

SLD03.23.08 Easter Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28:1-10
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Nabbed by Truth”

“There’s not much truth being told in the world. There never was.”

So reads the first line of Annie Lamott’s book, Grace (Eventually)¹, that we’re reading for our book group (next meeting Tuesday, April 15th at Rose’s house. Book or tape available for borrowing. Y’all come.)

“There’s not much truth being told in the world,” writes Lamott. And personally, I couldn’t agree more.

But once in a while...you get a flash, right? A glimpse? A hint? A word here, a moment there, when Truth reaches out and nabs you?

“At 21,” writes Lamott, “I still believed that if you could only get to see sunrise at Stonehenge, or the full moon at the Taj Mahal, you would be nabbed by truth.”

I know that feeling, don’t you? That inclination to connect Truth with a capital ‘T’ to some person, place, time or event that will surely mediate Truth’s presence? Hec, I’ve *lived* that inclination. And I’m here to tell you, sunrise at Stonehenge and the full moon at the Taj Mahal are not nearly all they’re cracked up to be. At least, they didn’t change my life.

For at a younger age, I thought, too, if I could just get a nursing degree, a business degree, a divinity degree, meet the Dalai Lama, pray by the Ganges, visit the Holy Land, see Christ’s outstretched arms on Corcovado, buy a house, get married, have a child, be at this spot for the harmonic convergence, with that teacher for cosmic

¹ Grace (Eventually), Anne Lamott, Riverhead Books, Penguin Group, New York, New York, 2007, p. 1

insight, this other for holy healing.... Or, when I was little older, if I could just get ordained, preach from my grandfather's pulpit, baptize with water from the Jordan river, endure my son's adolescence without committing homicide, grow this church, escape that church, retire from the ministry altogether...surely Truth would nab me.

And what do you know but that once in a while, it did. And once in a while it does. Though certainly not due to anything *I've* contributed *or* contrived.

The way I see it, many of us show up on Easter morning hoping Truth will nab us. After all, for us Christians, Easter *is* our sunrise at Stonehenge and full moon at the Taj Mahal, plus maybe a grandmother's hug, a first lover's kiss, a stargazer's scent, and sunset over Santa Fe, all rolled into our highest holy holiday when we celebrate God magnificent doing of God's most splendiferous thing.

Certainly we at Emory Church, like Christians the world over, pull out all the stops for Easter Sunday - special flowers, special banners, special music...and show up with eager eyes, ears and hearts, more alert, open and ready for God's truth to nab us.

"There's not much truth being told in the world. There never was."

But we are **so** hungry for it.

Says Lamott, "I actually knew a few true things. I had figured out that truth and freedom were pretty much the same. And that almost everyone was struggling to wake up, to be loved, and not feel so afraid all the time. That's what the cars, degrees, booze, and drugs were about."² And, one could add, all the traditions, rituals, spiritual paths, the relationships.... Fill in your own blanks.

She tells a story about falling in love with this "perfect man," who subsequently dumps her in a particularly smarmy manner, whereupon she spirals down into a familiar

² Ibid. p. 2.

but inescapable despair. Despite or perhaps because of her pain, Lamott concludes another truth: “It’s easier to experience spiritual connection when your life is in the process of coming apart,” she says. “When things break up and fences fall over, (and) desperation and powerlessness slink in, which turns out to be good,” she insists,”[because] humility and sweetness often arrive in your garden not long after.”³

She could as well have been talking about today’s story, the one God wants to nab us with this morning. For it, too, is a story about truth and freedom. About the truth of God’s immeasurable love and the freedom from death it offers, as well as the pain that often precedes it. It’s a story we in this church have been preparing for forty days now.

Well, for two millennia, really. But especially during these last forty days of Lent, we’ve been preparing for it, and even more especially during these last three days during which Jesus breaks bread with his disciples, makes them uncomfortable by washing their feet, gets arrested, gets tried, beaten, humiliated and crucified. Until finally he dies and gets buried, at which point it’s fair to say, at least the first time the story was told, that all the hopes and dreams of his followers get buried with him.

After which ignominious end, things break up, fences fall over, and desperation and powerlessness slink in for what seems like forever but is really only three days. Well, and the two millennia that follow.

But then, what do you know but that right on the heels of Saturday’s despairing vigil arrives Easter Sunday with a different truth, a new reality, that through no fault or favor of their own, turns out to be stunningly good in humbling and sweet ways Jesus’

³ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

disciples never could have expected; in fact, never understood or even believed no matter how many times or ways Jesus talked about it.

Maybe that's because Truth isn't really something that *can* be talked about or described or explained exactly, at least God's Truth with a capital T. It just has to sort of nab you from behind or from the side, or wherever you're not looking. Like the gloriously unexpected, quite impossible Truth of Jesus' resurrection nabbed Jesus' disciples that first Easter morning. Here's what happened.

Anyone here struggling to wake up, be loved, and not feel so afraid all the time, listen up.

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

So there it is, Matthew's version of Jesus' Resurrection Nabfest. You'll notice it's different from the Johannine version we usually hear - shorter, more dramatic, more direct and to the point. There's no morning darkness in Matthew's account, no half-light with which to confuse the eye. No fretful Mary Magdalene running to fetch other disciples. And certainly no confusing Jesus with the gardener.

In Matthew's account, things happen hard and they happen fast; there's not a whole lot of pussy-footing around. When the two Mary's go to see Jesus' tomb, the earth starts shaking, and they start shaking, and an angel of the Lord dressed in lightening and snow descends to roll back the stone of the tomb. As the tomb police pass out from fright, the flashing angel advises the apparently still standing women, "don't be afraid. Jesus has risen. Check it out. He's not here."

Shakily, the women look inside the tomb. No Jesus.

Outside the tomb? Flashing angel.

Under their feet? Trembling earth.

Inside their hearts? Trembling fear.

Commands the angel, "Go tell the others," and off they tear, until they run smack into the fleshy body of the risen Jesus, who calmly says, "Hey."

Past all grasp of whatever might once have passed for reality, the women collapse to the ground and grab his feet, *something* to hold on to, and surrender their hearts to God.

Jesus' first word? Same as the angel's - "Don't be afraid."

Second word? Same as the angel's - "Go tell the others."

Only then Jesus adds something else - "Tell 'em," he says, "tell the others not to worry; they'll see me, too, here before long."

The other day, a friend of mine made me laugh when she asked, "What else could there possibly be to say about Easter?"

She had a point. In fact, I used to think that way about the entire gospel when I first started seminary. I mean, after all the Sunday sermons of all these millennia, what

more can there possibly be to say about the gospel? Once you've cover the basic drill of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection, what can there possibly be left to say? How many times can you cover Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, his unremarkable childhood (except for that precocious moment at the temple) and the high points of his ministry in Galilee? After all, it was only three years!

And Easter Sunday, Lord, you've been through one, you've been through them all, right? I mean, how many ways can you say "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again?"

So you add some fabulous music, a festive procession with cottas and a flowered cross and maybe you can drum up a sense of occasion, right? Throw in some special banners, a few handbells and some twirly things whisking through the air, and even if you're secretly wondering what all the hoopla is about, you can't help but notice that surely *something* about today is supposed to be special, maybe even ecstatic (or as ecstatic as we Presbyterians get), if not for you personally, then maybe for the person sitting next to you.

I mean, if we do and say and perform and produce and participate in all the best and right things, surely Truth will discover its optimal conditions and make itself abundantly clear!

Unless...as before, God's Truth is not dependent on, not a function of, our words or music or festive worship, on any fault or favor of our own. Certainly the music of Jesus' words and presence never gained much purchase with his first disciples. Yet even today God's Truth might nab us as it did those first disciples, not in the saying but

in the hearing, not in the seeing but in the perceiving, not in the grasping but in the knowing.

I believe something beyond me or you is pulsing in the fabric of this moment, in the very warp and woof of today's witness. In the words I say and the notes that are played, to be sure. But also in the pew cushions that soften your seat. The firm wood that's got your back. The slate floor that holds your foot. The soft background rustle of silk and linen and bulletin pages. These stone walls that surround, protect and shelter us.

Remember how, in the gospel of Luke, the Pharisees rebuke Jesus and tell him to tell that first multitude of believers to hush? And Jesus says, "I tell you, if these people were silent, the very stones would cry out!" (Lk 19:37-41)

Well, God fixes it to where on Easter, the very stones of the walls of Emory Church *do* cry out! Can you not perceive it?!

What goes on Easter morning, and, for that matter, during worship *every* Sunday, is not remotely dependent on anything you or I say or sing or ritually conjure – though we do the best we can. (Which, incidentally, is good news for any pastor, elder or choir director who gets too wrapped up in the day's attendant performance pressure. I mean, the stakes can feel pretty high when folks who rarely darken the door of the church show up and we SO want them to come back. We SO want to convey to them the gift of the Spirit of God and of *this* church in particular. SO want to communicate to them our welcome to join this funky faith community as we stumble our way toward the blessings of the gospel.)

But Easter just isn't about what you or I say, or sing, or do. Easter is about what God says and sings and does, which is, simply put, to offer each and every one of us an undeserved, unearned, and unfathomably magnanimous ...I LOVE YOU.

That's it. That's what Easter's all about. That's the truth God's trying to nab us with: I LOVE YOU. And YOU. And YOU. And YOU. And YOU back there. And ME up here. And YOU over there. And YOU waaay back there in the back so you can get out quick. And YOU and YOU and YOU in the faithful choir. And YOU at the organ. And YOU who can't hear me. And YOU who can't see me. And YOU who don't measure up. And YOU who don't believe in me. And YOU who doubt my existence. And YOU who can't love me back. And YOU who can't even love yourself. And YOU who didn't even show up at an Easter service. I love you, too.

I LOVE ALL OF YOU, says God. And I LOVE EACH OF YOU. And *my* love is not dependent on *your* love. Or your faith. Or your goodness. Or your confession. Or anything else about you except the very essence of your being that I put in you in the first place – the part that makes you, you. The real you. The one I created you to become. The one I keep creating you to become. The Me in you, says God. The part of Me, in fact, if you can imagine it, that I AM NOT without you.

Bottom line (if such a phrase can be used for the Infinite) - as many ways as there are for God to say "I LOVE YOU," *that's* how many things there are to say about Easter.

There's not much truth being told in the world. There never was. But here's a few true things to know: Almost all of us are struggling to wake up, be loved, and not feel so afraid all the time. Jesus' life, death and resurrection witness to the truth of

God's immeasurable, unconditional and freely given love for you, for me, for all creation, and the freedom from death it offers.

Some of us have been nabbed by this truth. Some of us haven't. Most of us only catch slippery glimpses from time to time, mostly when our lives are in the process of coming apart. But what Jesus tells the nabbed ones to let the rest of us know is this: "You just never know when Truth'll reach out and nab you. Don't worry. You'll see me, too, here before long."

To the glory of God. Amen.