

Sermon: Who Are We?
Text: Matthew 28:1-10
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Easter Sunday
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After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Matthew 28:1

Have you ever wondered why the New Testament starts off with four separate accounts of Jesus' life? We know them collectively as the Gospels; individually as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But why are there four separate stories, and not just one?

If you were there and you saw everything that happened, and heard everything that was said, and then wrote it all down, wouldn't just one account do the job?

It might do, if that's how the gospel record had come to be. Meaning, if this story had been written in real time by someone who was watching and listening to everything Jesus said and did, like an embedded reporter, then that one account might have been enough. We'd have the story of Jesus, like a feature piece in the New York Times Magazine.

But that's not how the Gospels came to be. For five or six decades after the events we are celebrating today took place, this story was first told and passed down in oral form.

Until one day someone finally had the brilliant idea -- and it was brilliant -- to write it down for all posterity. That idea caught on and more than a few people took the opportunity to record the story as they had heard it or understood it.

Not just Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but several other people too, including, we think Thomas and maybe even Mary.

A lot could be said and has been said about how these separate accounts were written, and the differences between them. That material is interesting and for those of us who take the Bible seriously, it's worth careful study.

As for the question of why four, and not, say, two, or five, I do not know the full answer to that question.

But I do have a theory as to why there is more than one. I believe it's the Bible's built in antidote to fundamentalism.

If there were just one version of Christ's life, only one account of his teachings, his death and resurrection, we'd have to read that not just authoritatively but definitively.

Inevitably we'd look for the meaning of the story in the facts alone, as though the Gospel record were akin to a science textbook. Master the facts, and you've mastered the material.

As for what the story actually means, well there could be little doubt about that. After all, facts are facts. They brook no disagreement. Not in the minds of literalists, anyway.

But mercifully, that's not the case. In the end, we have four gospels. And when it comes to the facts, they are all different, sometimes quite dramatically so. I'm inclined to think that's how God intended them to be. So that we wouldn't flatten out the story just to fit the basic empirical details.

To understand what this astonishing story is about, including what this astonishing day is about, we have to go deeper than that.

I came to a new appreciation for why this is so from an unlikely source: a 30-something year old Nigerian woman to be precise. But not just any Nigerian woman.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a best-selling novelist, with an international following.

Long before she was a novelist, Chimamanda was a bright little girl, with a ravenous appetite for stories.

Her parents were themselves highly educated professionals--her father was a professor at the university in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, and her mother was an administrator--so their home was filled with a love of learning and with shelves filled with books.

But at that time there still weren't many Nigerian authors available in print, or books by authors from other African countries for that matter.

So the books that populated the shelves in Chimamanda's childhood home were all by English and American authors, who wrote about snowy landscapes and whose main characters often had long blonde or brown hair and blue eyes, and ate apples.

Obviously this was nothing like the life that Chimamanda knew. She was born a Nigerian girl with tight, curly black hair, who lived in a land of perpetual sunshine and ate mangos instead of apples.

On the one hand, these stories about Narnia and a little house on a prairie opened up new worlds for Chimamanda and greatly expanded her imagination. But the unintended consequence of them was that she grew up believing that little girls who looked like her and who ate mangos did not belong in stories.

As she says, "How impressionable, and how vulnerable, we are, in the face of a story." That is especially true when all we have is a single story. One account of who we are and what our life means.

She was about to find that out for herself in an acutely personal way.

Chimamanda attended college here in the United States. Upon meeting her roommate, this young Nigerian girl immediately learned that her American counterpart had very fixed ideas about what she, as an African, was capable of.

Not in an actively racist way, necessarily, just in the way that one might if you've only ever heard that Africans are poor and that the continent as a whole is undeveloped.

Could she use a stove? Did she know how to use money?

So how does this happen? How do you create a single story about what another person's life means?

According to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, here's how: you describe and imagine that person as one thing, and only one thing, and you repeat that story over and over again. And that is what they become, that one thing. (Chimamanda tells her story in full here: ted.com "The Danger of a Single Story".)

I say all this because last Sunday I concluded my sermon by asking the same question about Jesus that the crowd in Jerusalem was asking about him: Who is this man?

On the one hand, the answer seems easy and obvious, right? Follow the story and it will give us the answer. When last we left Jesus, he had just ridden into Jerusalem on a colt. Or was it a donkey? Matthew uses both words, so even this factual detail is ambiguous.

What's the next thing Jesus does? The following day he drives the money changers out of the temple.

This act of defiance, of righteous indignation, is one of the very last things he does. It wins him no friends among the civic and religious authorities in the capital and in the temple, and perhaps contributes to the events of the following Friday.

But surprise, surprise, in John's gospel, it's one of the very first things he does. He turns water into wine, his first miracle in that account, and then he drives the moneychangers out of the temple. That's three years before he does this in Matthew's version.

Does this difference matter? Is it significant? I think it does matter. It's significant because where you start a story will determine the whole trajectory, including where and how it ends, and what it means.

When it comes the Easter story itself the details are even fuzzier. In one version, Mark, the first Gospel to be written, Jesus doesn't even appear. What does the resurrection mean when there is no body? It's as though Mark is leaving it to the reader to finish the story, to decide for themselves what Easter means.

In the other three, this one scene, this one moment, Easter morning, is populated by different sets of characters in each, all of whom say different things, and all of whom have different reactions to the astonishing discovery that the stone has been rolled away, that the tomb is empty and Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Which is to say these stories probably reflect our own experience of Easter, the different things it means to us, the different ways we understand and experience it.

In John, the resurrected Christ walks through walls, then offers to let Thomas touch him. According to Luke, he eats breakfast with his disciples then, then just a little later, he ascends to heaven, rising in the air like his body is filled with helium.

Clearly the laws of physics don't apply to resurrected bodies. And neither do the laws of facts to the Easter story. Do these differences imply that these accounts aren't true?

Are these stories an early example of magical realism where facts are slippery things and you can get away with anything, where circles can be squares and people can be raised from the dead, and the truth doesn't matter because none of this actually happened?

There are certainly more than a few skeptics out there who would make that case.

But I believe we have an answer that is better than that. These differences don't invalidate the story.

They make it bigger. They keep us from turning resurrection into something we can understand. Something we can describe. Something that makes sense and that we can wrap our minds around. Something we can nail down, as it were. Something we can domesticate and keep safely contained in a little tiny box the size of our head.

Who is this man, and what does this story mean? What does this day mean? Well, it depends. It depends on whom you ask. And it depends on where you start.

Maybe you start with the assumption that we are all sinners, and Jesus was sent to save us by atoning for those sins by dying for us on the cross.

That's the first story you heard told about him, and really it's the only story you've ever heard about him. You've heard it told again and again, almost literally every time you come to church, starting from when you were six years old.

Maybe you're not sure how the resurrection figures into this account, exactly. If it's his death that matters, then what difference does it make if he rises from the dead?

But that's okay because, as Chimamanda pointed out, maybe you were impressionable and vulnerable when you first heard this version.

Frankly, you're glad for the chance to be forgiven, to feel like, with Jesus, you can rise again from the tomb of guilt and shame in which you've found yourself from time to time, given some of the things you've done over the course of your life.

But then, having never actually read the stories, maybe you thought you might just investigate them for yourself.

And the first thing you notice is what Jesus says about himself, how he describes his mission, as he understands it. How he has come to preach good news to the poor, and liberty to the captives.

And then you notice that almost everything he does in the pages that follow serves that mission.

How he seems almost singularly focused on loving and ministering to anyone who is kept in bondage, or made to feel excluded: women and children, neither of whom we considered fully human in that time, the unclean, the blind, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, the criminal who was crucified with him on Good Friday.

It's as though he believes that everyone he encounters is made in the image of God, and so his chief goal is to dismantle every system: religious, economic, social, political that treats them otherwise, that keeps them locked in a tomb of sin or sickness or oppression or despair.

Which is also when you realize this is a narrative about two competing empires: one, a kingdom rooted in power whose goal is control and domination, and one rooted in love whose goal is peace and liberation.

So that when you come to the story of what happened on that terrible Friday, it seemed less like an atoning death for the whole human race and more like that crisis moment when sin itself had triumphed. Power won on the day love itself died.

Which is maybe how some of you are feeling right now, at this particular moment in history. Despite the chimes and the trumpet and the alleluias that started our service, you're just not sure this story is true, that Easter matters anymore.

If that's how you're feeling today, that's okay. Because you're not alone. Remember how the story of this day starts:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Note: they did not come to see Jesus. They did not come expecting that stone to be rolled away.

They arrived with their hearts still broken because, in the words of the spiritual we heard on Thursday night, they were there when they nailed him to the tree. They were there when they laid him in the tomb. They watched their best hopes for themselves and for their world die right before their very eyes.

For me, this whole Lenten season has felt like a journey to that tomb. It feels like values I love and care about deeply, values I've worked hard to see realized in the church and in the country have been under constant assault.

Orders to deport my neighbors; a green light to pollute our air and our rivers; a persistent effort to gut our schools, to cut our social safety net to ribbons; to make vulnerable Americans even more vulnerable.

All of this culminating, as fate would have it, on Good Friday when we went to bed and wondered if we would wake to find the world turned into a giant smoking tomb.

In a world like this, in a time like this, so far out from that first Easter, maybe the most important question before us is not who Jesus is. The more urgent question is who are we?

I believe the answer is as simple as it is wonderful: We are people of this story.

Yes, when terrible things happen to our world, or to people we love, our hearts break and we grieve and lament.

But then we gather here again because we are Easter people, because what happened then, happens again and again, the living Christ meets us here and raises us up from the tomb of our own despair and our grief and our hopelessness.

We know this story is true because it has happened to us.

Did you catch how this particular version ends? I just love this. The two Mary's come to the tomb. They have a face to face conversation with an angel, who tells them news that is so good it's almost literally impossible to believe.

And then here's what it says:

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"

I love that because this is the same word the angel used at the very beginning of this whole story, to announce to Mary God's wild and crazy idea to become one with us, and for us.

"Greetings!" Now Jesus himself says it here. Greetings! Love has won. Life has triumphed over death. And this story is going to repeat again and again. But now it's your story. And everyone belongs in it. Little Nigerian girls with black curly hair, women whose hearts are broken. Even people who doubt or deny or betray me.

Everyone belongs in this story! Now go, because you get to write it and you get to tell it and you get to live it.

Praise God!