



Resurrection Choices

TEXT
Matthew 28:11–20

April 19, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Go and teach, Jesus said. *Teach the world to be good students of my commandments.* That's the job that we have because he was raised from the dead.

Resurrection is something that God did. Resurrection is what love does. But resurrection also gives us work to do.

It is noteworthy that Jesus didn't say, *Now that I have been raised from the dead, you can take comfort knowing you, too, will be resurrected when you die.* What Jesus said was *Go and teach them everything I have commanded you.*

You may think, "I'm not a teacher." Most of this teaching, however, is not done in the classroom. I'll come back to that.

I am grateful we are having this series, "Faith That Is Not in Vain," because interestingly enough, it allows us to say some things about the Resurrection that we couldn't say on Easter Sunday. Easter is an interesting day. You may have noticed that on some Easters, our attendance is larger than a normal Sunday. There are folks who join us for that day who don't come any other time. Everyone is sitting rib cage to rib cage. The parking

lot is enough to make you lose your Christian faith.

Even if they don't come any other time, I am so grateful they come on Easter because it gives us an opportunity to be the church to them. I don't know how it got started that Easter became the big public day. But it's certainly a change. That's different from the first Easter. The first Easter was not a public day. There were no crowds to witness resurrection. It was a family day. I don't mean egg hunts and picnics. I mean Jesus only appeared to those who had been with him along the journey, his followers. That can't be an accident.

He could have strolled into Pilate's office, I suppose. That would have been interesting. "I am here to see Governor Pilate, please."

"I'm sorry, sir, is the governor expecting you?"

"No, I'm pretty sure he's not expecting me."

The story would be different if Jesus had gone into Pilate's office and explained to him the realities of resurrection. How would things have gone if Jesus had appeared to the soldiers who, just following orders, were tasked to drive the nails into his body?

What if Jesus had walked back into the temple and looked the high priest right in the eye and told him that God had raised him up? I can wonder, but Jesus didn't do that. He didn't appear to any of those people. Easter wasn't a public day. He only appeared to those who followed him — which I suppose is why we have this other story that Matthew tells us about.

The guards reported everything that had happened — or at least they thought they reported everything. This is not a good day for the guards. They were given a pretty routine job: keep a dead man in the tomb. That's all they had to do. But it didn't go well for them.

They reported everything that happened to the priests, who then gave them money to say that the disciples had stolen his body. That's probably what they thought had happened. What other explanation would you give? It's probably what everyone thought happened. They knew his body was no longer in the tomb. But that doesn't mean Jesus is resurrected.

Matthew names something so basic and yet so honest. There is more than one narrative on this day. Either love wins and Jesus is alive ... love raised him

from the grave ... or it's a hoax, and his disciples just made up resurrection.

What you do today is shaped by the story you choose to trust. If Jesus is dead, then the world hasn't changed. You could make a case for that. Just look around. You can make a case that the powers of violence and hatred and selfishness are winning. But if Jesus is alive, then his life is the only thing that is truth. His commandments matter now.

That's the first choice we have to make. And I don't mean to make that sound so black and white, so yes or no. To choose resurrection is a daily journey — because trusting that Jesus is alive means everything that he commanded us matters now.

I think that's why Jesus didn't go to the guards or to Pilate or to the high priest. He went to his followers because they were the ones who knew what his life commanded. It says the guards went and told everything that had happened, but they couldn't tell everything. They didn't understand everything.

And even if they knew that Jesus was alive, they still couldn't tell everything that happened. They might be able to tell us that someone was raised from the dead. But that's not what happened. It wasn't just anyone; it was Jesus who was raised from the dead — which means that everything he commanded us matters now. That's why Jesus went to his followers. They were the only ones who could tell us what really happened.

The church I served in Florida had, in an earlier day, built an apartment complex for low-income retirees. It was a ministry, and it was one block from the church. I visited there often. It was there that I met Mary. She was long in years and longer in stories. She was the entertainer at the lunch table. She was always chatting in the elevator. And if you visited Mary in her apartment, you better plan on the afternoon because you weren't getting out of there.

I knew her pretty well — at least I thought I did. She died Christmas week, and her children, both of whom lived out of town, came to town. They amazed me by what they told me.

She had been married to Charles, who died in Europe in the days following the Normandy invasion. He had been there less than a day. She never married again; he was the love of her life. She was left with two babies, whom she raised. She had never finished college, which surprised me because her apartment was filled with books. She worked to send her children to college, one to graduate school to become a Ph.D. in physics, I think it was.

She marched with Martin Luther King in the late '50s. She did that more than once. I thought she was just the fun spirit at the Presbyterian House, but I had no idea who she was, not really. You have to journey with a person to really know them.

That's why Jesus went to his disciples. You had to know

him to know what resurrection meant. You had to journey with him to know that his commandments mattered now. *Go and teach them all that I have commanded you.* To teach his commandments is not to give a list of rules. It is to tell the story of Jesus. But it's more than telling his story. To teach his commandments is to live his story.

He appeared to his disciples because they were the ones who could tell the world that he commanded us to go the second mile; to turn the other cheek; to forgive seventy times seven; and not to worry about tomorrow.

But the teachers of this word can't just do so in a classroom, although that is important. To teach it is to live it. The teachers are those who are obedient to this way of life. Resurrection is something that affects our choices every single day.

He appeared to his disciples because they were the only ones who could tell how he treated people. He ate with tax collectors. He welcomed children. There were those who were lost like prodigals. He searched for them to bring them home. You can't understand resurrection unless you live this story.

I think he appeared to his disciples because they knew he could work miracles. He opened the eyes of many who couldn't see what was right in front of them. He cleansed lepers and restored them to community. He calmed every kind of storm. He fed thousands from his dinner plate, and he walked on water. He appeared to his disciples because they were the ones who

knew he worked miracles. And none of his miracles was greater than forgiveness.

A few years ago, Miroslav Volf came to town. He is a brilliant theologian who teaches at Yale. But more importantly, he is a man of profound faith — a faith he first witnessed in his Pentecostal parents. He was born in Croatia and has witnessed the heartbreak of war.

As a child, the light of his life was his Aunt Milica. She was the angel of his childhood, he said. She was always with his family, sharing meals, telling stories, watching over him. When Miroslav was an infant, a freak accident resulted in the death of Miroslav's older brother, Daniel. He was just five years old. His parents suffered the kind of grief that only those who have walked a road like that can imagine.

There was something about that day that Miroslav never knew until he was an adult. As an adult, he learned that his beloved Aunt Milica was supposed to be watching Daniel the day he died. She had been careless, and he died. When he learned this, he said: "Mother, you never even hinted at blaming Aunt Milica. She should have watched him and didn't."

"Should I have told you?" his mother replied.¹

Volf said, "I could teach forgiveness in the classroom, but I learned it was real when I witnessed it as Aunt Milica continued to be welcomed and loved in my family."

Matthew states the obvious. There are two narratives on

Easter. One is that Jesus' followers were lost in their grief or wanted to perpetrate a hoax on the world, and they stole his body. The other is that the love of God did what love does, and he is alive. Which narrative you choose determines what matters in your day.

We at Village Church engaged in homebound Communion this week. The same will happen this coming week. Teams of pastors and elders will crisscross the city visiting members of our Village family who can't get to worship anymore.

We sit in family rooms and hospital rooms; in nursing facilities with two to a room. We catch up on news at the church and news from these good folks. But then we find a table, seldom as beautiful as this table — sometimes just an end table or a card table or a kitchen table or one of those adjustable hospital bed tables.

And we remember his life — and how he broke bread like he had done countless times, and like we have done every day of our lives. But this time he said, "This is my body, my heart, my life broken for you."

And then we take little sips of juice, and we remember his life — how he told them this is the cup of the new covenant. They knew exactly what he was talking about.

They knew he was quoting the old prophet Jeremiah, who said there will be a new covenant when the commandments of God will not be written in the book. There will be a day, a promised day, when the

commandments of God will be written on our hearts, and God's children will someday live as God desires us to live.

We eat that bread, and we drink that juice, and we pray — and something happens. Tears come, as many times as not. Words of gratitude flow easily. Something happens, and it seems to me the only way to describe it is to say that Jesus is in the room.

Go and teach, he said. It's as if Jesus says, *I don't simply wish for you to believe I am alive, I am calling you to live like I am alive.*

¹Miroslav Volf. *Free of Charge* (2005), p. 122

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.