



The Lessons We Learn from the People We Meet

## Along the Way

### **An Unsubtle Easter**

**Matthew 28:1-10**

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

April 9, 2023 | Easter Sunday

A friend of mine who is also a preacher says that every week, she is tempted to offer a preface to the scripture reading, starting it all with the words, “I know this sounds crazy, but . . .”

I know this sounds crazy, but an angel of the Lord appeared to a young Palestinian woman named Mary . . .

I know this sounds crazy, but a rabbi once spit on the ground, made the mud into a paste, and put it on a blind man’s eyes . . .

I know this sounds crazy, but the way that same rabbi talked about loving God and loving your neighbor made the whole Roman empire quake in their shoes . . .

I know this sounds crazy, but have you heard the good news about the oppressed being freed; the hurt, healed; the ignorant, awakened; the proud, humbled; the guilty, forgiven; the hungry, filled; the lowly, lifted; and the shamed, reassured? It all sounds too good to be true, because if you’re paying attention to the world around you, that’s not typically how things go. But no story is harder to swallow than this Easter story.

I know this sounds crazy, but when the women made the way to the tomb, Jesus wasn’t there. I know this sounds crazy, but death’s destructive power has been pummeled forever. I know this sounds crazy, but resurrection is real.

Today we declare that the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, risked incarnation, not for the sake of some experiment or merely making a point. God came among us in the person of Jesus for the sake of relationship — relationship with us. And Easter is God’s refusal to let that relationship go. God will not allow death to end it, or even interfere.

That first Easter morning, when Mary and the other Mary show up at the tomb, they could’ve never imagined such a thing. And this morning, all these years later, when our expectations may not be all that different from theirs, it seems someone ought to acknowledge the sheer madness of this story. Because it sounds crazy.

But.

Resurrection is fantastical any way you look at it, but Matthew’s account seems especially so. In Mark’s version, it just ends with fear — which seems credible. In John’s version, Mary doesn’t even recognize Jesus at first — this also makes sense, since you don’t expect to see a dead man alive and walking around. In Luke’s version, the disciples don’t believe the women — their telling of what happened is dismissed as an idle tale. Sadly, that, too, is credible. But with Matthew, the earth shakes mightily, and an angel appears, brighter than the sun, and he rolls the stone back, in the women’s presence. They watch the stone move, and then the angel sits on it, casual as if this were an everyday occurrence.

In the other gospels, the women find an open tomb, leaving open the possibility that someone else was up to something. In this telling, the women watch it open, and they discover that Jesus is not in there. He’s already gone. The tomb isn’t open to let him out. The tomb is open to let the women in — to let them in on the crazy, good news. The only part that makes sense is the guards, who were given one job: to make sure

the dead man in the tomb stayed in the tomb. They watch all this unfold and they pass out cold on the ground, appearing deader than the one they were supposed to watch. That makes sense. The rest? Not so much.

That is the thing about resurrection, though. It doesn't make sense because it was never intended to. There is no logic to be found, thanks be to God, because a logical resurrection would only have meaning in a logical world — and we can all agree, that's not the world we live in, is it? We need a crazy resurrection story because that is the only kind that can really make a difference in this world of ours that, more days than not, seems awfully unhinged.

We need resurrection to be wild. We need grace to be mind-blowing. We need love to be completely and utterly inexplicable. Rational, reasonable resurrection will not get the job done. Because resurrection is not an argument. It is not an idea to which you subscribe or not. It is not measurable or quantifiable. At its deepest core, it is not even a doctrine. Resurrection is a relationship. Resurrection is an encounter with God that simply will not quit. Resurrection is God's incomprehensible insistence on being with us, come what may.

*The New York Times* ran an op/ed piece about Easter yesterday. Maybe you saw it. It was written by Esau, a New Testament Professor at Wheaton College. He made the point, beautifully and poignantly, that he believes in Easter not because his life is bright and shiny and wonderful, but because it isn't. This was the line that stuck out most to me: "Easter is an encounter with the person who, despite every disappointment we experience with ourselves and with the world, gives us a reason to carry on."

That's something else about Matthew's telling of this story. If you flip back a few pages, you'll read time and time again about how secure the tomb was. "Secure the tomb," Pilate demanded. "Secure it through at least the third day. You have a guard of soldiers at your disposal," he says. "Make as secure as you can. And so they go, we are told, and they make the tomb secure by sealing it tight."

We like security. We like certainty. Even if all we might be certain of is the fact that there is no hope, surely that is better than the unknown, the lingering "maybe." That's what Pilate was going for. And what I think that means — what I think it means that Jesus still emerges despite Pilate's very best efforts at security — I think it means that resurrection comes to us in exactly the moments and places we are most sure it can't.

I know this sounds crazy, but I want to tell you a story about one of my dogs. Annie is a rescue dog from Kansas City, where I used to live. I love her dearly — and she is a handful. She spent the first six months of her life living in the sewer system of a city park, and when she was rescued, the shelters said she was unlikely to be adopted. I am still somewhat unclear about how her home ended up being mine, but it has been seven years now. Believe me when I tell you a dog that has only ever lived in a sewer does not adjust quickly to a house.

When I had to leave her at home, I would put her in her crate. Now, to be clear: it was a crate with a dog bed and toys and all the rest. She was not suffering. But the first time I left her alone inside her crate, when I got home, she greeted me at the door, tail wagging and very pleased with herself. She had managed to wiggle the crate door open.

The next time, I made sure everything was closed exactly right. I even put a cinder block in front of the gate. And again, she greeted me at the door, tail wagging, very pleased with herself. It was clear I needed to up my game. I ordered a heavy duty, fully plastic crate that was all one piece. "Inescapable," the ads said. But those ads were proven to be lies, as again, sweet little six-month-old Annie greeted me at the door. The entire bottom corner of the crate had been chewed through.

In a last ditch effort, I tried again with what Amazon called The Canine Fortress, and I preemptively reinforced it with heavy duty zip ties. I came home certain there was no way she could have gotten out. Frankly, I wasn't sure how I was going to get her out. But — you know what I'm going to say — somehow,

even still, there she was, at the door, tail wagging, delighted to see me. She was so determined to get out, she bent the metal bars enough to free herself. She chipped a tooth in the process, but she was victorious. And at that point, my friends, I admitted complete and total defeat. That dog simply would not, could not be contained.

I know this sounds crazy, but I think that was Matthew's point. I think that is Matthew's understanding of Easter. Of resurrection. That it comes into our lives in the moments and places that seem the most impossible. The most off-limits. Resurrection comes into the trauma of your past. Resurrection comes into the pain of your present. Resurrection comes into your fear of the future. Resurrection comes into even the most God-forsaken places and says, "I am still here. I am right here. I will never leave you alone. Whether you like it or not, whether you think it's a credible possibility or not, whether you think you deserve it or not. Wherever you go," Jesus says, "whatever happens, in this life or the next, I am right by your side." It is a story so amazing and a truth so profound **of course** it shakes the very foundations of earth.

I know it sounds crazy, but I believe that resurrection is real with all my heart and all my soul, all my mind and all my strength.

I know it sounds crazy, but say it with me, because it is so good it must be true: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.