

“Each day comes bearing its own gifts. Untie the ribbons.” — Ruth Ann Schabacker

“Friends are like walls. Sometimes you lean on them, and sometimes it’s just good knowing they are there.” — Author Unknown

“A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. A woman must do what he can’t.” — Rhonda Hansome

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has” — Margaret Mead

I begin this morning with these quotes from women, about women because our Easter story begins with a group of faithful *female* disciples whom we know from earlier in the Gospel. Several of them are mentioned again by name in verse ten. “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.” This small group of thoughtful, committed people set out early that morning to do a completely predictable, if gut-wrenching job. They go to the tomb with spices which they had prepared. This was quite likely something that they had done many times before.

In their grief and pain, they went together, leaning on one another, as friends do. They woke up early that morning with the expectation that they would offer a gift to their beloved who had died — without any expectation that the day would offer such an amazing gift to them. Most typically when we are relating events, we speak of this happened, then this, and then this. As in this case: Jesus was crucified by the Romans. Then his body was taken down from the cross. Then it was wrapped in a lined cloth. Then it was laid in a rock-hewn tomb. The women had followed and “they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned [home], and prepared spices and ointments.” And then, “On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.”

*But...* did you notice the little three-letter word that our reading today began with? It’s the word “but.” When we use that word, it is because we have more than a series of events to relate to someone, we have a story to tell. Have you ever thought about that? In the very best stories, we tell how this happened, then this, *but then this*

*happened*. So in the very first word in the telling of this morning's story, we are clued in that something unexpected is about to happen.

Now before I go on, I like how Michal Beth Dinkler, a seminary professor at Yale Divinity School, provides us with an illuminating theme for this story. "Typically, we think of 'presence' and 'absence' as opposites. When a teacher takes roll call in school, the student is either present or absent... However this strict present/absent binary does not always stand up to scrutiny... This past year's increase in Zoom and other online meetings has complicated our culture's notions of presence and absence, as we simultaneously join people from around the world [or around town] in digital spaces. What does it mean in this era to be 'here with' others?"

As we return to our story, Michal Beth Dinkler writes, "to their great surprise, the women do 'not find the body of the Lord Jesus.' Jesus is absent. Most of us are desensitized to how utterly shocking this must have been; if anyone should be present in a particular place, it would be a dead body in its tomb. *But* Jesus' body is missing." (End quote). Now quite naturally, "they were perplexed about this." And "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, *but* the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* has risen.'" Now for those of us counting, that is already the fourth time in just five verses that the word "but" has been used in the telling of these events. Do you see? In the best stories, it's not merely this, then this, and then this. It's this, *but then this happened*. And then this, *but then this* — this day's events take us on an unexpected journey full of twists and turns and we end up somewhere we had not at all anticipated.

Now something else that is very interesting about our story is that in the way that Luke tells the story, he never describes God raising Jesus from the dead. Instead, we only hear the story as it is told from the lips of those who have a spoken testimony. Isn't that curious? The heavenly messengers meet the women and tell them, "He is not here,

but has risen.” And then they use another favorite word of mine. They tell them, “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee...” They are pointing to Jesus’ own spoken testimony. Jesus had said “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” And because of the messengers’ testimony, and Jesus’ testimony, we are told, “They they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.” So was Jesus absent or does his absence unexpectedly point us to his presence in a new way?

The story is passed from the lips of the messengers, who point to Jesus’ testimony, his words and his teaching and this gives these women a story to tell — which they immediately do! Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them [I think that’s meant to include us] speak boldly and faithfully on Jesus’ behalf. They proclaim to the male apostles that Jesus is present. He is alive on earth again! Did you know that Church tradition has dubbed these women “the apostles to the apostles?” The official name is in Latin, *quae apostoli ad apostolos*. Now initially, anyway, the male disciples do not come off too well in this story.

Again, Michal Beth Drinkler provides a helpful insight, “When they [the eleven] hear the news from the apostles to the apostles, they still do not believe. The men think the women’s proclamation of the empty tomb is ‘empty talk’ (a pejorative term like ‘silly gossip’ or ‘fake news’). They misunderstand Jesus’ missing body, thinking it represents absolute absence; even Peter, who runs to the tomb to see for himself, simply ‘wonders what happened,’ a response about which Jesus later questions him[!].”

In this latter portion of today’s reading, that little three-letter word “but” shows up two more times — so again, that seems quite significant. As that quote from Drinkler challenges us, so does our Gospel writer Luke. *But...* these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. *But...* Peter got up and ran to the tomb.” The challenge and the choice lays it out there so plainly that it makes me feel really quite uncomfortable. The tomb is empty. So is Jesus’ absence from the tomb symbolic of his

absolute absence as many believe? Will I myself dismiss the empty tomb as empty talk? Many people believe that dismemberment and death are all there is.

*But...* what about you? And what about us as a community? Will we join with those bold, faithful women who shared their testimony, their truth about Jesus? Jesus said that on the third day he will rise again. Is Jesus' truth also yours and my truth? Will we remember Jesus words, his own testimony? Because the act of remembering is redemptive — it has power. When we become proclaimers that Jesus is alive and present we are re-remembering the body of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit we are doing our part to draw together again a community that has been dismembered—torn apart—by fear, confusion, grief, distress, hatred, and pain. By our words and by our actions we can point people to a deeper reality that so often seems too difficult to remember or believe. *But...* that deeper reality is that God is present in all kinds of ways, working in the world, to bring about healing, peace, wholeness, shalom, and new life. So long as God is present, death can never have the last word. The testimony that we proclaim is that Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed! Alleluia. Amen

Easter Sunday April 4, 2021

Luke 24:1-12

Pastor Jonathan Zielske