

“A Telling Presence”

Matthew 28:1-10

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I have served seven churches since my ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, three in the Philadelphia area, two in Ohio, and two in Texas. While pastoral tasks are more or less the same from church to church – worship and visits, sermons and classes, and meetings, meetings, meetings – each church has its own quality and character. Some of that quality and character can perhaps be shaped by the pastor; most of it, though, seems embedded in the walls, a sort of congregational DNA. Similarly each church presents its own opportunities and challenges because each church has its own context. The first church I served outside of Philadelphia was founded in 1726. Gently set on a river bend and surrounded by farmland, the setting was, by the time I arrived, slowly being engulfed by suburban sprawl. The second church I served was so small and set so closely in a neighborhood that I could stand in the pulpit, look through the tiny narthex, and see people sitting on the front porch across the street from the church. I could almost make out the headlines on the newspapers they were reading!

Founded in the 1950's, St. Philip is the youngest church I have served. It is the only church I have served with a blue tiled chancel wall. And, unique among the churches I have been in, the enduring themes of conversation here include traffic and real estate. The traffic conversations tend to be among folks inside the church. How long did it take you to get here? How did you come? What time did you leave?

The real estate conversations seem to happen exclusively with those outside of the church. These are the people who call expressing an interest in buying the church property. I explain that we're not looking to sell. *Of course, you are. Everyone is willing to sell at some point. Just tell us what that point is.* No, really, we feel like this is where

God has called us. This kind of theological talk tends to bring no response beyond bafflement, as if it's not possible that one could be in a place and not be willing to leave it if the price were right, as if it's not possible that decisions and actions might be motivated by something besides money.

Another version of the real estate conversation came my way last week. One of our neighbors came by to share with concern the planned developments in this area. If you think there are lots of tall buildings here now, just wait until you see what's coming. There are proposals for millions of new square footage to be built; tens of thousands of additional cars are projected. Maybe it's progress, maybe it's not, depending on your perspective. It is undoubtedly motivated by money. More people, taller buildings, bigger profits, more money, what could be better?

In the midst of all of it, stands St. Philip Presbyterian Church. In the midst of all that is and all that will be, stands the church. While all around us are signs of the power and significance of money, this church is called, set in this place, to bear witness to something else, to someone else, namely the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. The power and significance of that God is most decisively disclosed in the resurrection of Jesus.

Easter is the exclamation point on the identity of God. Easter proclaims that there is no end to God's love, no matter how deep the valley, no matter how tall the building, no matter how bad the traffic, no matter how strong the tomb, nothing can separate us from God's love. It is a love that will never let us go; it is a love that surprises and reverses and includes; and it is a love that compels us to make it known.

Matthew tells us that those women go to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning. They know he is dead. They have seen him hang on the cross, crying out in his moment of death. They have seen Joseph of Arimathea take his dead body, wrap it in linen, and place it in the tomb. They have seen Joseph cover the entrance of the tomb with a large stone.

Jesus is crucified, dead, and buried. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have seen it. They know it is so. And they go to the tomb anyway.

It is the dawn of the first day of the week, Matthew says. It is dawn of the day when everything changes. The heavens and the earth conspire to roll away the stone. An angel announces what has happened and then instructs the women to go and tell the others. Then to emphasize the point, Jesus himself appears to them and says the same thing, go and tell the others. Amidst the swirl of fear and joy, amazement and mystery, the message could not be more clear: Go and tell. Go and tell what God has done. Go and tell that death has been defeated. Go and tell the good news. Share it. Bear witness to it. It's not just the first day of the week; it's the first day of a brand new era.

Beginning with those women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and spreading through generations, Christian faith, Easter faith, resurrection faith, is something that cannot be contained. God continually beckons us to keep going and to keep telling. And the going and the telling happen in all kinds of ways: being a companion in the valley of the shadow of death; bearing a word of hope amidst the voices of despair; opening a hand to someone accustomed to seeing arms folded; adopting a posture of hospitality that welcomes people without regard for personal attribute; speaking of possibilities when others are certain the tomb is forever sealed shut; advocating for the poor and the left out and the last and the least and the lost, even in, especially in, a neighborhood abounding in wealth; bearing witness to another way, another God even as others are bowing down to all sorts of idols. All of these things – and more – tell and show what Christian faith, Easter faith, resurrection faith looks like.

I find myself on Easter thinking about the other places I have been for this holy day, all those churches, all those communities, all the points along the journey that has brought me to this place. I am grateful for all of it. You likely have your own reflections, the various places that you have celebrated Easter over the years. Even when we combine our

lists, we have just a small sample of the worldwide communion of believers, the great company of the faithful extending through time and space, each one in, many and various ways, engaged in the ongoing work of going and telling about a God whose love is so great that not even death can stop it.

First Easter, this Easter, this church, every church, the proclamation endures: Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!