

The Rhythms of Easter

A few years ago I was helping to lead a congregational retreat just up the road in Montreat. It was Saturday afternoon and the group had dispersed for some free time. Some folks were hiking, others were assembling jigsaw puzzles, but a large inter-generational group had gathered on one of the upper floors of Assembly Inn to participate in a drumming workshop. There were probably 30 or 40 drummers in the circle and that enthusiastic group was generating a lot of sound. It was rather wonderful to hear—at least to my ears.

The problem was...that we had not adequately considered the drumming workshop when we made room assignments. As it turned out, we had placed our nursery space on the floor immediately above the drummers.

I happened by the nursery shortly after the drumming began, and the place was humming. Our youngest children were wide-eyed: some with excitement, but others with real fear, as they tried to sort out what they were hearing, but not seeing.

One of the little boys asked me what was happening, so I explained that just below us there was another room where people were drumming. I grabbed a plastic tub and drummed on it myself to demonstrate. He continued to look at me quizzically, so I repeated myself: “On the floor just below us was another big room full of people banging on drums and making all the noise we were hearing.” After pausing for a moment he finally crouched down, spreading his fingers wide on the carpet as he looked me in the eyes, and said patiently but firmly... *“This is the floor.”*

“*This is the floor.*” In his worldview, the floor was solid, stable, dependable ground, and it was ludicrous to suggest that there were people making noise *under* the floor.

The best we adults could then do was to help the children put on their shoes, and lead them down the staircase to the threshold of the room where the drummers were playing. We took them to see and hear for themselves, to make sense of it as best they could—

You and I may have more in common with those children this morning than we care to admit. For many of us, *death* is the *floor*. We are happy enough to hear Matthew’s account of earthquakes and angels and stones rolled away, but don’t know how to reconcile those sounds of Easter with a lifetime’s accumulated evidence.

Matthew invites us to bring our doubt and enter his story anyway.

I’m not sure it was so different in his own day. The two Marys have their hands “spread wide on the floor of their experience” as they approach the tomb. They *know* that their beloved Jesus is dead—they witnessed the whole thing. Matthew tells us they were part of a group of women who watched it all from a distance—they heard the taunting and the anguish as he died. Matthew also reports that these particular women were the two persons sitting opposite his tomb when it was sealed. So the Marys are not confused about what has happened as they set out in the early dawn. They are not depending on rumors to piece together the story; they were there.

But as the dawn breaks, the floor of their experience shifts, and they have an encounter that stretches the capacity of language to communicate. The

ground buckles beneath their feet, and they are blinded by the appearance of someone sitting on the stone that no longer seals Jesus' tomb. And this shining envoy from God has a message tailored for their broken hearts.

First, he says, "*do not be afraid.*" After this day, these words, this encounter, there will be nothing in life or in death that they ever need to fear again.

Next the angel says, "*I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.*" In God's great mercy, both their longing and their experience are acknowledged and affirmed. God meets them where they are. They are looking for the one they have lost—Jesus—who was truly crucified.

The angel meets them where they are, but he does not leave them there for long. Death is real, but it is not the end of the story. The angel continues: "*I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified, but he is not here for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.*" These faithful women are invited to see for themselves—to gather new bits of experience, new images to live alongside the cross that is seared in their hearts. They are invited to begin to live into a new reality, for the angel's message has the power to transform not only their lives, but the whole human story.

They are not given long to assimilate this experience, though, for there is work to be done and they are the only ones in a position to do it. The angel concludes by saying, "*Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'*"

And so the women run. Wearing both fear and joy on their faces, they turn their backs on death and run toward a mystery and a mission they could not have fathomed before that day dawned.

Notice that it is *as they carry* the angel's message, which is now *their* message, that they encounter Jesus, in the flesh. He greets them with a word that literally means "Rejoice"—for this is the sweetest of reunions.

I love that Matthew says that the women come to him—even in this extraordinary moment he is approachable. They do not have to hang back. They take hold of his worn and wounded feet and they worship him—these faithful Jewish women, who know in their bones that *only God* is to be worshiped, worship *Jesus*, because to stand in his presence is to experience the limitless power and grace of God. Here is holiness they can touch without fear.

Jesus, then reminds them of their mission, saying "*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*" Almost word for word Jesus repeats the angel's charge—with one important exception. Jesus calls the disciples his *brothers*.

Matthew has not mentioned the disciples in quite some time. They fled from the story when Jesus was arrested; except for Judas, who betrayed him; and Peter, who denied him. The disciples have not been around to see what the women have seen.

So this word "brothers" adds a new dimension to the women's mission. Not only are they to communicate the news of Jesus' resurrection, and the instruction that the disciples are to go to Galilee, but the news is to be couched as an invitation to a family reunion.

We know that the women completed their task because six verses later the disciples are gathered in Galilee, where they are met by Jesus—but that’s a story for another day. Today we are only at the dawn of Easter, an Easter whose aftershocks will keep unfolding until the end of time.

How like God, though, to have entrusted the gospel to these two Marys. God always seems to use the most unlikely messengers to bring good news to the world. In their own day women were not considered reliable witnesses—they could not testify in a court of law—yet these two particular women are the ones God chooses. It makes me wonder which particular messengers God might be using in our own day—messengers whom we in our settled institution might be quick to dismiss?

But I also hear a more universal word of challenge to the church in this passage: Are we willing to be bearers of hope, bearers of good news we cannot fully explain, but the power of which we have witnessed in lives changed, forgiveness offered and received, fear banished? God doesn’t wait for the women to have everything sorted out before God sends them on their way. The need is too urgent. Rather it is in the act of responding to God’s charge that the women are encountered by the living Christ. Often it is not until the church sets out that the church is equipped. Always we are a *work in progress*.

In the end I don’t think Easter faith is so much a matter of intellectual assent—of making sure all the floorboards are nailed down tight. Easter faith is born and lives in relationship. It comes as we worship, as we serve, as we open our lives to a power and a joy beyond our meager measures—

So hear the words of the angel as they also are addressed to each of us and all of us:

- Do not be afraid
- I know you are searching for what is missing in your life.
- Your pain is real; but it's not the end of the story.
- I have work for you to do.

There are individuals and communities who need to hear a word of invitation from you—a promise of reconciliation—a lifeline of hope.

- I will go ahead of you. I will meet you in the places to which I am calling you. You will see me there.

Rejoice, sisters and brothers. He is risen. He is risen indeed.