The Choice to Believe

A meditation on Matthew 28: 1 – 10

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church April 12, 2020

I was sitting in my office on Friday afternoon, waiting for the Good Friday service to begin, reading and thinking. Wondering how in the world to write a message for Easter; how to preach Easter in the midst of a pandemic, a question that has been looming over me for several weeks now. My phone rang and it was my husband. “We saw a hummingbird today!” He said. He was home, taking care of the fur babies, cutting the grass, working from his home office at the kitchen table. “It was black and yellow!”

“Are you sure it wasn’t one of those moths that looks like a hummingbird, only they are not as pretty when you get a good look at them…hummingbird *moths*?”

“No, definitely a hummingbird. It even sounded like one.”

“Okay,” I said. “Great!” I said. But I didn’t mean it. Because I didn’t believe him.

As soon as I got off the phone, you know what I did. I searched the web hoping to find proof that yellow and black hummingbirds exist…When I landed on an article that described hummingbird *moths*, and how spring gardeners often mistake them for hummingbirds, I didn’t just read it. I texted him the link so he could see the photos and read about “inexperienced garden visitors” who mistake these moths for birds. I wanted him to know the truth…and well, I wanted to be *right.* The helpful article even provided a map of the US, and there, right over Tuscaloosa, was a purple dot, indicating that the hemaris thysbe, or hummingbird clearwing moth, lives here. Ah, ha!! I thought to myself. (fs.fed.us)

He didn’t respond to my text. I would have to wait until I got home to clear this up.

Which story would win out? The myth (in my opinion) that a hummingbird had visited our garden, in *April*? Or the probable reality that a hummingbird moth had surveyed the dining options on our patio?

Sometimes we hear news, and we share it because we are so thrilled by it; we want others to know our joy. Other times we share news because we know it will bring joy to someone else. Others aren’t always ready to receive our news. Maybe they aren’t ready to hear that you are moving away, even if it is for an exciting new opportunity, or the chance to be closer to family. Maybe they don’t want to know that you are enthused about a new, healthier lifestyle choice, because it will affect their own choices. Maybe they just aren’t in a place where they can receive good news. You don’t necessarily want your spouse to tell you that the baby took its first steps while you were away at a conference. Sometimes hearing someone else’s good news, just leaves us feeling jealous, or even more uncertain than we were before about our own lives, our own paths, our own choices.

Who in this story will believe in the good news?

Who will be left behind by good news?

Who will be frozen in place and who will be set free to run with renewed hope, restored joy?

This brief scene is crowded with characters. Mary Magdalene, the “other” Mary (most likely Jesus’ own mother), an angel (in a spectacular Easter outfit), two guards, and Jesus. The events unfold rapidly. The angel enters the scene as no angel as ever entered before, with an earthquake! In almost every other story of an angel appearance, the messenger just slips in quietly, unobtrusively. You rarely hear them come or go.

In Genesis, three visitors – thought to be angels - approach Abram and Sarai’s tent as if they are just ordinary travelers. Later in Genesis, an angel rescues Sarai’s servant, Hagar, from death in the wilderness, but again, that divine being comes with no fanfare, just slips in beside her. Angels in the Hebrew scriptures just seem to walk about, coming and going as if they were not unusual beings. Even in the New Testament, they typically appear quietly, sometimes even in dreams. Gabriel, appears at Mary’s door, walking in as any neighbor might do. An obvious exception is the night of Jesus’ birth, when an entire choir bursts into the night sky, a star lit, musical celebration. On the night of his birth, the sky is as bright as the day. On the morning of his rebirth, the earth is shaken to its core.

On this morning, the angel rocks the earth with its arrival, waking weary soldiers and loosening the stone that seals an empty tomb. Without breaking a sweat, the angel rolls the stone away so the curious can see inside. The angel itself doesn’t look inside the tomb; there’s no need. This messenger already knows the news that the world needs to hear: there is no body to be anointed. This is no longer death’s resting place, this is the womb of new life. No, the angel doesn’t need to go inside, for Jesus had not been waiting for an angel to release him. That was not why the angel had come. The angel had come like so many angels before, to bring news that leads to life. “You will have a child. You will find shelter. You will wrestle with me and survive.” This is the work of angels. And what better place to wait, atop the door that has been opened forever. The angel takes a seat on top of the stone, the perfect spot from which to receive visitors.

The guards, most likely chosen for their faithfulness and the assurance that they could fend off any potential grave robbers, are petrified with fear. Did they faint from fear, not even able to stay upright long enough to hear that they did not have to be afraid? Or did they “play dead” in hopes that this illuminated being would not harm them? Even with their faces turned to the ground, or with their eyes closed, bracing for what might come, they would still be able to hear what the angel says to the women. Will they be too shocked to take it in? Will they believe themselves to be on the wrong side, and beyond the reach of this good news? What will they say, when they are asked about that morning? Will they want to believe? Will they convince themselves that what took place could not have been real? Will they talk themselves out of it? Allow others to talk themselves out of it? And what about you, have you ever been so paralyzed by fear that there is no room left for faith? Have you been told that you are on the outside of good news? That is was not meant for you? And yet they were there, and they were witnesses, too.

The two Marys must have been in shock, for what they have come to see is not at all what they were seeing. There isn’t supposed to be an angel. The tomb should be closed. And those guards? What could have frightened them so? But the angel turns to them from atop the tomb’s door, and says, “Don’t *you* be afraid!” As in, don’t act like those guys over there!! It’s not said as an encouragement, but as a command. This is not the time for fear! This is the time for action.

It would have been impossible for them to process what they were seeing, what they were hearing. Nothing was as they expected it to be. They came expecting to find death, and instead, the possibility of life. They didn’t have the proof yet, but they had the possibility. It was exactly as Jesus had told them it would be. He may have left out a few details – like terrified soldiers, and a heavenly messenger, but he had told them what would happen. He had told them he would die in Jerusalem, and he had told them he would rise again on the third day. The angel reminds them of this and they do what they are told! They almost crash into him trying to get back to their friends. They fall to the ground and grab his feet and hang on for dear life.

And I can’t help but remember those times when I was trying to get out the door – and my little boys clung to my legs for dear life. Not that they had ever had anything but positive experiences with babysitters or preschool teachers, but just because they could not yet grasp that though I would leave them for a short time, I would be back. And so Mary Magdalene grabbed Jesus’ left foot and Mary, his mother, grabbed his right and he couldn’t move without dragging them along with him. He had to remind them to let go, again, trusting that he would always be there. Always. He had to remind them to let go and then go, and tell the disciples that life abounds. To tell the disciples that life is abundant even in the midst of grief.

Friends, where are you today?

Do you feel more like one of the guards, frozen in place, unsure that love is stronger than death?

Do you see yourself in one of the Marys? Clinging to Jesus for dear life? Hoping beyond hope?

While this is an unusual way to celebrate Easter, and though we may deeply miss being together, this strange Easter gives us the opportunity to dig deep, doesn’t it? Is it Easter without the lilies? Is it Easter if you cannot sing an Easter anthem? Is it Easter without an overflowing gathering in the fellowship hall? Is it Easter without the egg hunt, the jelly beans, and the new outfits? What is the essence of this celebration?

As I stand in a nearly empty sanctuary I invite us all to imagine that empty tomb, a place of new birth. We have all been birthed to be the church, to be Jesus’ body wherever God has called us to be. When we can gather in person again, let us hold on to that truth. The church was never intended to be a place for us to hide away, instead, like the women who came to the tomb on that first Easter, it is a place we come to be reminded not to fear, but to go out and tell the world of God’s unending compassion.

Today, when I get home, I will boil water. I will measure ¼ cup sugar and I will stir it into 1 cup water, and I will cool it down. I will fill the hummingbird feeder and I will believe. I will watch and wait and trust that a little dark bird will come looking for food among the flowers. And most of all I will trust the story, told by someone who loves me. Told by someone whom I trust. Told by someone who wanted to share good news with me. I will trust the story that that a hummingbird was here yesterday. I will believe the witness, and I will wait with anticipation. That’s how it works. We have witnesses. We have an angel, and two Marys and two frightened guards. Which witness will inspire your belief?

Friends, Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen!