

BEGINNING AND ENDING WITH ANGELS

A SERMON FOR EASTER  
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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MATTHEW 28:1-10

I preached my first Easter sermon at a sunrise service in Central Park in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, in 1969. There was snow on the ground. It was cold. In fact, two of the three Easters I was in Kentucky, it snowed. We could have sung “I’m dreaming of a white Easter...”

So if I’ve got it figured right, that’s 45 years of preaching Easter messages, many years two or three different sermons, for I would preach a different sermon at the sunrise service than at the eleven o’clock hour, and a different service at the contemporary service, or the evening service.

I figure I’m somewhere in the vicinity of 75 to 80 Easter messages.

I’ve talked about Mary Magdalene, for she features prominently in all four gospel accounts of the first Easter Sunday. I’ve talked about the other women, and their number and identity varies from gospel to gospel. I’ve talked about Peter and the unnamed disciple, who was probably John the Evangelist, who raced to the empty tomb. Of course, I’ve talked about Jesus, the Risen Lord, for He is the central figure of the Resurrection story. And I’ve talked about God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.

But in forty five years, I’ve never talked about the angels.

And it is strange that I have not, for there is a symmetry in the beginning and ending of the gospel. The story begins and ends with the appearance of angels, who bring good news, glad tidings, of great joy.

Now those words are found in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. Of course, the angel (or archangel) Gabriel appears earlier in the story than that, first to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and then to Mary the mother of Jesus. And Matthew tells us of an unnamed angel appearing to Joseph as well. But it is to the shepherds, keeping watch in the fields, that a multitude of the heavenly host appeared, telling them not to be afraid, for that good news, that long anticipated great joy, of the birth of the Messiah had taken place.

And so the story of the life of Jesus has its beginning with angels.

What is an angel? Most of us think of a heavenly creature, with wings, and a halo. Truth is, most of us think of angels as beautiful women with long blond hair, or maybe red hair, because that is how we usually see them depicted in art, or displayed on top of the Christmas tree.

When we think of male angels, we probably think about a curly haired blond teenager, with rosy cheeks, maybe with his lips puckered to blow the trumpet that will sound at the end of time.

The word *angelos* means messenger, and the angels are God’s messengers who carry God’s news to God’s people.

In the beginning of the story of Jesus, it was the angels, the heavenly messengers, who carried the good news of the savior’s birth to the shepherds. And the shepherds themselves became messengers, angels, sharing that news with all they encountered.

Now I want to make one thing perfectly clear: it is an important point of interpretation of the gospels to me. Each gospel is unique. Each evangelist, each writer, tells the story differently, and there are differences in the details. This does not mean, as some skeptics suggest, that the Bible contradicts itself. It means that four different reporters are giving four different accounts of the same event, and in all cases the accounts were written years after the event happened. So details are blurred, stories have been told and retold, and they were told and retold by human beings like us, who get their facts mixed up, and can't keep their stories straight. I did that recently at my brother's memorial service, so I know how easy it is to do. My brother Richard, and our neighbor, Mike Taylor, corrected me after the service, but I just flat mixed up in my mind a simple story of my brother, Robert's life.

And if I could do that less than five months after his death, how much more would the story have changed years and years later?

In Matthew, as we read a few moments ago, the angel appears along with a violent earthquake, just at daybreak. He rolled the stone away from the grave, a stone that probably weighed five hundred to a thousand pounds. And as our pew Bible translates it, he sat himself down on it. With a face shining like lightning, and garments white as snow. The guards shook with fear and fainted dead away.

The women did not faint; the angel addressed them, telling them there was nothing to fear, and that the tomb was empty, and that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And he ends his words by saying, "That is what I had to tell you."

Mark's version has the angel as a youth sitting on the right hand side of the tomb, wearing a white robe. But the message is the same: Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead. He is not here.

Luke's account has two men robed in dazzling white, inside the tomb, and the message remains: You are looking for Jesus among the dead. He is not here. He is risen, just as He told you.

In each of those accounts, it is the women who went to the tomb at daybreak who met the angels.

John tells a story of Simon Peter and another disciple rushing to the tomb after Mary Magdalene had found the stone rolled away. They did not see the angels, but when Mary returned to the tomb, they were there, two angels in white, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus lay. In John's story, the angels ask the Magdalene why she is weeping, and after she replies, she turns from them and finds Jesus, though she fails to recognize Him until He calls her by name.

Whether it be one or two, in the ending of the story, there are angels, just as they were there in the beginning. And their message is the same: Fear not.

The news changes from "Christ is Born" to "Christ is Risen". But the message is the same: God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

In order for the world to be saved, the world must hear the good news. The world must hear the stories, must see them re-enacted, must hear them told in different ways and in different places. To tell the stories, it takes messengers, angels, to share the glad tidings, the good news, the gospel.

Those angels, those messengers, don't need to wear white robes that dazzle with their brightness. They don't need to wear black robes, which designate them as clergy. It would help if their faces shown with the brightness and light of the story, but they come in all shapes and sizes, in both genders, of all ages.

Every one of you who tells another the story of Jesus is an angel. A messenger of God. You don't have to tell the whole story. Maybe all you have to do is listen to the angels in scripture: Don't be afraid. Jesus is risen from the dead. God loves you just the way you are.

Beginning and ending with angels, the story of Jesus goes on. And it doesn't end on Easter Sunday in the tomb nearly two thousand years ago. It continues to this very day: and we who believe the good news, who share the good news, are angels.

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of death, for Christ is risen. Don't be afraid to share the good news, for you are an angel.

Let us pray.

Lord, someone we will see this day, this week, this month, this year, needs to hear the message of the angels. Help us to share with them Your love, and the good news of the gospel: that we have nothing to fear, for Christ died for our sins and is risen for our hope. Amen.