April 20, 2014 – Easter Sunday

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I love the cinematography of today’s Easter Gospel. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (we’re not sure which one – there are a lot of Marys in Jesus’ life) approach the tomb to see it, as the text says. The word for see here is *theóreó*, which means to gaze upon or to experience – the word from which we get our word “theater.” This is the last resting place of their friend, their teacher, their Lord. This is the last resting place of all of their hopes. Since there was a big rock rolled in front of the tomb opening, there isn’t a lot to see, but they are compelled to come anyway, and sit outside. They had probably been there since it was closed up, leaving only for the Sabbath observances.

In Matthew’s Gospel, there are some political overtones to the arrangement of the tomb. The chief priests had come to Pilate with the concern that if Jesus’ body should disappear for some reason, people would say that he HAD risen from the dead and the fraud and heresy would be perpetuated. Pilate, himself, realizes that this would not be a good thing for him in the eyes of Rome, so he agrees to have the tomb sealed with a large stone and to place guards in front of it so no one could possibly get in or out. Problem solved.

Fast forward to the day after the Sabbath. I wonder which higher-up those guards had ticked off to be forced to pull guard duty in a cemetery. They must have been pretty happy to see the sun coming up after a night peopled with ghosts and goblins, in their minds at least. But just when they thought they were home free, and maybe thinking about their breakfasts, there’s an earthquake and an angel of the Lord shoots down from heaven like a lightning bolt and rolls back the giant stone in front of the tomb like it was nothing. Then the angel hops up to sit on the stone, but by that time the guards weren’t conscious to see it because they had all fainted from fright.

I imagine the angel sitting back and crossing his legs, and smugly regarding the prone guards and saying, “Yeah, I get that a lot.” But to the two women, who were no doubt standing there with their jaws on the ground, he says, “Don’t be scared – you’re the ones I came here to see, and to tell you that the one you’re looking for has been raised and isn’t here anymore. C’mon inside and see for yourselves.” Then he hops down off of the stone and gestures gallantly to the two Marys to go inside and check out the emptiness.

“Run along back to the disciples,” he tells them, after they examine the tomb and are sure it really IS empty. “Tell them that Jesus will meet them in Galilee.” And off they go joyfully, but still a little shaken up. It’s a lot to take in!

While they’re on the road, suddenly Jesus himself is standing there before them and they fall down at his feet and worship him. Actually, they literally grab hold of his feet, as if they were not going to let him go again.

There is an interesting parallel there. The angel appears, suddenly, and the guards fall down in a dead swoon. Then Jesus appears, suddenly, and the two Marys fall down at his feet and worship him. This time it’s Jesus who tells them not to fear, but they’re obviously not afraid of him. Perhaps he’s telling them not to fear losing him again, or to not fear what the future has to hold for them.

One of the Bible commentaries I like to read, from Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, made an interesting suggestion. It said that Easter morning is a funeral. It’s a funeral for fear. Fear is put to rest at last and all that is left is love. What was put into that tomb on Friday was fear – fear on the part of the Jews of Jesus’ influence and fear on Pilate’s part both of Rome’s wrath and of losing control of the people under his thumb. And yet, only Jesus came OUT of that tomb. Only love prevailed.

But God’s love in Jesus isn’t passive. It’s active. It’s in our face and it sends us out into the world. The angel rolled back the stone and hopped up to sit on it. Then he hopped back down – for some reason, I think of this angel as a hopper – to usher the women inside the tomb, presumably also hopping over the recumbent forms of the guards.

“Come on in and see for yourselves, but then go and tell the other disciples,” he says. And Jesus, when he meets them on the road, greets them with, “Come and see me, but then go and tell the disciples.” They both say to tell everyone to go to Galilee and they will see Jesus there. Lots of coming and going.

Because Jesus doesn’t want us to just hang onto his feet. He wants us to stand and go out into the world to proclaim his good news. He wants us to bring that prevailing love to everyone we encounter.

In a few minutes, we will welcome another member into the body of Christ. Among other things, we will be asking God to teach little Elizabeth to love others in the power of the Spirit, and to send her out into the world in witness to his love.

Those are mighty big tasks for such a little set of shoulders, but as she grows into the vows that her parents and godmother are taking on her behalf, she will find, as we all will find, that she’s not alone. Jesus is there with us every step we take, holding our hand when we feel unsteady. He’s always there, showing us the way of love.

But it’s up to us to let go, to get up from Jesus’ feet, and to bring that way of love to where it’s needed most. To the poor and needy, to the friendless – the unloved and unlovable, and to each other. Because with love comes forgiveness. And with forgiveness comes mercy. And we could use a lot more mercy in the world.

The tomb is empty, fear has no more power, and God’s love is free to work in the world. Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!