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Sermon: Breaking Free
Text: Matthew 28:1-10
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Matthew 28:1-10

28 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^(a) lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,^(b) and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

It really should not have happened this way. What we have just heard was not the most likely outcome. As with all messianic movements, it should have ended with the crucifixion and the dispersal of the disciples into hiding and anonymity. It seemed to be following just that pattern. ‘The unanimous evidence of the tradition deposited in the New Testament,’ Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson tells us, ‘is that Jesus’ trial and execution wholly disenchanting and scattered his followers.’¹ Statistically speaking, that should have remained the most likely outcome and the end of the story. In Matthew’s account, Peter who is held up as the rock of faith and Jesus’ reliable disciple, hides in a courtyard and repeatedly denies knowing anything about Jesus the Galilean, Jesus the Nazarene, and the Jesus who shared his same Galilean accent. In exasperation, for the third time, Peter denies knowing the man at all. That is pretty much the last we hear from the disciples, other than several women followers from Galilee who persisted and stood at a distance at Jesus’ crucifixion. Messianic movement dispersed and

¹ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, 194.

eradicated. Messiah humiliated and annihilated by the brutality of the Roman imperial machine.

One of my favorite quotations comes from the missionary to India Leslie Newbigin who said that Jesus did not come to write a book, but to form a community. If that is the case, then the events of the passion and crucifixion would have seemed to have thoroughly destroyed that effort. A small gathering of women, looking on from a distance, a small crowd of people probably who were voyeurs and enjoyed the brutality of Roman political punishment, and the two criminals hanging on either side of Jesus. No disciples. No hosannas. That is all the remains of the community Jesus came to build. In a sermon to prisoners on Good Friday in 1957, theologian Karl Barth remarked about the two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus who 'had probably never heard of him before and were certainly no believing converts, no saints. Far from it! But in this hour they could not abandon him, they could not sleep. Willingly or not, they were forced to watch with him many long hours on the cross. Nor could they escape his dangerous company. They could not very well deny him, being publicly exposed as his companions. This how they were in fact the first certain Christian community! He and they, they and he were bound together, were not and are not separated in all eternity. Great things had to pass before Peter and the rest of the disciples joined this first Christian community. And when they did so, they could only 'get in line behind the two criminals who were already first, and up there in front, with Jesus on Golgotha.'² That is what exists of the 'community,' that surrounds Jesus at his death. The rest went home to Galilee, pretending never to have known him, or kept their heads down in Jerusalem. Pretty bleak and desperate circumstances. But just a few days later, Robert Jenson reminds us, 'a community had formed of disciples who believed Jesus lived as Son and Lord.' A few days later, the community Jesus created and came to build had not been scattered, dispersed, and destroyed, but was gathered to continue as his disciples in the world. What happened to change everything, what reversed all the scattered and defeated disciples, what miraculously put back together the community Jesus sought to

² Karl Barth, 'The Criminals With Him,' in *Deliverance to the Captives*, 79.

form? Our passage from Matthew is the answer to what happened. It is the answer to how a community that was scattered, destroyed, disillusioned, and dismantled, suddenly a few days later, were gathered together and put back together and given a purpose, power, and meaning for their lives that kept them from ever being dismantled, that made them whole, that held them together for a purpose.

It is easy to feel that we are destined to be dismantled and scattered and disillusioned as a community; and that is the end of it. Ron Byars reminds us that in a religious vacuum and culture that allows for no 'mystery or where mystery is multiplied and cast loose from reason, there is likely to be superstition.'³ *New York Times* columnist David Brooks shares the statistic that 29% of Americans believe in astrology, which is not exactly a more rational or sophisticated or deeper communal faith.⁴ In addition, we pretty much as a society are happier to turn all our schools into prisons with locked doors and metal detectors and active shooter drills, than we are willing to have any conversations on guns and their massive availability without limits. We are resigned to the fact that nothing can be done other than to prepare our children and our schools and our churches for the next trauma.

Maybe Peter had it right. Maybe the disciples were on to something. Cut our losses. Deny Jesus when our allegiance to him makes our lives more difficult. Forget the community he labored to form. Let's just find God individually, astrologically, on our own, in our own generic way. Who needs a whole gathering of his followers who believe he is still alive and on the loose and forming people like us for something more than our own self-gratification. Perhaps it is easier in our age of polarization and splintering and rivulets of division to administer the last rites to Jesus and his pipedream of a community and simply pursue our own individual spiritual interests, secure our own individual religious success, and settle for the snake oil our world is more than happy to let us believe faith amounts to anyway. The writer Rachel Held Evans reminds us though that we may feel that the end is

³ Ron Byars,

⁴ Andrew Whaley, 'Giving Up On God,' *Journal for Preachers* (Easter 2023), 54.

near or the future is bleak or that it is somehow unnatural for faith to ever give way to disillusionment and despair and death, she reminds us that 'death is something empires worry about, not something gardeners worry about....death is certainly not something resurrection people worry about.' She quotes the writer GK Chesterton that 'Christianity has died many times and has risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.'⁵

They all went home, they retreated into their enclaves of self, they were finished and done with being together, they had no reason anymore to exist as a community; and then suddenly, several days later, a community exists who miraculously believe Jesus was the risen Lord and that their lives existed for him. The risen Christ disrupts their ego-ism and resignation to go at it alone. The risen Christ disrupts their cynicism that we have to settle only for a world ruled by violence, death, and destruction. The risen Christ disrupts their own abandonment and propensity to walk away, refusing to let them be defined by their own fickle ways and whims. In theologian Daniel Migliore's words, Christ's resurrection 'subverts our conceptions of what is necessary, upsets our worldviews of what is possible, shatters the 'glamor of violence' that blinds us, and sets in its place the splendor of the truth of God's reconciliation and peace realized in Jesus Christ.'⁶ Instead of a bunch of individuals all pursuing their own religious interests or practicing their own personal spirituality in their privacy of their inner selves or believing that one can get by in life on nothing more deep than the practice of astrology, Jesus forms a community by the power of his resurrection. The God who raised Jesus from the dead takes scattered, abandoned, hopeless, cynical individuals and disrupts them from what they thought was the endgame and the normal and orderly way the world works, and forms a community out of such disparate circumstances and left for dead individuals. In Christ, they see that their humanity has not been abandoned, shattered, left for dead, and allowed to go its separate ways, but that it is has been exalted, repaired, put back together, made whole.

⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 225.

⁶ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 200.

After the earthquake, after the fear and trembling, after the angels, and the empty tomb, the resurrection of Jesus not only gathers together the disparate lives of a scattered community, but tells his reconstituted, repaired, and resurrected community of disciples to meet him in Galilee (v.7). There, in Galilee, the angel tells the women, is where you will see them. Not in Jerusalem; not in some individual experience of our own on the mountaintop; but the angels says that the disciples will find Jesus in Galilee. He is going ahead of you; and there you will see him. According to the theologian Jon Sobrino, Galilee represents the poor and despised places in the world. After all, when it becomes known that Jesus is from Nazareth/Galilee, the next question is, can anything good come from there? Peter's Galilean accent did not make him sound like a sophisticate in the courtyards and corridors of Jerusalem. Nazareth and Galilee are not the places we make reservations to visit on Easter vacation. They are those places in the world we turn away from, those places in the world it is better to be from than to live in, those places in the world we would not expect God to be found or to show up.

Jesus may encounter us here in the beauty of Easter and in the festive joys of this service, but that is not the end of it. He does not just form a community and then say my work is done. He forms a community and then says, I will see you in Galilee. I will see you among the poor and the despised—or more accurate, there you will see me. I will see you as you follow me out in this world and seek to engage me in the least, the last, and the last of this world. I will see you when you turn to those places and people in this world that the rest are inclined to turn away from. 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Disenchanted and disillusioned and scattered...that is where we, Jesus' followers, are found in the aftermath of his crucifixion and death. And out of nothing, Jesus' life is raised from the dead, a new community is formed, disillusioned lives suddenly have a purpose and a reason for living, and a community of the resurrection is created out of an empty tomb; a community that exists, not for its own spiritual ends or self-betterment only, but for the sake of all the Galilees of the world. That is where Christ tells them to find him. And that is why Easter does not end with the beauty of this worship service or even the gift of this one day. We are just

getting started. We have just been resurrected. Not simply for our own enjoyment or self-indulgent religious pursuits, no, we have been raised from our scattered disillusionment and despair and personal religious self-indulgence, we have been raised to go into the despair, the disillusionment, the shattered lives, and the Galilees of our world and to find the risen Lord there. There you will see him. There he promises us he will be found. There, the God who knows the way out of the grave, will use us to plants seeds of reconciliation, justice, and hope, not just in our own backyards, but in the Nazareths, Galilees, and forsaken places of our world. For it is in those places that the risen Jesus enables his Easter community to do its best work. He is going ahead of you to Galilee.....Easter does not stop here; follow him there. Amen.