

Sunday – April 24, 2011 (Easter Sunrise) St. Matthias UMC
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook Fredericksburg, Va 22405
Sermon – **Do Not Be Afraid** www.stmatthiasumc.org

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

Each gospel has a somewhat different Easter story. I'll just stick with the one in Matthew, to avoid confusion. Later this morning, I'll be preaching from John's Gospel, if you want to compare and contrast.

In Matthew, two Marys went to "see the tomb." They just wanted to sit vigil with Jesus' body, because they had already anointed it in Mt 26. The guards at the tomb would have made it impossible to do any more than just sit their vigil.

Then, there is an earthquake and the appearance of an angel. Both of these things would have been considered signs of the apocalypse. The world was about to end. But, that's not exactly what happened. More on this in a minute.

The angel's appearance is "like lightning." What in the world would that mean? Whatever it means, it caused the guards to faint. These guards were professional policemen from the Temple. They would not have fainted at just any little thing.

The angel tells the women, "Do not be afraid." It's the first thing he says. Jesus tells the women the same thing, after he greets them. That is quite often the opening greeting from angels and the Risen Christ. I think it's because being in the presence of the Divine throws our own sinful nature into such relief, that we see how far we fall short of the glory of God, and it terrifies us.

The angel tells the two Marys that Jesus "has been raised." He says this twice. This is significant. Jesus had really been dead. God, the Father, raised him. Jesus didn't just grit his teeth and do it on his own. And this is not just a big deal for Jesus and his followers. It's a big deal for the whole world. And, resurrection is different from Lazarus being raised from the dead. Lazarus was going to die again. Jesus was not. He has a completely new body now, although it still has scars from his crucifixion - his murder at the hand of the

people he came to save.

Now, the resurrection, the most important event in human history, goes unwitnessed and unreported. There is no description of it in any of the gospels or the letters of Paul or anywhere else in the NT. Since there were no witnesses, the gospel-writers would have had to make something up. But, none of them did, because they are not liars. Even though, as I said, each gospel has its own description of that first Easter, with details varying among them, they are not concocting a tale. This is how it should be. Nobody could have made up a story that was as amazing as the unknown reality had to have been.

The resurrection gives meaning to everything else in the gospels, in the entire Bible, and to the Church. Without the resurrection, there would be no New Testament, no Church at all, only life as it had always been before there was the hope of our personal resurrection, without the fellowship of the Body of Christ, without the personal relationship we can now have with God through Jesus Christ.

There would be nobody trying to live as Christ taught and lived, trying to love as God loves us all, to find Christ in every other person. There would be no Light of the World: not Jesus, not us. Who would love their enemy and pray for their persecutors? Who would live without judging, and pray without ceasing? Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christianity - if it existed at all - would be a philosophy, just like the teachings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. But, Jesus never wrote anything down, so would any of his teachings even be preserved?

Do we honestly think that there would be a Church 2,000 years after Jesus died, if he was not raised? A Church that claims over 2 billion members, about one third of the population of the earth in 2011? Would there be a Church at all, if Christ had not lived and died and been raised from the dead, ascended into heaven and sent the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost that inspired the Apostles so much that the Church grew from 12 to 3,000 in a single day?

How would that have happened? How would the Church have survived 300 years of persecutions at the hands of the greatest Empire the world had ever known, only to be declared its official religion in 380 AD? Would a group of people motivated by fairy tales make that happen?

And that brings us back to the earthquake, the angel and the signs of the end of the world. The fact is the resurrection did bring about the end of the world as it had been. With Jesus being raised from the dead, a new world was born, the world he'd been teaching about and modeling throughout his ministry. It is the world in which the Kingdom of God is within each of us, and among all of us.

Love is the law of this new world, and we can be a part of it to the extent we are willing to obey the commandments Jesus laid down and lived out: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Love one another (within the Church). There is no other way into the Kingdom, and there is no way we can love like this all by ourselves. Only by relying on Christ and the power he gives us to love can we even hope of being able to love as he taught. So, as a Resurrection People, let's be determined to rely on Christ and be loving citizens of his Kingdom.