

## Reconnecting the Grace-full Body: Tell It On A Mountain

### Matthew 28:1-10

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*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” <sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (NRSV)*

At one point of orbiting church as a kid, I was taught several songs that would serve me well for speaking the language of Christianity. I learned that God’s love flows deep and wide (deep and wide), and that Father Abraham had many sons. I learned that Jesus loves the little children, although I’ve since learned not to talk about color in quite the same way. And I learned a simple chorus about communication: “Go tell it on a mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go tell it on a mountain, that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

I learned as an adult that most people know Go Tell It on The Mountain as “Jesus Christ is born,” which makes more sense once you learn the verses about shepherds and stars. But that particular church setting wasn’t as interested in teaching a July-sticky group of children about Christmas as it was about letting everyone in our elementary schools know about our faith—that oh-so-scary-to-progressive-churches notion of *evangelism*.

Brace yourselves: we’re using an Easter text with a Christmas title in pumpkin spice season to talk about how we talk about God. Deep breaths.

In our sermon series on the parts of the grace-filled Body, we looked last week through the lens of music at the ways in which we use our gifts and our called selves to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. This week, we’re holding up communication. It’s an incredibly important facet of our lives; whether you’re a gifted communicator or not, you have to find a way to use communication well. It’s in our personal lives: as of 2021, 96% of Americans owned a cellphone<sup>1</sup> while 72% spend at least some time on social media.<sup>2</sup> It’s in our business lives: a Forbes study released this year states that workers spend, on average, nearly half the workweek on digital communication platforms, a fact somewhat shaped by the reality that nearly 60% of American workers have moved into some kind of hybrid or full work-from-home situation.<sup>3</sup> How

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<sup>1</sup> [A daily-diary study on the effects of face-to-face communication, texting, and their interplay on understanding and relationship satisfaction - ScienceDirect](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Social Media Use in 2021 | Pew Research Center](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The State Of Workplace Communication In 2023 – Forbes Advisor](#)

we talk to each other matters deeply, and how we tell stories across the various parts of our lives shapes the relationships we have.

Matthew, the name accepted for our gospel writer of today, knew this. Each of the gospels tells certain stories in certain ways, a fact we'll get into more during Advent, but this tale of resurrection has some fascinating differences from the other three. Matthew is traditionally known as the gospel writer trying the most to reach out to the Jewish community; Professor Stephen Westerholm writes that "more than any other evangelist, Matthew is concerned to link the old revelation with the new, to show the latter as the culmination rather than the abrogation of what went before...Matthew's evident concern is to tell the story of Jesus, who is center stage in nearly every episode in the Gospel. Jesus is important for Matthew, not as a gifted human being whose religious intuitions, insights, and experiences can inspire others, but as the focus and instrument of God's activity on earth."<sup>4</sup> Matthew understood that communication has to mean something, has to go somewhere, and that every kind of communication is telling a story whether intentional or not.

So what story is he telling when he announces this resurrection? It's a story many of us have heard a thousand times before, and yet it's a story that we tell each other again every single year because it is the core of our faith. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless."<sup>5</sup> The Church does not exist because we need to tell people how to be kind, or because we needed to do something with all this stained glass. The Church exists because Jesus the Christ defeated death in a garden and told the gaggle of grief-gashed Marys that the world needed to know that, needed to know that there was a Lord different from Caesar, a hope outside of empire.

"The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

"Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'"

Matthew's account is all about "go and tell," all about "report what you have seen," all about the communication of this dark-dawn deconstruction of what the world had been before. Rev. Judith Jones writes, "After the crucifixion, when the religious and civil authorities have at last succeeded in their quest to kill Jesus, they react to the threat of his resurrection by sending soldiers to seal the tomb and guard his dead body. But the God who shakes the earth cannot be stopped by armed guards and an official seal. The story that begins with fear ends with overwhelming joy. Jesus' birth is shadowed by many deaths, but Jesus' death brings the promise of resurrection life for all."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Westerholm, "Matthew: Overview," in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Peterson, eds. *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 630.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 15:14, CEB.

<sup>6</sup> [Commentary on Matthew 28:1-10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2020

So how are we communicating this, Church? How are we telling the story, telling it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born, that Jesus Christ is Lord in a way that has very little to do with crowns and everything to do with compassion? Often, we don't. This is a real and heartbreaking truth about the modern Church: we have gotten so afraid of the deep and valid pain that evangelism has caused that we've often given it up entirely. We meet the angel's call to tell the disciples with bland memes of reassurance that we're not *those* Christians; we answer Jesus' invitation to see Him in Galilee with a double checking of our schedules about whether that will put us too close to a rally of the "wrong" sort of people.

"But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid.'" The Church has done *significant* damage in the ways various pieces of this stumbling Body have taken evangelism, and it is crucial that we recognize that, repent of it, and change our ways. But it is equally crucial that we refuse to be silent that this matters, that this risen Christ has changed us to change the world, that the Caesars and empires of the world may be alive and well but they are *still* not the most powerful thing in the universe or the only way to live. We have *good news, euaggelion*,<sup>7</sup> and we are invited to be messengers, *aggelos*,<sup>8</sup> angels. That's our invitation, Church; we are to be angels in the world, because we have a story of hope that needs to be told. Death is defeated; despair is defeated; injustice will be defeated; the last shall be first, and every single created thing is beloved of God.

Let's start the discussion, then, on communication. It's okay if that's not your gift; it may surprise you, but evangelism isn't mine. One-to-one conversation, especially off-the-cuff, doesn't come easily to me, so I try not to put myself in lots of situations that require that. But I do think through what stories I want to tell about this thing I've owned called faith so that I have something ready if I'm asked.

Maybe you're mediocre at talking about what draws you to church but fabulous at describing how volunteering with Love Thy Neighbor makes the living Christ real to you; lean into that. Tell the story. Maybe it's hard to tell someone that you're a Christian but it's easy to tell them, once they ask, about how you have this rockin' small group studying the book of Mark and you're having a ball. Lean into that; tell the story. Every single one of us has at least one reason that keeps bringing us back to this mess of a structure called church, and if you don't know what that is, come chat with Nancy or with me. We're thrilled to help you find your good news, your message.

That message becomes part of what this church and the larger Body of Christ is telling the world. I don't know if you've noticed, but a lot of the story that people hear from Christianity these days is less than great. So, let's talk about it; Jessica, who curates our website and designs our logos and social media promos and banners and signs, helps give visual weight to the things that we at First UMC of Ann Arbor are doing. Adele, who designs the slides you see for announcements and liturgy for the livestream downtown and for the TV at Green Wood and also puts together our bulletins and videos, makes sure we have all our ducks in a row so we can tell others where the ducks themselves are. If you have a story to tell about this church and what it's doing, they're your people. We have a Facebook group to swap events and ideas, and I am so

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<sup>7</sup> [Strong's Greek: 2098. εὐαγγέλιον \(euaggelion\) -- good news \(biblehub.com\)](#); note that "gg" in Greek becomes a "ng" sound, hence "evangelism"

<sup>8</sup> [Strong's Greek: 32. ἄγγελος \(aggelos\) -- an angel, messenger \(biblehub.com\)](#)

grateful for the folks who chime in on our YouTube videos to say hello and they're here and this is part of their day—even if it's not Sunday. Maybe especially if it's not Sunday. We have what sometimes feels like 8,000 newsletters that are fascinating reads about what various subgroups are doing like youth, or children's ministry, or adult faith formation, or mission work; if you don't know what they are, they're all on our "Connect" section of the website, or you can email the office and get direction on what you're specifically seeking. And today, for those who are here in person, we have a ReConnect event right after the service to simply talk with each other and tell the stories of being in community. Online folks, hold tight; we'll be uploading a corresponding digital version soon.

"Go tell it on a mountain;" there is a distinct lack of mountains around here, I know, and it's not Christmas, or even Easter, but every single day of the year we have a story to tell. We have a God to speak to, to sing of, to do interpretive dance about if that's your gift. However, you go about it, you, *you* are called to be part of the message that hope is alive in a garden in Israel and in this community and everywhere in between and we do not have to be afraid, even of ourselves. God walks with us, singing and dancing and speaking and signing and delighting in the story of being loved, and loved, and loved beyond measure, beyond death, right into life abundant.

May we receive it, give it, and believe in it, always. Amen.