

Around Easter each year I wander through our cemetery.

Each of us, I guess, have practices to help us stay grounded ... to remember our own mortality and keep in touch with the simple, reality-altering reality that our time here is fleeting and our true hope is, after all, eternal.

And for me, there's something about reading headstones in the shadow the a church that does that.

Each stone there has a story.

Some show signs of their age cracked, encrusted, weathered and worn ... like some of us are.

Some are works of beauty ... the face of an angel, a saint, a cherub or youth rock-solid, finally marble stones carved with care ... like some of us are.

Some tell stories of deep suffering an unimaginable pain ... like one family, from 100 years ago, where father and mother are surrounded by six small stones of infant children each carrying its own special sorry, it's own unique pain ... like some of us are.

I walk through the cemetery in the early morning light. While the dew is still on the flowers. Some years before dawn breaks ... that in-between time filled with potential of a day not yet fully arrived and a night not quite left behind.

It's an ethereal time and standing there one feels part of both the past not yet gone and the future not yet come. Some folks fall on their knees in prayer in such a place --- like the dew magnifying each and every surface.

Some folks can't keep themselves from singing. Like the birds around them; as though the sun won't rise unless coaxed into the sky.

Still others spontaneously break into stories. They remember their parents ... with sadness and pride. Or their children, with increased measures of both. Or they recite the litany of their people with the cadence of Ken Burns on a PBS documentary... ...as though their forebears surround them as a great cloud of witnesses in that sacred place

Me? I take pictures.

Because sometimes what I find in a graveyard is more than I can bear unless I find a different way to look at it.

The Easter story is like that in Matthew. You may already know that the story of Jesus is told in different ways in the four Gospels in the Bible --- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And the differences are there on purpose. They help give emphasis to different aspects of the Good News of God's presence in Jesus Christ.

And in Matthew the women come to the graveyard weathered and worn simply to see the grave.

When they arrived they had a [Carole King](#) moment.... they "felt the earth move under their feet; they felt the sky tumbling down, tumbling down. Their hearts started to tremble [and an angel] came around."

And the angel removed the only two obstacles between them and what they wanted to find. The angel removed the guards ... well, the guards were posted there to keep people from stealing Jesus' body, but when they saw the angel coming toward them and passed out cold.

And the angel rolled the stone of the tomb away the stone that stood between the believers and their beloved ... and in case the symbolism didn't quite sink in, the angel sat on it ... just plopped down on the stone.

He looked at the women and gave them two of the most wonderful gifts you can get from a graveyard: Hope and purpose.

The first is hope. It's what we often need most when we come to graveyards. "Do not be afraid," the angel says.

Or perhaps we hear this message from the pastor, standing by the open grave, "O Thou, [God], who hast ordered this wondrous world and who knowest all things in earth and heaven, so fill our hearts with trust in thee that by night and by day, at all times and in all seasons, we may without fear commit those who are dear to us to thy never-failing love for this life and the life to come. Amen."

“Fear not” is a good message to hear in a graveyard. Sometimes “fear not” is the message people of faith are called to share with each other in the graveyard.

But people of the Gospel know that the resurrection story is not only a story of hope. The triumph of Eternal Life over the mortal death brings us not just hope for the future but also a calling for the present.

It all begins with the angel saying “What you are looking for is not here.”

{Story: The family}

... “What you’re looking for is not here.”

WHEN the truth of the empty tomb of Jesus really sinks in, it changes us. And Easter is the moment where the story of God’s Incarnation--- God’s personal presence in Jesus Christ --- turnsfrom despair to hope as it turns from what Jesus did for us to what the Risen Lord does to us.

The Gospel of Matthew shows this clearly. The women come to the graveyard are met with a message of hope and the rest of the chapter ...which is actually the rest of the book ... contains new purpose.

The risen Lord commissions us to leave the cemetery ---- because once the reality of a resurrecting-God hits us, it’s time to get busy doing something about it.

The resurrection story triggers three separate commissionings.

First, the women are told to “go and tell.” They get the message with both barrels. First, the angel tells them: “Hey. Don’t be afraid. Check this out. Right there is where he was laying. Go quickly and tell his disciples that he’s going ahead of them to Galilee ... back to the home they had left to follow him. Back there in Galilee he will meet you.

So the women do what they’re told and start back, in a hurry, to tell the disciples. And along the way catch this: on the way to do what they have been commissioned to do ... as they live into their calling ... they meet the risen Lord ... the resurrected Jesus.

And he tells them the same thing: “Do not be afraid,” he says. “Go tell the gang ... the guys who were too pathetic to come visit the tomb or attend the crucifixion ... tell the guys that I’ll race them home..... back to Galilee. There, they will see me.”

Their Commissioning makes me consider: How might our own callings help us see the risen Lord on the way to the work we are called to be about?

I wonder.

Then comes the second post-resurrection commissioning: That of the guards. They weren’t called by Jesus or angels. They were commissioned by their bosses ... the authorities ... to go and lie. So this isn’t a commissioning we’re expected to accept but one that shows the enemy’s approach to the resurrection.

When the guards who had fainted at the sight of the angel of God descending from heaven straight toward the tomb they were guarding ... when those guards gave their report to the Chief Priests and the Elders of the Temple it became clear to everyone that they had a problem on their hands: they had an unconfined, uncontrolled, un-en-tombed God on their hands.

So they created a story and bribed the guards to go around town telling folks that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body ... the disciples, fishermen from Galilee who didn’t have the guts to attend the crucifixion of Jesus had worked up the courage to take on two armed guards at the tomb and steal the body of Jesus.

Evidently that was enough to make some people doubt the resurrection story.

And their commissioning makes me consider: How have I been called by the powers of Empire or by social pressure or shyness or the little darkness of uncertainty in my soul how are those voices commissioning me to lie about Jesus? ... Maybe not so blatantly, but rather to disavow the resurrections God has provided in my own life ... the joy that has come from a womb once barren or a tomb once full?

I wonder.

And third, there is the last post-resurrection commissioning service: The disciples. They are told to “go and make.” This is sometimes called the “great commission” and some people have cheapened it a bit to say it is just a call to go and baptize people ... or go build the church ... or go tell people about Jesus.

But the calling to those who follow Jesus ... who are apprentices of the Master ... and servants of the Lord ... our calling is to go and make other disciples. To connect people with not just the hope that stands strong at the edge of open graves, not just the ability to say the sinner’s prayer and repeat the right promises to become a member of a church, but the sacred calling of introducing people to a personal relationship with Jesus to show them and tell them and model for one another, the Love of God which is willing to give itself for the other, to wash feet in servanthood to another ... to love God and neighbor in daily life and become a disciple of Jesus.

And their commission makes me consider: How are we doing with that? Around here? Or in ourselves? Or with our neighbors? Or with visitors with dew-drenched shoes in the cemetery who need to hear just one more time Do not be afraid. What you are looking for is not here. It’s alive and has gone one ahead of you. Listen. I tell you a mystery. He is alive! The Lord of Life is racing you home.