

And So It Goes –

Imagine, if you will, two women, both called Mary, going to the tomb where their friend who had been murdered by the authorities, lay. He had not been properly prepared for burial in the way that their faith decreed and so they went, by first light, to finish the job they had begun, in haste, three days prior.

They arrive as the sun is rising and there is a great earthquake which knocks them off their feet. They struggle to stand, yet as they do they see the massive stone which was previously before the tomb rolled neatly to one side and a man who could only have been an angel of God is sat upon it, waiting to speak to them.

They glance at the temple guards who are frozen in place, a mixture of terror and gobsmacked-ness, at what has just occurred. The angel is clothed all in white with the appearance of lightning, and while indicating the guards with his head they say, "Don't worry about any of this. The guards will be no bother to you. They've been scared witless and will be in that state for a while. Anyone would think they'd never seen an angel of God before".

"And let me guess, you're looking for Jesus. You want to finish the job you started on Friday, am I right? You don't need to look here. Because you see, he's not here. Now, you need to deliver a message to his disciples, you know the ones I mean. Peter, James, John, Andrew and the rest of the crew. Yet, before you do that, check out the tomb. See the empty linen cloths. Jesus doesn't need them because, as he told you, he has been raised from the dead".

"I'll tell you where to find your friend Jesus, he has gone ahead of you to Galilee. Go now and tell the others". And so the two women look at the empty tomb, realising the angel is telling the truth and make haste to find the disciples so they can tell the miraculous news. They run as fast as they can, experiencing a mixture of fear, joy, hope and terror. Nothing they have been told makes sense, and yet, nothing over the past seven days has truly made sense.

All of a sudden, as if out of nowhere Jesus appears before them, very much alive – just as the angel had told them. "Hi," he says, "Looking for me?" Overjoyed and overwhelmed the women drop to their knees and begin kissing his feet. Never have they been so excited to see him. He is alive! They weep freely, their tears soaking his feet.

"Oh wow", he says, "thank you, but, um, no thank you. I appreciate this outpouring of emotion, I really do, but there's no time for this. I have somewhere I need to be in the not too distant future; unfortunately, you can't come with me. But first, I need you to continue on your way to the disciples and tell them what you have seen. Tell them all of it; the angel, the stunned guards, the empty tomb, and this conversation we are having right now. Tell them to meet me in Galilee, they know the place".

From that point he vanished from their sight and, once again, stunned at the events they had just witnessed, they continued on their way to where the disciples were hidden. The disciples had been holed up in the place where they had last been together – the night everything went wrong – the last place they had felt safe altogether.

Now, there is a little bit more of the gospel that was not included in the scheduled lectionary reading for the day. A couple more paragraphs to complete the chapter, and, in fact, the gospel.

Meanwhile, the guards had recovered their senses and went into the city where the rulers were to tell them what they had seen. A quick meeting of the temple authorities was called, where it was decided it would be prudent to offer the guards a great sum of hush money in order to say that Jesus' followers had stolen his body while they, the guards, were napping. This was such a fabulous story that it has been told for generations since it happened.

Jesus meets the disciples in Galilee as he promised he would, and he greets them all warmly. "How are you guys, really? I know it must have been a lot to take in. I don't blame you for running away. Why are some of you looking at me, as though you don't believe I'm actually here? Trust me, it's really me."

"Now you need to listen closely to me. We don't have much time. All the lessons I've been teaching you over the past three years – I hope you remember them. You see, I have to leave you soon...and you cannot come with me. Everything I know, all the power and authority I have, comes from God. I need you, all of you, to remember that. You are the future of this movement. You will continue the ministry I began". He blessed them and told them to go and make disciples through baptism. He told them not to be upset, not to grieve and worry because even though he would be leaving soon, he would always be with them.

And that ends Matthew's Gospel. It's a strange ending in some ways. We don't know what happens next. And like much of scripture, we are expected to know what it means, we are meant to understand it – even though we may not.

I have been studying scripture for over twenty years and the more I study our sacred story the more I realise that the Bible was never written to be taken literally. Originally it was written, as the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, to provide rules for living in community. Many of the early writings no longer apply to the way in which human beings live.

How many of you gentlemen, follow the Levitical advice when it comes to trimming your beard or the “corners of your head”? How many of us wear mixed fiber clothing and plant more than one type of plant in a garden? How many of us enjoy bacon and the occasional oyster on the half-shell?

The most important part of today's Gospel reading isn't that Jesus was resurrected. The most important part of today's Gospel reading is that the disciples returned to the place where everything went wrong. Even in their terror and flight from the upper room, they fought their fear and reassembled where they had last been together – where they had last felt safe.

We do not know if they had discussed ahead of time that if anything happened and they had to scatter that they would return to what we know as “the upper room”. And frankly, it doesn't matter. What matters is they came together, as Jesus had intended, so they could figure out what to do next.

It is no accident that Jesus appeared to the women first. We aren't given the specific details, yet I suspect the angel chose “the Mary's” because he knew they would be level headed and would follow Jesus' instructions with little hesitation. The scene with the stone at the tomb entrance has always made me smile. Here's an angel who caused an earthquake, which shook the stone which had been sealed into the entrance completely free.

The angel then perched themselves on top of the stone. In my mind, they have an impish grin on their face. They've startled the guards so much they are, in every way imaginable, scared stiff.

It is the women, while frightened, who run to the tomb to finish the ritual burial preparations for Jesus. For all of the gender inequality in that time of Roman occupation, the women were able to move around much more freely in a time such as this because nobody would be expecting them to be anything other than hysterical.

And so it goes, they listen to the angel, take the message they are given and go to tell the disciples. Which they do.

This has been an emotionally draining yet exhilarating week. We have shared together in eight days of services from the Cedar Sunday protest march, through the Stations of the Cross, Tenebrae service of light and shadow, to the Saints Day story of Mary Magdalene. Then we nestled into the Paschal Triduum or Three Sacred Days where on Thursday we gathered and heard the ancient stories, had our feet washed and shared communion one last time. Friday we came together again for a service of devastation, emotional upheaval and hopefully a little better understanding of why that particular Friday is "good". Yesterday we gathered to hear an ancient story and to lament on what we have lost over the past four years. To discuss what we miss, what we wish we could still do and yet, to talk about what we've learned and shared together in community.

Today, we gather in a beautifully lit, bright space (despite the weather) and see the colours, smell the scents of flowers and will celebrate communion for the first time in the new life of Jesus. In our new life together in Christ.

Today we make noises, shout and sing Alleluia, and even remember our sign language teaching for Alleluia!

This is a great time of life, new life, remembered life. This is the anthem of Spring that despite the cold dark nights of winter, the frigid temperatures are abating, our faces are raised to the sunbeams that we can feel on our skin for what feels like much too long a time.

We have flowers on the altar in memory of those who have gone before us. All around us are signs of new life. The sound of birds in the trees, the bright green buds beginning and the trees sending forth shoots of new life.

Jesus Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Our new life in Christ continues today! Alleluia!

Over the next few weeks and months I will be deliberate in demystifying some of the rituals in each of our denominations. We will have conversations and I welcome questions. I will continue keeping office hours most Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings. Drop by. Yes, I'm busy, but I'll make time for you – I promise.

We have so much for which to be thankful. Alleluia!

For our families of blood and birth. Alleluia!

For our families of choice. Alleluia!

For our families of faith. Alleluia!

And so, blow those bubbles, click those clackers and let's rouse one another into new life. Alleluia!

Let the Church say, Amen. ALLELUIA!

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
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Sermon for Easter Day – 09 April 2023
Psalm 118. 1-2, 14-24 and Matthew 28.1-10