you that has approached this grave, and where you might only expect to find lifelessness, you find reunion instead. I want you to imagine that you are at the burial place of a dear loved one, and in that moment of deepest despair, you are astonished to find them waiting, greeting you by

name. I want you to recall a specific time in your life when you faced uncertainty and confusion and then imagine that Jesus, the living Savior, is there in the darkness, with arms outstretched, just for you.

Because my friends, that is the truth of this Sunday morning. You don't have to just imagine it. This is the truth of the resurrection.

He is risen. He is risen indeed.

Amen.