

I

In my line of work, I visit a lot of cemeteries. It is one of the great privileges of our calling as pastors to be able to accompany the family and friends of the deceased in those holy moments at the graveside.

I've had the privilege of leading services in all kinds of cemeteries – some set in tree-filled gardens next to a river, some reserved especially for veterans of the armed forces, with their markers laid out in uniform precision, and just last month, I was privileged to lead a service at our church's newly dedicated columbarium.

II

There is something deep within our human nature that causes us to build cemeteries, to set aside places within our cities and towns and villages that are reserved for the remains of those whom we have loved and lost.

One of the things that makes us uniquely human, that makes us distinct from all the other living things with whom we share this planet, is that only we human beings contemplate in advance the thought that one day we will die, as will everyone we know and love, as will every other living thing.

And so throughout human history, we have built cemeteries and erected monuments, and we return to and visit those places again and again and again. There's something deep within our human nature that draws us to build and visit those sacred

places, something that transcends all boundaries of time, culture, and place.

III

And the story before us this morning is about two women making a visit to a cemetery early in the morning on the first day of the week long ago. It's an ordinary scene – one that plays out every day in every culture to this very day. Only in the case, of this story, there was no good reason for the women to go to the cemetery that morning. In fact, you might even say it was foolish of them.

So listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel according to Matthew, beginning at the first verse of the 28th chapter.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them

and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

There was no good reason to go to the cemetery that morning. At least, not according to Matthew's version of the story. According to Matthew, after Joseph of Arimathea had laid Jesus' body in the tomb, the chief priests had gone to Pilate and asked him to have the tomb sealed off like a crime scene. lest some of Jesus' disciples try to come and move his body. So Pilate dispatched a guard of Roman soldiers to the tomb, and the soldiers secured the entrance to the tomb with a heavy stone and then stood watch for around-the-clock surveillance.

The chief priests had conspired with the empire to seal Jesus' tomb up tight. No one was getting in, and certainly no one was getting out, not if the powers that be had anything to say about it.

So there was really no good reason for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to go. They couldn't have gotten inside to care for Jesus' body, for two women were no match for a guard of Roman soldiers under strict orders.

And yet, Matthew tells us that after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb.

And I wonder why?

Oh, I understand why people go to cemeteries. I understand why people go to have a quiet time to remember and reflect and pray, and perhaps to leave some flowers on the grave of someone they've loved and lost.

But given what had just transpired on Friday afternoon, and given that the tomb was under 24-hour guard, I don't imagine that the cemetery would have been very peaceful on that Sunday morning. And I certainly don't imagine that the Roman soldiers were about to let anyone near the tomb, much less to decorate it.

So I wonder, why did they even bother? I mean, I imagine that they had all kinds of other things they could have been doing with their time early in the morning on the first day of the week.

They could have slept in. Grief tends to make a body so very tired. I don't imagine that anyone would have blamed them if they had simply rolled over and gone back to sleep.

They could have tried to occupy themselves with work. There was always plenty of work to be done, and their friends and neighbors probably would have admired them for choosing to work through their grief.

Maybe the wise thing would have been to get out of town. Jesus was dead, Judas had hanged himself, and things were falling apart pretty quickly. No one would have blamed them if they had cut and run.

And yet, for some reason, after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the cemetery.

In Mathew's picture of the first Easter morning, no mention is made of what the women were or were not carrying with them nor the tasks that they were or were not preparing to accomplish. And so I wonder, given all the other choices before them that would have perhaps made more sense, why did the women to go to the cemetery? Matthew says that that the women went "to see."

In Matthew's language, just as in ours, the verb "to see" has more than one meaning. To see means not only to perceive visually but also "to gain understanding."

These women had been with Jesus since nearly the very beginning.

They were there when Jesus climbed up a mountain and gave his inaugural address in the Sermon on the Mount.

They were there when Jesus took five loaves of bread and two measly fish, when he gave thanks for it, broke it, and turned it into supper for 5,000 men, besides women and children.

They were there as Jesus taught in parables about wedding banquets and bridesmaids, day laborers and talents, sheep and goats.

They were there when Jesus had come riding into Jerusalem to waving palm

branches and shouts of Hosanna.

And they were there on that Friday afternoon, watching from a distance, as Jesus hung on the cross, breathed his last and died.

They had seen so much in such a very short period of time. And so perhaps, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went "to see" the tomb - to gain understanding.

And shortly after they arrive, the scene shifts in an almost indescribable way. Matthew wants to be sure that we readers understand that this is a supernatural, cataclysmic event.

A great earthquake shakes the ground, and the tomb that has been sealed as tight as humanly possible by the powers that be is casually rolled back by an angel of the Lord, and once the stone has been tossed aside, the angel sits on it like it's a park bench on a fine spring day.

And the guards, who represented the finest soldiers that the most powerful military in the world could hope to produce, shook and became like dead men. The irony is intentional - what was dead inside the tomb is now alive, and what was alive outside the tomb now looks dead!

And then the angel speaks the most common commandment in all of Scripture - the imperative sentence that appears more than any other command in the entire Bible - Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been

raised, as he said. Come see the place where he lay.”

There’s that verb again. Come see. Come perceive with your eyes, and come gain deeper understanding. Come see that the tomb is empty. And come see that the powers that be are no match for the God who was and is and is to come. Come see that suffering and pain and death are not the final words for any of us.

IV

My friend, I wonder about you – more than you know. I wonder what has brought you here today.

I mean, you had lots of other options before you. You could have slept in. You could have made an early brunch reservation. You could have worked in the yard. You could have stayed in and watched some television - apparently there’s a pretty big golf tournament over in Augusta this weekend.

But for whatever reason, early in the morning on the first day of the week, you went to considerable trouble to come here, to this place, on this day.

And so I wonder about you. I wonder what drew you to this place on this day. Maybe you’re here because you’re visiting family or you’re too young to stay home by yourself, and if you know what’s good for you, you don’t argue with grandma about going to church on Easter Sunday.

Maybe you’re here because you’re a musician and you’ve got a gig today!

Maybe you’re here because this is part of your weekly Sunday morning routine and it just happens to be Easter.

Maybe you don’t even know why you’re here, you’re just here.

And I wonder, what have you come this place to see?

You had so many other choices before you today, and to be honest, there’s a voice inside my head telling me that I’ve got to sell you on this resurrection business. There’s a voice inside my head telling me that I’ve got this one chance to close the deal.

But the reality is that I can’t sell you on any of this, because faith is not a product. Faith is not a commodity that be bought or sold.

So all I can do is share with you a little bit of what I have seen, what I have come to understand about this story.

I have seen that Jesus is not God’s avatar or doppelganger or messenger. Jesus is God in the flesh. I have seen that in Jesus, the God of the universe knows personally what it is to be hungry, to be thirsty, to be bone tired. In Jesus, God knows personally what it is to love someone so much it hurts, and to have that love go unreturned. In Jesus, God knows personally what it is to be betrayed, to suffer, and to die. In Jesus, the God who created solar systems and galaxies and ecosystems and all that is, seen and unseen, also knows what it is to be completely and totally human.

I have seen that there is far too much pain and suffering and downright meanness in the world today. But I have seen that Jesus' life and death and resurrection from the dead means that there is more to this life than suffering, pain, heartache, and death. I have seen that his resurrection from the dead that the powers that be in the world today that seem so hell-bent on sealing up tombs and constructing and enforcing systems of domination and oppression do not get the final say.

I have seen that some day, I will sit the front pew listen as someone pronounces grace over the body of someone I've loved and lost. But in the resurrection of Jesus, I have seen that day is goodbye, but goodbye for now. I have seen that some day, the last breath will leave these lungs of mine, and someone will take my body and prepare it for burial. But in the resurrection of Jesus, that means that death is not the last thing that will ever be said or heard about me.

I have seen that the world is full of pain and brokenness and loss, but in the resurrection of Jesus, grace bats last.

But I can't sell you on this story. All I can do this morning is invite you to come and see for yourselves. So come and perceive with your eyes, and come gain understanding. Come put this resurrection story in conversation with the story of your life.

As for me, I am convinced. That's not to say that I don't have my doubts. That's not to say that I most days I live with some stranger mixture of fear and joy.

But I have seen enough in my life, and enough in this story, to be convinced that there is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor stones, nor guards, nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's what I've seen.

What do you see?

Amen.