

GOING TO SEE

Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

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TEXT: Matthew 28:1 “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to look for the fulfillment of God’s resurrection promise assuring us that life will prevail over death, and faith will cancel fear.

A few weeks ago, there was an article in the *Concord Monitor* asserting that there was no snow on the ground down south in Windham, right here in New Hampshire. My memory is a bit foggy on the story, but I believe it was accompanied by a photo of children on playground equipment. I was tempted to go and see for myself, but instead, I went skiing. Lindy, completely unfazed by the possibility of snow-free New Hampshire, bought a ticket for North Carolina, where she was certain that spring had fully sprung. Today is in fact the fourth day of spring. Hard to believe, but it is entirely possible that we wouldn’t have to travel far in order to see for ourselves that this winter is going the way of all winters.

Here’s my point, on this Easter Sunday: can we imagine what it is like to go to see something— something like a world without snow, something like resurrection – that we have been told is true, that we want to believe is true, but that presses us beyond our capacity to imagine?

My question gets its start in Matthew’s account of the women’s trip to the empty tomb on the first Easter morning. Matthew writes, very simply, that the women “went to see the tomb.” He doesn’t say that they came with spices to embalm Jesus’ body. He doesn’t have the women wondering who will roll away the stone.

Back up a day. Matthew reports that the chief priests and the Pharisees reminded Pilate that Jesus had let people know that he would rise from death on the third day. That was why they wanted to make sure that the tomb was sealed. Now, if the people who brought about Jesus’ death knew of his promise to rise from death, doesn’t it make sense that his friends would remember this promise? How could it be that the women went to the tomb without bringing that promise of Jesus with them? For sure, these same women had seen Jesus die on the cross. They had watched as Joseph put his body in his own tomb. So certainly they went to the tomb full of the reality of his death.

But what if they went with a mix of grief and hope? What if they went both with what they had seen, and with what they had been promised? What if “going to see the tomb” meant going with an openness to a possibility beyond their ability to imagine, a possibility exponentially more astounding than a place in New Hampshire in March with

bare ground, a possibility that what Jesus had promised somehow would be true?

I submit that this is exactly how people who have embraced Christian faith and have lost someone deeply dear to them approach the reality of that dear one's death. For sure, the death is real. But then there is the promise our faith holds out, that death does not have the last word, that life prevails, because Christ overcame death on the first Easter. In the midst of overwhelming grief, the griever lives at the intersection of the closed reality of death and the open reality of the promise. Could it be, the griever cannot help but ask, that what feels so much like the end might not be the end? With this question burning, the griever, like the women on the first Easter, goes to see. Not in the sense of going to see their loved one physically return from death. But going to see what life might hold for them beyond death's finality. Going to see whether faith will uphold them, whether it will generate newness for them, in spite of the hugeness of their loss. Going the long way to see whether they and their loved one might somehow meet, on the other side of Jordan's wide river.

The women at the tomb witnessed an earthquake, like the one that occurred when Jesus died. The quake was an angel's way of rolling back the stone and opening the tomb. There he sat, perched atop the stone, looking like lightning. Remember the guards whom the religious officials posted to make the tomb secure? They were helpless, scared to death. So much for homeland security. But the angel had nothing but assurance for the women: Don't be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus. Stop right there. Matthew wrote that the women were going to see the tomb. The angel, however, knew that they really were looking for Jesus. The angel recognized and affirmed their fledgling faith in the promise Jesus had made. They couldn't have been looking for a dead Jesus; his body would have been stuck behind the stone. Most likely they had no specific idea what they were going to see, but they were open, open to the possibility of the promise fulfilled in some way that they could not have pictured ahead of time.

So the angel gave them a tour of the empty tomb, and then gave them instructions: Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has been raised. They will get to see him back in Galilee, where the whole adventure got started. Matthew reports that the women went "with fear and great joy." The possibility that they had been willing to entertain on the way to the tomb now was becoming the reality that would change everything.

That mix of fear and joy is the mix of honest believers. It's more complex, more human than a glib, "Of course I was sure he would be raised." But neither is their fear like the fear that undid the guards. It's a recognition that we have been grasped by a great goodness, by a power that cancels every power we have suspected could do us in. That's scary, but it is also cause for much rejoicing.

Let's face it. Even though we have the testimony of those witnesses to the risen Christ, we still find ourselves at the intersection of death's finality and life's possibility. Not just on Easter morning. This is the story of our lives. There is way too much going on in our lives and our world that would point to the conclusion that death has the last word.

Here we are, five years into the war in Iraq. Can anyone honestly imagine a true and sustainable peace in that country? No matter what your opinion may be of the rightness of our presence there, it seems as if death will have the last word.

Here we are, trapped in an economy where healthcare and fuel prices are skyrocketing and overheated investment banking is sliding into the sewers of Wall Street. People are getting hurt, lives are being destroyed, because of greed, pure and simple. No matter what the Fed or the IRS or some presidential candidate manages to do, it seems as if death will have the last word, at least for some very vulnerable people.

Here we are living in a world that we are warming up at rate that we may not be able to stop. Politics and promises and conventions and commitments abound, but nothing seems powerful enough to overcome our addiction to fossil fuels. Meanwhile, polar bears are drowning and droughts are becoming more entrenched. No matter what we try to do, it seems as if death will have the last word.

Here we are, on the day that our cold weather shelter is closing. Too many of our guests will be without a safe place to sleep tomorrow night. And they will not be alone. All around this country, we grow accustomed to the scourge of homelessness, unless we know a homeless person, and see their fear and their lack of options. No matter what a miracle group of caring people like our volunteers might be able to do, it still seems as if death will have the last word.

Any one of you could add more things to this list. Some of the items would be intensely personal: relationships fraying, health in great crisis, finances in jeopardy, the business of living gotten beyond your control. Some of the items would add more to the list of the mess the world is in. All of it taken together simply adds more detail to a picture that looks like a well-sealed tomb.

But then there is the promise, Jesus' promise that he would rise from death, Jesus' promise that life, not death, will have the last word, Jesus' promise that we, through faith, may participate in his awesome victory. The promise stands. The Easter truth is, the

promise has already been kept. Christ has burst his rocky prison, death has been undone, and all things in collusion with death know that their time is up.

But now, it is ours to go to see for ourselves. We have come here this morning to see, and if we search ourselves just a little, we quickly realize that we want to see more than a flowered cross and a fancy service. We want to see some sign that the promise of resurrection is a promise for us. We want to see something that suggests a shifting of the world's momentum away from a course heading toward death and onto a course that leads to life. We are not all that different from the women who went to see the tomb. We go to see our world well aware of death's power. Out of devotion to those who hurt most, we do not avoid the sealed tombs of our world. But we go to see those places where death has asserted itself mindful of a powerful promise given us by the Lord of life, a promise he sealed by his own blood.

Here is what can happen: an earthquake can happen. An upheaval can undo death's finality and open ways for life to assert itself. A messenger from heaven can come to us, announcing truth that will not be entombed. In the wake of that great shaking, in the presence of heavenly truth, we can be like the guards, scared to death, still scared of death. Or we can be like the women, trusting that there is no reason to be afraid, able to hear news that death indeed has been vanquished, and willing to go and tell what we have seen filled with awe and joy. And then, just as the risen Christ met them as they were on the way to do the work of Easter, the work of proclaiming life's victory, of urging other to go to see the risen Christ, he can come and greet us, inviting our worship, and changing forever our way of seeing the world.

We will go from this worship this morning to see a world steeped in death's ways. The snow will not have melted just because we've sung Easter songs, nor will the world's huge problems be resolved. The difference will be in how we go to see: with the promise or without it? The promise offers no specifics as to how life will overcome death, but it frees us to trust that the overcoming is assured. In that holy confidence, we see the world differently, as the place God's love in Christ continues to draw to itself, as the place where our lives are transformed by Easter's victory, and where we get to participate in the completion of life's overcoming of death. Go, and see for yourselves. Go, be embraced by the Easter promise, and do not be afraid.