

Sermon for Easter Sunday  
Rev. Judith Watt

Year A  
Matthew 28: 1-10

*Jesus is on the Loose*

On March 31 of this year, just a few weeks ago, I marked a significant anniversary. Twenty-two years since the day in 1989 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was in my first year of seminary then, still wondering if I should be there, wondering if God really wanted me there, wondering what on earth could be God's plan for me. I was in seminary but it all still felt a little crazy. And then, in the spring of that year, I found a lump, had a lumpectomy, and sat with my husband and friends as the surgeon told us, "Yes, the tumor is malignant."

Another preacher, John Jewell, asks if we remember playing the game "Freeze" as a child? It was the same game my friends and I called Statue. A group of kids runs and plays as though everything were normal and then the one who is "it" yells, "Freeze!" Everyone has to freeze exactly as they are when they hear the word. Hearing that I had cancer was a freeze moment for me.

There are moments in our lives that are frozen in time and frozen in our memories. Good moments. Bad moments. Moments of joy and moments of grief. A first kiss. The day a child is born. A look on the doctor's face. The death of someone you loved.

These are frozen moments. Time stops.

You've had them, too. I know you have. Maybe you call them defining moments. A diagnosis. A period of unemployment. Losing something to someone else

--something you've wanted and worked toward. A child born with special needs. A fiancé killed in war.

There are good things, too, that make frozen moments. A great success. That enchanted evening when you saw your true love across a crowded room. Being chosen for something because someone believes in you. Frozen moments – defining moments.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had already experienced one frozen moment – the horrible and violent death of Jesus – their world turned absolutely upside down. But there was more. And this morning we arrive with them at the tomb – looking for Jesus there, because that's where he is, we think, that's where he is supposed to be.

We spend a lot of time at the tombs of this world. There are many of them, it seems. And we worry about our diminishing storehouse of hope. Worry about unrest in far off places. There is so much of it. There is our unease that comes with knowing so much human life has been devastated by natural disasters – so many disasters recently we are losing count. An economy that seems so unsure. Old theories of government and politics and economics that no longer seem to be applicable or predictable. And there are all those tombs of our own lives, too, aren't there. Worry. Anxiety. Hopelessness about anything really changing for us. Relationships that need to be readjusted. Loved ones who keep getting worse. Loneliness that won't go away.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had no hope of finding anything but the dead body of the person who had been their hope, their key to the future, the One who had captivated them and respected them and loved them with all the respect and love that every human being deserves. We arrive with them this morning, looking for Jesus in the tomb and instead, we witness an earthquake, and encounter an angel who tells us, “He is

not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” The angel didn’t stop there. “Come, Come with me,” the angel said, “ see the place where he had lain.”

Finding the tomb empty was another freeze moment – and it is still the most defining moment in our Christian faith. There is no branch of Christianity that doesn’t center itself around this news of the resurrection, this news of the empty tomb, this news that Jesus isn’t in that tomb, this news that Jesus is loose, has gone on, ahead of us and will meet us there, wherever is next.

“Any way you look at it,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “(it) is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted almost 2000 years now, and yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on that tomb, on that morning, on what did or did not happen there and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either. The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. . . . . but as it turned out that did not matter because the empty tomb was not the point.”

The point is that Jesus is on the loose. That Jesus goes ahead of us. That Jesus meets us again and again, wherever that next place in our lives is. And that along the way we find ourselves scared to death sometimes over whatever it is that scares us in life – scared of what will happen next, scared of not knowing the answers, scared of the way life changes – but whether it’s an angel of the Lord or Jesus himself, we keep hearing

“Do not be afraid.” “Do not be afraid.” The angel said to the two women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he had lain. 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.” That’s what the angel said to the women.

Do not be afraid. Jesus is going ahead of you. There you will see him.

When I got that diagnosis of breast cancer, I was really scared. Both of my parents had died just a few years before – both of cancer. I may as well have been staring into a darkened, cold tomb myself. That’s how I felt. But a few days after my diagnosis, as I was waiting for the doctors to give me treatment options, friends from church, women with whom I’d been in an ongoing Bible Study group, other church friends, my pastor offered to gather one night with us, my husband and me, and pray. Because we were scared. And I remember that evening well because it was during that evening that I found myself voicing a prayer I’d never voiced before – at least not with the same clarity or conviction. Remember, I told you I was in seminary at the time, wondering if I should be and wondering what on earth God was doing or had planned. Tentative about all of it. Actually almost embarrassed by being in seminary – or self-conscious. That night, in the midst of that prayer circle, I prayed aloud something I’d never prayed – “God, I just want the chance to serve you. That’s all. I want the chance to serve you.” And now twenty two years later, I look back and realize how gracious God has been. How privileged I have been. Like you, like you - to have been called into this body of faith, this family of Christian believers, this religion – with all of its struggles and the ways it has been

misunderstood and all of the ways we, as Christians have been stereotyped and typecast and dismissed by the world, or the media – and yet, you and I have been so privileged to have been called into this family of faith comprised of Christian disciples. Yes, sometimes we are scared. Yes, a whole lot of times we doubt. Yes, we fail and certainly we are not perfect. But we are so privileged because we have heard the message that Jesus is on the loose – that Jesus goes ahead of us – and that Jesus meets us there – as we follow him – as we keep taking those tentative scared steps into the unknown future of our lives. That when everything else looks dim or scary or hopeless, that’s the promise – he is not in that empty tomb – he is not there – he has gone on ahead to Galilee and he’ll meet us there or in a multitude of places – Because he is on the loose – on the loose.

I have prayed with one of you about a job situation and one day we prayed so specifically that a job would come before the day when unemployment benefits ran out. You called me this week and said “I got a job.” And I after we both relished in that good news, I asked “Did you get it before the unemployment ran out?” And you said, “I had the unemployment benefits had been extended but before the extension was granted, they would have run out on Tuesday-- and I got the job on Tuesday.”

Now, I don’t know how that stuff happens. I know it doesn’t always happen like that. Prayers aren’t always answered that way. But I sometimes think that God answers those kinds of specific prayers in certain instances just to show us this stuff is real – real – still – today – real-- and to encourage us in our faith and in our ability to trust and to encourage us to turn our lives over again to Jesus and to encourage us to go and tell.

There is a line in our Christian funeral liturgy – a statement that I so love. It is part of a prayer and it says “Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and of

death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.”

We can live, as those who are prepared to die, because of the resurrection – because Jesus is not in that tomb, because Jesus is on the loose everywhere and because he meets us and in those frozen moments of our lives, those defining moments, and Jesus says “Do not be afraid, Go and tell my brothers and sisters that I go ahead of them wherever they go and they will meet me there. ” Jesus is on the loose. Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed!