



Resurrection Happens in This World

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 28:1-14

April 4, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I was teaching my kid brother to throw a baseball. He had a lot to learn. But I was a kind and caring elder brother. I could be patient with these things. We had a half-dozen balls in the front yard. He picked one up and threw it. He threw widely, of course, off to the side. The next one bounced in the grass. My glove was safe from harm. A couple of balls sailed over my head, crossed the street, and landed in the Van Arsdale's yard.

When he had thrown them all, we went to retrieve the baseballs. I found one in the Van Arsdale's shrubbery. Jim got the one by the pine tree. He decided to throw that one to me. "Tom, catch," he said. I turned around and as if possessed by the spirit of someone with a real arm, he threw a ball straight and fast—and right at my head. I ducked. It's the only reasonable thing to do when an unexpected baseball is coming right for your nose.

Unfortunately, right behind me was a large picture window. It shattered. I looked at Jim and said, "Buddy, it's time to go see mom."

How I ended up being the one in trouble is still something of a mystery to me. Jim told our mom that I had teased him, "You can't throw a baseball to save your life." Some nonsense like that. Now, you know me. You know I wouldn't do that. But because the world in which we live contains mystery, my mother believed the baby rather than her firstborn. I spent the rest of the week in timeout and my allowance for the next two months contributing to a new front window for the Van Arsdals. Even today, if you ask my brother what happened, he will continue to narrate the fiction that the broken window was my fault.

It's not uncommon for there to be multiple stories to explain things in this world—even if some are

fiction. We have to determine which story is true; which story will guide our living.

There is more than one story about the empty tomb. One explanation is that Jesus' disciples stole his body in the dead of night. Death is death. Accept it. There is a limit to what God will do. Jesus was crucified and the powers of this world won. That's one story.

There's another story, first told by the angels, and then by the women... that the love of God can't bear to stay away. Just as God chose to take on skin and be born in Bethlehem because God couldn't bear to be away from this world so, too, even after the world responded to God's radical love with violence, God chooses to come back. God refuses to let love die. This day, we are reminded of the importance of deciding which story is true; which story shapes our living.

Several years ago, I went to Israel. My friend, Fahad, a Palestinian Christian born in Galilee, took me back to the place of his birth. We traveled everywhere, including a spot that is reported to be the tomb of Jesus, now empty.

I doubt it's the tomb. But there was a tomb, now empty. All the testimony of the early church is that the risen Jesus appeared to them.

It has become important to me, over time, to recognize that God didn't just take Jesus to heaven. Resurrection was a historical event. It happened in this world. It happened here. Resurrection means there is life beyond the grave. But, if I understand the text, it *first* means Jesus is alive here. And if that is true, we ought to be able to see him.

But, as I said, there are two stories about this day and both have their points. It often seems not to be an Easter world but a Good Friday world—a world

where death rules, and injustice wins, and a lack of meaning for so many lives.

I talked with my friend, Jim. He was on his way to the grocery store. He was in the parking lot when he heard gun shots. He is fine physically but shaken. He had a front-row view of what Good Friday looks like—when love and innocence seem over-powered by pain and evil in a King Soopers grocery.

He said, “I just can’t stop thinking about those folks who were supposed to come home with food for the week and now they are never coming home.” Given the weekly, almost daily, reality of gun violence in our country, we live in a Good Friday world.

If the story the angels tell us is real, then Jesus is alive here and that is why life has meaning. But if it is not, then maybe Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* had it right. How did he say it? “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”¹

Macbeth can pass as wisdom when you come face to face with gun violence in a grocery store. It seems to be a Good Friday world—because it is.

I won’t dwell on it today because you know it in your bones... the power of Good Friday shows up in a virus. It shows up in systemic racism. It shows up in fire and storm and the resistance to treat the earth as God’s gift rather than our possession. It shows up in gun violence. The powers of Good Friday are relentless.

But the story of the angels is that it is into this Good Friday world that Jesus was raised. And if he is raised into this world, then we ought to be able to see him.

Harvey Cox taught religion at Harvard. He spoke of his own experience of the resurrected Christ. Cox says, “I was surest about [the resurrection] when I was locked in a southern jail during the civil rights movement and heard the young black people with whom I was arrested singing ‘we shall overcome’ at the top of their lungs.”² The love of Christ was alive in that cell.

That’s how we see him. The thing about the resurrected Christ is that he moves through the world the same way the earthly Christ moved through the world... not in blazes of glory but in ordinary time and in ordinary flesh.

The common trait in all the resurrection appearances is how ordinary they were. The women were leaving the empty tomb and he meets them on the road. “Greetings,” he says. He meets Cleopas at dinner when they paused their journey to Emmaus. Mary thinks he is the gardener until he calls her name. He meets Peter while fishing; they have breakfast on the beach.

Frederick Buechner said, “He never approached from on high but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks.”³

It’s been such a hard year. The irony is: I’m not sure I have ever seen Christ more clearly than I have this year. In the face of Good Friday, we have witnessed moment after moment of human kindness. In a gesture repeated in every city and seen over and over and over... Dr. Joseph Varon embraces a patient on Thanksgiving Day, to remind both himself and an unnamed patient, that love is real even in the face of COVID. It looks like the risen Christ to me.

And protester, Patrick Hutchinson, carried to safety an injured counter-protester at a Black Lives Matter rally this summer. When my hurt becomes the source of sympathy for your hurt, rather than the justification for your destruction, it looks like the risen Christ to me.

And I have seen Christ in you. We know how many hungry people there are in our community. So you donned your masks, brought food, packed it up, and shared it. Christ said, “When I was hungry, you gave me food.” It seems the risen Christ shows up in both the hungry and in those who feed them.

And this week, I saw Christ alive in some of you as you reached out to our own Rev. Nishioka. Rodger lives just a few blocks from here and he likes to walk to and from work. Some of you, recognizing

1 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V, line 25.

2 Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, (2004) p. 284.

3 Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, (1992) p. 78.

it's a Good Friday world and Asian Americans are being harassed and attacked for the unholy reason of simply not being white, some of you said, "let's walk with our friend." That happens when we decide the story of the angels will shape our living.

There are two stories to this day. Some say his disciples stole his body, for whatever reason; they believe that life is a tale told by an idiot, meaning nothing.

But others choose to trust the story first told by angels, and then by the women, and then by generations of Christians through the ages, who have chosen to let this story shape their living, and when we do, the Christ who lives in this world becomes visible. Resurrection means life beyond the grave, death is defeated, thanks be to God. But first, resurrection happened in this world and it still does. I've seen him. You have, too; haven't you?