

McCabe United Methodist Church

Easter 2017 Series

“A Secure Savior for Insecure Ground”

Sermon on Matthew 28:1-10 (Easter 1; April 15 & 16, 2017)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Let us pray: *God of death and resurrection, I pray these words I'm about to speak are acceptable and pleasing to you. May the story and message of Easter nestle into the hearts and minds of all who hear it... and may we be inspired to live and share its joyful hope. Amen.*

Do you understand what I mean when I say there are some weeks when the exact things you need to count on going juuuust right, instead of going just right, choose to fall apart? Let me say that again:

Some weeks the exact things we need to count on going just right, instead of going just right, choose to fall apart. Do you understand what I mean when I say that? Anybody in the room ever have a week like that – where the exact things you need to count on going just right instead choose to fall apart?

As it happens, and as I've learned, the week we've just experienced is nearly always such a week for most churches.

Holy Week – the week we're now at the very tail end of – is, arguably, the busiest week in any church's year: there are special presentations, twice as many worship services as usual, more people, more details, more bulletins to print, more of *everything*.

No matter how smoothly things go, Holy Week is *always* chaotic for churches. But, in my experience – and in the experiences I've heard from other pastors and staff at many other churches – chaos nearly always gets added to the week: whether it's a critical annoyance, like a copier that quits working before any of the thousands of bulletins get printed... or it's a tragedy, like a sudden death or natural disaster.

Something *always* happens. Nothing goes as planned.

Here at McCabe this past week, things were on track to go pretty well. By late last week, there were first drafts of nearly all of our many service bulletins, things had fallen nicely into place for our special worship services, and I even already had copious notes written for this sermon. (A small miracle, I must admit!)

After our Palm Sunday worship services last weekend, I was feeling excited and so *ready* to move into Holy Week!

Then Monday came... and, by late in the day on Monday, we had lost three of our 12 disciples for Thursday evening's Living Last Supper drama: we were *sure* we'd lost three disciples, and I was worried about losing a fourth. All of a sudden there were unforeseen scheduling conflicts and undesirable illnesses.

None of it was anyone's *fault*, so there was no reason to be upset... but, all of a sudden, three days before Maundy Thursday, we had significant holes to fill at the Upper Room table.

Outwardly, I was incredibly confident all would be well and that it wouldn't be too difficult to find alternates who could slide on into the chairs that had suddenly been left vacant. And, blessedly, by Monday evening, we *did* already have alternates in place. But, somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind and spirit, I must have been worried that something *else* would happen.

See, Monday night, in the middle of the night, I awoke from a nightmare: a nightmare that did not take much analysis for me to figure out. I had dreamt I was in a play and that, during one of the performances, the stage imploded – as though it had fallen into a sinkhole.

Earlier that day, it had felt like our Living Last Supper drama was falling apart... and then I dreamed of a stage that *literally fell apart*.

I ask again: have you ever had a week where the exact things you need to have go just right instead fall apart?

Now, if you were here in worship on Thursday evening, you know that our Living Last Supper drama went incredibly well and that we experienced a very

moving portrayal of the last meal Jesus shared with his closest disciples. A few things *had* fallen apart, but, in the end, all *was* well.

A few things had fallen apart, but, in the end, all was well.

As the days of Holy Week went on for us at McCabe – and for me, personally – there were a handful of other incidents when chaos was added into the already chaotic week. Some chaos and even some pain.

Friday afternoon, I was feeling a bit of melancholy over it all, but, then it occurred to me: of *course* things fall apart during Holy Week... it *is*, after all, the week when everything *did*, in fact, fall apart.

On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus made his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds of devoted followers, singing his praises, shouting that he was the one God had sent to save them.

But, as the journey of the first Holy Week went on, the crowds and the praises – and the devotion itself – quickly shifted. By Thursday, one of Jesus' disciples had taken steps to betray him and that betrayal was completed Thursday night.

Jesus was arrested into the hands of the religious authorities and those religious authorities began the process of trying him for blasphemy.

See, Jesus put the Jewish religious leaders in a troubling position. At the time, Jerusalem and its surrounding territory were under occupation by the Roman government and military. Jesus and his fellow Israelites – his fellow Jews – were at the mercy of Rome, with all its power and might.

They were not free in their own land. While day-to-day life may have seemed somewhat “normal,” the Jews were constantly reminded of Rome's dominance over them because Roman soldiers constantly patrolled their streets. And, of course, there was the constant threat of crucifixion as a means of executing those who attempted to act against Rome and its oppressive control.

The Jewish religious leaders were the lynchpins between the Jewish people and the Roman authorities. The Roman authorities looked to the Jewish religious leaders to keep the people “in line,” as it were. If any individuals or groups seemed to be working on an uprising against Rome, the Jewish religious leaders were in the tough position of needing to quiet the excitement.

As Jesus' public ministry of teaching and healing grew – a ministry with all its focus on the kingdom of *God* and not the Roman empire – as Jesus' ministry grew, so did the *insecurity* of the Jewish religious leaders.

What if Rome started paying attention to this wandering rabbi and his ragtag band of followers? What if Rome read between the lines of Jesus' words and noticed that his teachings challenged the Empire's presence in their midst?

What if Rome noticed... and decided to take away even more of the Jewish people's freedom? Or, worse, what if Rome became violent – not just against political criminals, but against *them*... against ordinary Jews? It had happened before in their history as a people, so they knew it wasn't irrational paranoia.

As the Jewish religious leaders watched the Jesus movement grow, so grew their insecurity. Perhaps justifiably. Then, when Jesus and his followers publicly processed into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday,

the trouble really started brewing.

It seemed as though things were beginning to get out of hand.

When you read your way through the Gospel writers' accounts of the first Holy Week, as you journey through the story, you begin to feel the ground shifting. There is a clear sense of impending doom. A soundtrack of Holy Week would include the sound of an approaching storm:

the day is bright and sunny, but you sense... something... and then you glance at the horizon and notice the clouds. The storm might miss you, but you just have this sense. Then you hear it: the distinct rumble of thunder – it's still far off, but you know the tell-tale sign when you hear it.

The story of Holy Week is a story wherein insecurities rise to the surface like a brewing storm. And, in the Gospel of Matthew, it's a story where that which seems to be secure – the very ground on which we live and move – literally falls apart.

It was the week of the Passover, a high and holy time for the Jewish people – every year, a “still point” in a chaotic world... a world that so often tried to sweep them under the rug or destroy them completely. The week of Passover was a week when things were supposed to slowly. When things *needed* to go smoothly.

But things didn't go smoothly. As the days of Holy Week went by, the rolling thunder got closer and closer, the clouds grew darker and darker.

On Friday of that week, as Jesus hung, dying on a cross, in the middle of the day, when the sun should have been at its brightest, instead, as the old hymn says, “the sun refused to shine.” And then, in the moments after Jesus gave up his spirit in death, there was an earthquake strong enough to split rocks and open tombs.

In fact, according to Matthew, when Jesus died and the earth quaked, not only did many tombs *open*, but the bodies of many *in* those tombs were raised to life and they went into Jerusalem and appeared to many people.¹

That's not how things are supposed to happen. We rest in the assurance that the earth does not usually quake like that and we believe that when people die, that is the end of their life on this earth. That is what we know to be true... *naturally*.

But there is something about the story of Jesus' passion and death that brings out the unnatural in the midst of the natural. Or, perhaps I should say, there is something about the story of Jesus' passion and death that brings out the *supematural* in the midst of the natural.

1 Matthew 27:51-53

So the week was tumultuous. Things did not go as planned and the earth literally fell apart by Friday.

Have you ever had a week like that?

Then, as though in the eye of a hurricane, there was quiet on Saturday. It was a day of waiting. A day when the earth itself remained calm. It was to be a day of rest and worship... but, for Jesus' remaining disciples and followers, it was a day of *anxious* waiting... of heightened insecurity.

Rome had killed their leader, their Lord, the one who had given them a place in God's kingdom. The earth itself had shaken in anger when Jesus died.

Everything fell apart for Jesus and his first disciples that first Holy Week, so it's no wonder things fall apart for *us* during Holy Week. But...

But, here, now, today, in *this* moment, things have shifted *again*.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 28, again, begins with this sentence: "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb..."

If ever a single sentence were designed to inspire goose bumps or a shiver down the spine, it's that one: "*After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb...*"

Saturday had been eerily quiet as Jesus lay dead in the tomb.

And then Sunday came. *Easter* Sunday. The *first* Easter Sunday. The Easter no one yet knew was Easter. On *that* Easter Sunday, everything was still disastrously insecure. Early in the morning on *that* Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were still journeying on unstable emotional ground.

Wracked with grief over the death of their Lord, they were simply setting off to do what they knew to do: to prepare his body in a way that would honor their love for him... to give him a dignity his shameful, horrific death had denied him.

When they arrived at the tomb that morning, the women knew what to expect: a sealed tomb, within which Jesus' body would be resting, and, near the tomb, there would be Roman soldiers on guard.

The woman would have perhaps been a bit insecure about encountering the soldiers... but they went to the tomb anyway.

“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week,

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb...”

Matthew sets the Easter scene with relative calm. Almost as though the hurricane had dissipated.

Then, just like that, the relative calm gives way, and *another* earthquake hits – this one, not the earth's reaction to Jesus' *death*, but a herald of his resurrection. The women arrived at the tomb, the earthquake hit, an angel appeared, the stone of the tomb rolled away, and the Roman soldiers passed-out in fear. (It's worth noting the *women* remained alert!)

“Do not be afraid,” the angel said to the women, “for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead...’”

Matthew tells us the women “hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” My, how things had shifted – again – in the blink of an eye. The women were “afraid yet filled with joy.”

And then, grace upon grace, the risen Savior met them. “Greetings,” he said. The women instantly dropped to the ground and worshiped him... awe and amazed at what was happening. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus said. “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

In that moment, surely Mary Magdalene and the other Mary began to feel a kind of security they had never known before. Everything had fallen apart... but God was putting it back together – in a new and glorious way.

Friends, *that* is the good news of Easter. Pastor and writer Frederick Buechner has put it this way: “Resurrection means the *worst* thing is never the last thing.”

In life, in this world, things will fall apart. Sometimes subtly, sometimes spectacularly. Things *will* fall apart.

But, because of Easter – because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead – we are blessed with the security of knowing that, when things fall apart, God *is* at work to put them back together again.

No matter how shaky the ground on which we journey, or how shaky our emotional life, or how shaky our nation and world, how shaky our community... no matter how shaky and insecure things seem, the fact of the matter is that, because of Easter, we *know* our God is steady and secure, working to bring good... working to bring new life.

“Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”

The good news of Easter is in those moments when unsteady ground begins to steady again. The moment you learn the tumor has shrunk... or the moment a dear one holds your hand after learning the tumor *has not* shrunk.

Easter is in the moment you choose to get out of bed in the midst of depression. *Easter* is in the gift of encouraging words after criticism. It's in the first feelings of joy after a heartbreak.

It's in stepping through the doors of a church for the first time – or for the first time in a *long time* – nervous about what you might experience... and being met with a gracious smile and words of welcome.

The good news of Easter is in the moment you hear birds sing, and see green grass growing, after a long, cold, snowy winter. Easter is in moments of unity and love in our fiercely divided world. Easter is a pin-prick of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, *this* is how our God works. *This* is our message. *This* is our day.

Easter is the day that defines our God and the day that defines who we are for others: we are people of the resurrection, called to bring hope and healing to our desperate, hurting world.

“Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”

That is our message. *That* is our story.

May we experience it. May we live it. May we *be* it for the world.

Let us pray...

God of Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry... God of Maundy Thursday's last meal with its betrayal and denials... God of Good Friday's painful sacrifice and death... God of Holy Saturday's quiet waiting... thank you that all of those days lead to this day, this celebration of Easter.

Thank you that this day of glorious good news that resurrections means the *worst* thing is never the *last* thing. Thank you for this day where the angel reminds us not to fear in the face of pain and death. Thank you for this day of good news that earthly security is *nothing* compared to the abundant, daily, heavenly security we have in your resurrected Son.

For this day, and for *all days* lived in the light of your hope, we give you thanks... and we pray in the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.