

“A Community of Re-Creation”

Reading: Matthew 28:1-10, 11-20

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Sometimes what *isn't* said is as significant as what *is* said. You know what I mean: that pregnant pause before someone gives you their opinion, that tactfully vague answer that is true but avoids any potential minefields. A while ago I chose a necktie to wear on a Sunday morning and I asked Pastor Carey how it looked, not because I really wanted her feedback but mostly because I'd really nailed it with this tie and jacket combination and I wanted her to tell me how good I looked. Don't laugh; you do the same thing. But of course in this case, she didn't say anything for a minute, and that hesitation said an awful lot. Suffice it to say that I changed my tie. What *isn't* said can tell us a lot. And as we continue through our story of God's work with humanity together, sometimes it's helpful to stop and think about what else *might* have happened but didn't. God chose *this* way to proceed, instead of the alternatives.

One thing that I'd never really stopped to think about before is how there aren't any witnesses of the actual resurrection of Jesus. Presumably the soldiers at the tomb saw more than anyone else, but even they weren't actually *in* the tomb when it happened. But all of the gospels are pretty clear in how these events played out. First thing in the morning on Easter Sunday, several of the female disciples of Jesus headed to the tomb to take care of Jesus' body, and when they get there, they discover to their amazement that He is not there and the tomb has been opened. And it's interesting that in all four of the gospels, there are angels who are either left behind or appear at the tomb to let the women know what's going on. One of the gospels, John's gospel, says that Jesus Himself then came and spoke with one of the women, but the others don't say that.

So the question that comes to my mind is this: why do those angels hang around? Why does Jesus leave behind a messenger? I mean, His part of the story is done, isn't it? Things have worked out pretty well for Him. Yes, He had to suffer on the cross, but His Father was faithful and has raised Him from the dead, and now, it would seem, the way to heaven has been opened and sin has been defeated and Jesus can return to His Father and be content knowing that He completed His mission. So why leave behind those messengers? What's up with the angels at the tomb?

The obvious answer, of course, is for them to tell Jesus' followers what's going on. That's the point of a messenger, after all, and the word that we translate as “angel” actually originally meant “messenger.” But we take it for granted that Jesus wanted His followers to know what was going on. We know by this point in the story that God is crafting a relationship with His people, but we really should never stop being amazed at that fact. We've pointed out before how other gods of other nations behaved so much differently than our God, and specifically they often didn't really care much about having a relationship with the people who worshipped them. So for a god to send messengers to His people out of love for them and because He wanted to include them in what happened next is kind of remarkable.

Again, it's sometimes significant what *isn't* said or *doesn't* happen. It can help us recognize the importance of these messengers at the empty tomb by thinking about what else God might have done but didn't. For example, one of the main theological implications of the resurrection of Christ is that God the Father has placed His seal of approval on Jesus the Son. The resurrection proves that the

life and teachings and sacrifice of Jesus were successful in the mission He was sent to accomplish; resurrection is sort of a reward for trusting in God. It proves that Jesus is who He said He is, and now His Father has given Him a position of authority and Lordship over all creation. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” He says. So that’s good news for Jesus, the hero of our story! He has won! But the story isn’t only about Him; the point isn’t just that He won. He doesn’t leave the tomb and then go straight up to a throne in heaven to live happily ever after. He won *for us*. He leaves messengers behind to point His followers in the right direction, and He stays around for a few weeks to help them make sense of it all. The story is not over yet.

And what’s more, the story does not go forward in the way some people expected. As we’ll read in our chapter for next week, one of the questions Jesus’ disciples asked Him after the resurrection was whether He would now restore the kingdom to Israel. They thought that now that He had been vindicated and given Lordship He would lead them in the glorious final struggle against the evil Romans and other nations to conquer creation. But what He *doesn’t* do is just as important as what He does. He doesn’t leave us behind and enjoy an eternity of bliss in heaven, He leaves behind messengers. He doesn’t build an army, He builds a community.

All along through this ages-long story, we’ve known that God has a plan to re-claim the people and the creation that were lost to Him in our rebellion against Him. He has persistently made His claim as the rightful Lord of creation, and He built a little outpost of His Lordship in the people of Israel. But now by providing a sacrifice through which we can return to Him, and by raising Jesus from the dead and defeating death at its own game, His kingdom has arrived — not in its fullness, but it has certainly arrived, and it will not leave. Jesus has broken the backs of the old rebellious kingdoms and has initiated a new, expanded kingdom of those who will follow Him.

It’s interesting how Matthew almost draws a fat yellow highlighter over the fact that we have two contrary kingdoms operating here. He gives us two very telling examples of how different they are. His gospel ends with two messages being spread: the first is the message of the guards placed at Jesus’ tomb. They had been put there specifically to make sure Jesus’ body stayed in the ground, though their only real fear was that some of Jesus’ disciples might come and steal it to stage a resurrection. So when Jesus comes out of the tomb of His own accord, more alive than ever, they’re terrified and powerless. When they report what they’ve seen to their superiors, they’re bribed to spread the lie that Jesus’ body was snatched. And so the last thing we see these religious elites and power players doing in Matthew’s gospel is sending out emissaries of untruth, a gospel of lies intended to preserve their power and prevent people from coming to Christ.

But in the next scene, we see the resurrected Christ with His remaining disciples, and He’s giving them a very different message with a very different purpose. Instead of a message of lies acting as a cover-up, He’s sending them out to spread the word of truth. Instead of working to keep people complacent and under control, He’s sending out evangelists to motivate people toward a new kingdom. Instead of spreading fear and distrust, He’s sending out ambassadors to invite and include new people into the community founded on His cross and empty tomb. So we see from the very inception of this community that its character runs counter to that of the kingdoms of the world.

He’s building a community of re-creation, a community of resurrection, a community in which the old and dead and spent and wasted is given new life through God’s creative act using the old.

There's new creation, in which the creative act begins with nothing and now there is something, and there is re-creation, in which the creative act takes something already there and makes it new. Our God can certainly create from nothing, but we also see that He delights in re-creating. When His world gets ruined, He doesn't toss it out and start from scratch, He selects a crumb of the old to serve as a seed infused with His creative grace to make something new. When things got so bad that God decided to flood the world and start again, He retained Noah and his family, along with representatives of the animals, from which God began again. When the people of Israel became so corrupt and wayward that God's plan with them seemed to have failed, He destroyed their nation and brought a remnant out of exile to re-create His people. He loves taking what is old and dead and wasted and re-creating it.

And here at the empty tomb of Christ, we see that act of re-creation, resurrection, taking place, not just for Jesus, but for all our sakes. There are messengers to spread the word of resurrection. There is a Great Commission given to Jesus' followers to then go out into the dead world and proclaim that there is a living community of resurrection. When Matthew's gospel tells of the crucifixion, he mentions that the event was so cataclysmic that it shook the earth and split open many tombs, and in this very odd, almost offhand comment, he says that the dead bodies of many holy people were raised to life and appeared to people in the city after Jesus' resurrection. It's almost as though God's act of re-creation in Jesus' tomb was so powerful that it overflowed into the other tombs. The usual understanding of resurrection in those times was that all the dead would be resurrected at once; there was one resurrection for everyone. It's kind of unexpected, then, that only one person would be resurrected. But the implication is that the resurrection of everyone *has* started, but it only got as far as Jesus before it was put on hold, and the rest of us will be resurrected later.

What that means is that the empty tomb of Jesus shows us that God's final act of re-creation and resurrection has already started; we are living in the end days in which God is making all things new. It's taking a little longer than we would have expected, but God is still about this act of grace-filled creation in the midst of the old. And from the moment that the very first people found that empty tomb, Jesus began building a community of people founded and centered on this act of re-creation. Re-creation is one of the main things that makes us a church: we are a community of re-creation living in the midst of the old, fallen world.

That means we are grace-filled people. When we look at others, no matter how broken and unlovely they are, we see them not as they are but as they can be re-created to be by the grace of God. It means we are people of holiness, who have had this act of re-creation done in us, that God has begun the work of resurrection, bringing new, eternal life into us even before we die. We do things of re-creation, both within ourselves and with others. We do things that spur ourselves on to holiness and spur others on to holiness. We take the broken things in our world and we challenge their brokenness and call them to re-creation: we speak out against injustice, we speak up for the voiceless, we show generosity and love in costly ways. It means that we do these things as a community, as a body of people who together proclaim the message of resurrection through our lives and our words.

As I often do these days, I think of the work of Five Loaf House, and how thrilled I am as a pastor to watch this community of re-creation enacting our calling through that place. That old, empty building, foreclosed and dark and musty and sagging in a few places, so unwanted that we

were able to buy it for \$15,000. And there, together, we are physically building a space through which we can extend love to others, breathing new life into a building, yes, but also demonstrating the resurrection of our Lord and calling people to similar lives. We do it not because we think we can re-create the world on our own, but because we are witnesses to the one who raised Jesus from the dead and who will bring His creation back to Himself one day soon.

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and is alive forever. As He told His disciples in Matthew's gospel, He knew that His resurrection meant that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him. And *therefore*, He says, make disciples of all nations and baptize them. Be resurrection people living in a community of re-creation building a kingdom of re-creation. It's not just good news because it's a happy ending to the story of Jesus, it's good news that must be shared and must change lives.



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