

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Easter Angels

Matthew 28:1-10

Handel's *Messiah*. The Hallelujah Chorus. These usually mean it's time to buy tickets to the Christmas concert, or to pull the manger out of storage. But as one radio station announced, they'll be broadcasting a recording of Handel's *Messiah* tonight as well. I suppose we need just as many hallelujahs here in mid April as we did in late December. Though you wouldn't necessarily know it by the quantity of our decorations. Earlier this week I made the trip out to our church garage, where I was reminded that we have several shelves with multiple containers of Christmas items. Meanwhile, sitting on the top shelf, all by its lonesome self, was our single container of Easter items—a crown of thorns, some linens for the cross, and a small sculpture of Jesus feeding two once-lost-but-now-found sheep.

No matter how much the temperatures rise, the trees blossom, and the grass gets greener, the infancy of Jesus still figures into our story. You can even hear echoes of it in this morning's Scripture passage from Matthew. Some of the themes first raised at Jesus' birth get highlighted in the story of his resurrection. Recall that when Jesus was born, the news of his arrival was a threatening announcement to Herod, who reacted by trying to exterminate him, sending soldiers to kill all the babies in the region. And now, even after the civil and religious authorities have succeeded in their quest to kill Jesus, they react to the threat of his resurrection with—you guessed it—more soldiers, who are needed to seal the tomb and guard his dead body. It's not enough that Jesus is dead and gone. The power of the state is needed to make sure that he stays gone.

But God has other plans. Stunning plans that often go against the way that things seem to work in this world. Remember that this God has already shown his strange and shocking way of accomplishing salvation by coming into the world in human form, starting out as a vulnerable, helpless infant. There's a story about something that happened during the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis in Poland. An old Jewish cemetery keeper came into the cemetery one morning and found that during the night a woman had crept into an open grave and there given birth to a son. She herself had died. When the cemetery keeper found the child, he said to himself and to others nearby, "This must be the Messiah, for only the Messiah could choose to be born in a grave."

Granted, the child wasn't the Messiah. In fact, the infant boy died before noon of that day. But the truth captured by the cemetery keeper's reaction was in keeping with what we know about God as revealed in the coming of Jesus. As one preacher has put it, "Only a God who loves as our God loves could come into the midst of all the pain of life and death and here bring his grace."¹

In today's text from Matthew, the Messiah who arrived in such lowly form comes out of a grave in a transformed body. Though the women who have come to the tomb will soon see him, for now all they have to go on is an announcement from an angel. Not a timid report from an unconvincing messenger who flickers like a dying bulb, but a bold announcement from a heavenly agent who radiates with blinding light. In addition to being incredibly shiny and slightly cocky, the angel must be pretty buff. After all, he has managed to roll the

stone away from the tomb all by himself. And as if that weren't enough, the angel sits down on the stone, like it's a royal throne, right in the middle of the cemetery. All we need now is for the confetti to fall and the band to start playing, confirming that the God of life has triumphed over the power of death.

Preacher Thomas Long tells about a former student who described a summer he spent as a laborer on a construction crew. He said that his foreman was a kind and gracious person. So if a worker got sick on the job, he understood and made arrangements. If a worker had problems at home and was late or absent from work, the foreman would cover for him. But the one thing this foreman would not tolerate was if a worker would sit down on the job before the work was done. To sit down was a sign that the job was done, and to do so beforehand was a violation of a sacred trust.²

The angel in today's story sends a message by sitting down on the stone. He parks himself on top of this great rock, the door of death, and declares that the job is done. God has defeated the power of death. All the forces that aim to destroy life have themselves been destroyed. All the things that try to conquer God's purposes of salvation have themselves been conquered. Victory belongs to the Lord.

No wonder the angel tells the women, "Don't be afraid." Even though everything around you seems to be coming apart, and wherever you look there's shaking. The earth is shaking. The guards at the tomb are shaking. You yourselves may be shaking. But God's plans and purposes are unshakeable. The proof is right here. Or should I say, not here. Jesus, who was crucified, is not here. He's not here because the cemetery, and all its graves, isn't where he, or anyone who belongs to him, is meant to be.

"Come and see the place where he lay" (v. 6b). That's the angel's invitation. A few days ago, just in time for this sacred week on the Christian calendar, I received an email linking me to a website where I could take an online tour of an ancient tomb. It wasn't Jesus' tomb, but was likely very similar to it. After pointing and clicking my way through the front entrance, I could survey the upper chamber, then navigate my way down to the lower chamber, which was essentially the basement of the tomb complex. During the journey, I would have the opportunity to see how some folks got the more elite burial spots, while others were laid to rest in much more modest surroundings. Plus, via video, a biblical scholar would be on hand to explain how this particular tomb sheds important light on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' burial.

Though I didn't accept the invitation and take the full tour, I'm sure it would have been a fascinating experience. But probably more elaborate than what the angel in today's text has in mind. "Come and see the place where he lay." Again, the angel's point isn't to have us come and look at what's in the tomb, but at what, or who, is not in the tomb. Rather than offering us a trip back in time, the angel is sending us forward in time. He's launching us toward a future that's different because the tomb couldn't hold Jesus captive. God had already raised him and transformed him.

Notice that the angel didn't roll away the stone in order to set Jesus free. He was already gone, and was headed for Galilee. It's like the story one man tells about a sleepy Sunday afternoon when he and his five-year-old son drove past a cemetery. When the boy noticed a pile of dirt near a newly excavated grave, he pointed and said, "Look, Dad, one got out!"³ Easter is when we celebrate the One who got out. In fact, Jesus had already gotten out before the women arrived at the tomb. The reason the angel rolled away the stone was so the women could see what had already happened. The resurrection was already a done deal. God had already done what only God could do.

And now, the women's job, and the job of each one of us who hears and receives and believes this good news, is to go and interpret the empty tomb to the world. Instead of hanging around the cemetery, taking tours of a vacant tomb, we're sent to be witnesses to the power of God, the power of life that conquers death.

I like the way that Alyce McKenzie describes the angels in Matthew's Gospel. She says they're like her UPS man. He's very focused on his job, which is simple—to make the delivery. He's not there to sell the item, to be your buddy, or to empathize with you. He's there to ring the doorbell, hand you the package, and hold out the clipboard for you to sign for it. So it is with these angels, says McKenzie. They're there to deliver the good news. They show up with the package, and it's up to us to sign for it, open, and use it.⁴

"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them" (vv. 8-9a). Suddenly Jesus met them. I trust that you, like me, need this worship gathering where you can come each Sunday to meet, and be met, by Jesus. True, there are many other ways in many other places where he meets us in between Sundays. But this day, like every Sunday, is the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection. And if we're going to keep going and telling, we need to keep coming together and, like the women in our text, falling at Jesus' feet to worship him. Only as we do that are we prepared to rise again to our feet and go forth for further witness.

And bearing our witness will often take us into places and circumstances that have the feel of a cemetery. Places and circumstances where it looks like the stone has been rolled into place, the seal has been applied, and the guards have been posted. It's over, finished, done. Darkness has overcome light. Evil has conquered good. Despair has defeated hope. Places, events, and circumstances like that. And yet, those very places of suffering, pain, brokenness, and lostness can become the spot where God moves into action and starts raising up what looks like it's dead and buried. Lost lives, sick bodies, shattered relationships, fragmented families, discouraged churches, divided communities, and corrupted institutions. Day in and day out, your commission takes you into settings where God's victory needs to be announced.

And you don't have to be a messenger from heaven to qualify. You don't have to be as radiant as the sun or as muscular as Gabriel on steroids. You don't have to be strong enough to push a huge rock or bold enough to sit on it. Or who knows, maybe even stand on it and use it as a pulpit. When we have our sunrise service at Mount Aventine, there's a large round stone in the grass. I place a music stand on top of it and we use the spot as an Easter pulpit. It usually works out pretty well, though I'm cautious about standing on it because I might tumble off in the midst of the message, and that sure wouldn't look very angelic.

But the fact is, if you believe that the crucified Christ is risen and reigning, you have an angelic assignment. You're sent to deliver the news that the tomb is empty, and to help others understand what that empty tomb means for them. And don't be surprised that when you get to the places and the people who need to know that God has overcome death with life, Jesus has already gotten there ahead of you, ready to meet you and help you fulfill your task.

¹ Bruce W. Thielemann, "Hark! The Herald Angels" Preaching Today, Tape No. 63.

² Thomas G. Long, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2006) 27.

³ Phil Callaway, from the April 16 entry of *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2006).

⁴ Alice M. McKenzie, "My Favorite Angel: Easter Reflections on Matthew 28:1-10." Patheos website. April 10, 2014. Accessed April 13, 2017 < <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Favorite-Angel-Alyce-McKenzie-04-11-2014>>.