

“Am I Ever Glad To See You!” – Mt 28:1-10 – Easter Sunday, 2017

I suspect that most preachers would on this Easter Sunday base their message on John’s account of the Resurrection. However, I prefer the challenge of preaching from Matthew’s version. I say “challenge” because Matthew’s account differs in so many details from John’s, and where John’s version is somewhat soft and full of deep pastoral emotion, Matthew’s version seems somehow more abrupt, less gentle. I am glad I have taken up this challenge because in my research I have discovered not only some significant similarities between the two accounts, but also a detail that I found greatly amusing in Matthew’s account.

To begin, the two accounts do start out with some agreement, namely that it was early on the day after the Sabbath, which was considered the first day of the week. Since the Sabbath to which they refer was on Saturday – still observed by the Jewish faith today – then the day upon which the events described took place was what we know and observe as Sunday. But immediately though we run into the first discrepancy and that is that John’s account only mentions a single Mary. Matthew covers the bases with Mary Magdelene – and the “other” Mary, both of whom are involved in what develops.

A second somewhat larger difference results from the fact that in John’s account the women discover that the rock had been rolled away before they arrived; according to Matthew the women seem to have been present when the angel of the Lord “rolled back the stone and sat on it.” The roles of angels are different in the two accounts as well – in John’s version the two angels sitting in the tomb ask Mary why she is weeping, but in Matthew’s the angel tells the women that Jesus “has been raised ... come, see the place where he lay” and gave them further instructions to tell the disciples to go to Galilee.

But one of the greatest differences, and indeed the one that caused me to laugh, was the difference between how Jesus talked to the women in the two accounts. John quotes Jesus speaking in a way that is so typical of the somewhat flowery style of John’s gospel – Jesus goes on and on about “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” But in sharp contrast in Matthew’s account Jesus greets the women in an absolutely wonderful way. The RSV translates Jesus’ greeting – the Greek word “xairate” – as “Hail!” The Latin equivalent is of course, “Ave!”, leading to the famous “Ave, Maria!” The NRSV translates it “Greetings!” The King James, “all hail!” But there are other ways that are perhaps even better to translate that word. The root of the word is the verb, “rejoice, be glad!” and that would have been not only a legitimate way for Jesus to have greeted the women but a wondrous affirmation of the meaning of the resurrection event as well. When the word is used as a greeting it carries all of the wonderful connotations of other friendly salutations, such as “Welcome!”, or even “ ‘ Morning! (complete with wonderful images of the fish-tank opening to the Monty Python movie *The Meaning of Life*)” I am particularly delighted that we can even quite reasonably hear in that greeting the legitimate translation, “Am I ever glad to see you!”

So, what does it mean that we have two such differing accounts of the resurrection in these two gospels? I believe it means that we are graced and blessed by God that there are differing versions. You see, if there was only one version, repeated verbatim in all four gospels, one would be rightly suspicious that there was what is denounced in academic research and avoided in journalism, namely the “single source.” As an example, sometimes we’ll see the media quoting a rash of medical articles describing some phenomenon, and giving it great credence because of the multiple references – but then we’ll see it all debunked because all of the articles quote one single source.

Take for another example what happens in the case of an accident. When a number of people witness the event, you will invariably have a number of differing accounts – sometimes so widely differing you wonder whether they all saw the same event. However, when a group of witnesses have stories that are word-for-word identical, the police and the insurance companies are as suspicious as we are that the story has been “cooked up.” It seems clear that all who were involved in the resurrection events were completely “all shook up” and so their stories would be different in the details. Interestingly, at least to me, is that Matthew’s account seems to have been coloured by the accounts of the guards – which I think is affirmed when you read on a bit further than we did. John seems at least in my mind to have had access to Mary or at least Mary’s telling of the story. In any event, we have differing versions, and I say again that I believe we are blessed by those differences.

And yet while there are differences, there are similarities or a thread of commonality that runs through both of these versions, and that common thread forms the foundation of our Christian faith. Both of these gospel authors include angelic beings in their accounts, and while the quotes are different, it is obvious that these angelic beings were there both to support Jesus in this defining moment and to proclaim to others that what had happened was clearly God’s doing. Their very presence and appearing to ‘common’ people like guards and compassionate followers of Jesus was a heavenly sign that this rising again of Jesus from the dead was an event that would touch the lives of all people.

Another thread that weaves through these accounts is that it was the women who were the first to encounter Jesus. Whether it was the “don’t touch me yet” of John’s gospel, or the clutching of Jesus’ feet in Matthew’s, it was the women who are the first of the followers of Jesus to be greeted by him, and to receive the first of the marching orders that would follow over the next two thousand years. “Go, tell my brothers, tell the others” Jesus tells them, go tell them the good news that death had been conquered in this momentous earth-shaking event. They were all shook up by this holy event – the guards, the women, the other disciples. Finding it difficult to believe, even though they saw him with their own eyes, touched him with their own hands, ate and drank with him, they nevertheless recovered from their confusion, and proceeded to tell the whole world the good news.

And that good news is, of course, the event that we rejoice in and celebrate today – the rising again of Jesus, victorious over even death. The cross upon which he died is now empty, and so is the tomb into which he was tenderly placed after the brutal crucifixion. Rejoicing and worship has replaced the tears and anguish of grieving. In that moment of greeting his followers all of the promises Jesus made were affirmed: the promise of life everlasting and abundant; the assurance that the Holy Spirit would be sent to continue to guide, comfort, and uplift all who place their trust in Christ’s redeeming power. Over and done is the quaking of the guards and the confused excitement of the women and other disciples, replaced by the solid assurance of God’s never-ending love made so clear in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, our risen Lord.

Once again on this highest of holy days in our Christian faith we gather to celebrate and rejoice with the women of faith who discovered the empty tomb and the angels and who were first greeted with “rejoice, be glad” by the risen Jesus. We join with them and with the other disciples in “coming and seeing” the empty tomb. We devour the stories of how they walked and talked and ate with the risen Jesus, and all that he had said and done during those few brief years began to come clearer and started to make sense, and the awareness became complete that this Jesus truly was the incarnation of God’s redeeming love.

Throughout the two thousand years that have passed since that dramatic morning that left everyone “all shook up” others have joined in the procession of proclaiming the good news of the empty cross and empty tomb and of trying to understand the full meaning of what Christ’s saving action has meant for the world. And today we also join that procession, hearing and retelling the glorious story of that first Easter morning, celebrating with great joy and thanksgiving the certainty that in the Resurrection of Christ lies our assurance also of God’s everlasting covenant of grace with us, that in our belief, in our faith we too have received the gifts of life abundant and eternal. There is no more appropriate day in our lives to shout “Halleluia!” – I say again and invite you to join with me – “Halleluia!” and to give thanks to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.