

“To Be Announced”

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Easter, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

Jeremiah 31:1–6; Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 28:1–10

Protestants (evangelicals in almost any language but English) are wedded to the absolute importance of the Good News. Our word *Protestant* is deceptive, because it seems to imply that the important part about us is our protest. We have left behind the ways of the rest of the Church, who became distracted by rituals and icons. We stress that the message is central.

And yet we don't act that way, anymore.

The word *Evangelical*, which the rest of the Christian world usually pronounces when they mean our word *Protestant*, is not just a group of people who deny science and embrace a more literal understanding of the Bible. The word *Evangelical* for the rest of Christianity is closer related to its Greek root words, which mean *Good News*. By forswearing the use of the word *Evangelical* because popular Evangelicals have co-opted it has ended up meaning very often that we have neglected the importance of the message we are supposed to be announcing.

So, my job with you today will be to address this vital matter in our lives. Or to begin to address it anyway, to help all of you to begin saying – out loud preferably – the heart of the faith we all claim. For those of you who consider yourselves already pretty adept at this, just play along. It'll do us all some good to review.

I've made a study of the stories of the Resurrection of Jesus, in the interest of helping myself to find a way to announce to others the Good News of Jesus Christ. I've always found it rather distasteful to approach people very directly about it, the way that Jesus appears to direct his followers to do at the end of Matthew in the Great Commission: *Go and make disciples of all nations...* and all that. Makes it seem as though the Jehovah's Witnesses have it right and the rest of us are layabouts.

But I'm not so convinced that we don't have a lot of potential in our own special ways of making the announcement.

I personally have adopted the practice of following a rather circuitous route on my way to the announcement that this morning entails. Some will ask people if they have had a personal encounter with the risen Christ, and if not then share with them the possibility of an opportunity. Others will try to trick unsuspecting people into what can become a very uncomfortable conversation about personal salvation.

I'm far more likely to demonstrate my knowledge of the differences in the story from one gospel to another. I try to make it fun, try not to sound too much like a know-it-all but more as if I've intentionally become well-informed and have found myself amused as well as convinced.

For example: were you aware that none of the gospels has the same initial reporter of the Resurrection? Mark has a young man inside the tomb as the women arrive. The young fellow is dressed in a white robe (and reminiscent, incidentally, of another young man who ran off naked from the Garden of Gethsemane when he left his linen clothing in the hands of a temple guard who had tried to capture him). It is this young man who tells the women the happy news that Jesus is raised.

In Luke there are two men in white robes at the tomb, resembling in this case the two men – Elijah and Moses – who were pictured with Jesus atop the mount of transfiguration, and pretty certainly the same two who scold the disciples on the mount of ascension for just standing around watching Jesus lift off into the sky.

John turns the two men into two angels, not the arch-prophets.

Matthew trims the story down to include only one angel, or perhaps Matthew, which

preceded John in its publication, actually took Mark's young man – who had not appeared earlier in the gospel – and converted him into an angel, for the sake of making the announcement as heavenly as possible.

Whatever is the case with Matthew's motivation, the angel has a whole lot more style in the reporting than Mark's young man. But then, of course, style was demanded. In the other three gospels, the stone was not sealed for security's sake. Mark has Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus in a standard Middle Eastern tomb, with a stone in front of the entrance. Luke does the same. In both cases, when the women arrive at the unsealed and unguarded tomb, the stone has already been rolled away.

Matthew's temple authorities suspect that Jesus' followers will attempt to stage a resurrection in justifying his claim to Messiah-hood. Therefore, chapter 27 ended with them sealing the stone in front of Joseph's tomb, thus literally locking the body inside, and they posted a guard.

If the authorities' attempt to outsmart the sneaky disciples was to be thwarted, it would have to be by a means that would make the turnabout of the execution obvious to everyone concerned. Everyone would have to know that no one stole the body away, but that something miraculous had taken place.

For this reason, one showman of an angel – with an appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow – before the guards and the women all gathered there, stages an earthquake which, apparently, breaks the seal. Next, the angel rolls the stone aside. And finally – in my own personal favorite detail of the story – the angel sits down atop the stone. Satisfied with the trembling and twitching of the guards in that moment, the angel turns to the women and says words to the effect of “Now, don't *you* be afraid of all this. For you, this is a good thing!”

Jesus had been raised, the angel said. Go tell the others.

And sure enough, Matthew says, a few steps later on their way back to announce the angel's message, the women met Jesus, who told everyone to go back to Galilee where their homes were and to meet him there.

So, that is what they did.

Now, you might have read Mark and learned that everybody just ran off, fearful, despite the young man's announcement at the tomb in that gospel. But that ending doesn't have quite the ring of truth to it, I think. Come back, this time next year, and I'll confer with you about why Mark's reporting still has authority, even though it seems somewhat inaccurate. (Come back sooner, but no later than next Easter, when we'll read together Mark's version.)

Or you may have heard the story in Luke and its sequel, Acts of the Apostles, which say that Jesus didn't tell the disciples to go home right away, but rather instructed them to hang around Jerusalem for fifty days, keeping quiet about the announcement of the resurrection. That tale has its charms, not the least of which is its helpfulness for creating the liturgical calendar that we follow, this time of year.

But despite Luke's charms and Mark's seeming inaccuracy, Matthew offers me (and you, in all likelihood) a justification and even an environment for our announcing the resurrection – perhaps more subtly than others do it, but still...

After the spectacle of the angel and the conniving of those who would discredit the truth of an empty tomb, Jesus instructs his followers to go home to Galilee, for that is where their Good News is to be announced. In Galilee, yes, but – more importantly – at home, among mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and hosts of relatives and friends and colleagues.

Granted, there will be those Pauls and Peters and Barnabases and Silases who will be sent forth as apostles to the world. There will be those who, in order to make disciples of all nations, will be delivered into the nations for the sake of the Word.

But the vast majority of folk who receive the Good News of the Messiah's resurrecting will be expected to deliver it from their home places. Nothing spectacular, I am sure – a kind

word here, a loving embrace there, a healing gesture over there – but unending opportunities to demonstrate and share more than just an ethic, more than some set of principles or moral guidance, but the news that death’s chains do not, cannot! bind the faithful. And *that* truth applies, whether “the faithful” is a human being or a God. We will not be bound by death or fearful.

We have been born anew. With the news of a resurrection, our lives can begin again. God is coming for us. We may have found ourselves run off the tracks, but God’s road crew resurrection gives us a second chance. And, incidentally, a third and a fourth chance, too, and more and more until we actually do get it right. Grace is an amazing thing.

Congregationalists and our friends can be a quiet people, afraid of an association with the more strident announcers of the Good News who tend to catch more people’s attention, or whose exploits crowd news cycles. We want to cultivate the Good News, yes; offer it financial support through benevolent agencies, maybe; but *announce* it? Ourselves?

Honestly, if you believe in the Good News, eventually you’re bound to announce it! People, your people, people who know you at home, are likely to ask, what motivates you, what truth captivates your heart most deeply. And in such moments, don’t hold back. Remember and embrace this fact, or at least this truth that deserves to be announced: *The tomb was empty!* Others did (and do) whatever could be done to prevent that outcome, but that’s what happened: *The tomb was empty!*

And you, like me – rational people though we may be – consider the story and have trouble believing it, but the evidence remains and restates a promise: *The tomb was empty!* Suspiciously flashy angels and fleshy Messiahs notwithstanding, you’ve got to admit: *The tomb was empty!*

See, it’s not so bad to be announced, once you get used to the idea. Just keep reminding yourself, and soon enough you may even be reminding others: *The tomb was empty! The tomb was empty! Christ is risen.*

Amen.