

## **The Colors of Easter and Hues of Hope**

Matthew 28:1-10, 18-20

April 9, 2023 Easter Sunday Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent #7

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*After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth shook, reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move.*

*The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed. Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message."*

*The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there."*

*.....Jesus... gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, ....Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."*

*The Message 28:1-10, 18-20*

The story of Easter is a mystery. I have been preaching Easter sermons for over 30 years and every year I wonder what words can I offer that will be relevant and hopeful. Maybe we don't start with words. I am more and more convinced that it is artists and musicians that can offer us deeper experiences of the Holy and open us to the mystery of this ancient Easter story than only words. And our participation in creativity that see and hear and know in a deeper way. This year our congregation has been using the life and art of Henri Matisse to guide us through the season of Lent. I have learned so much. And I have become more aware of how art, color and light are shaping my spiritual life.

There is such variety of art and music depicting the Easter story. I came across an artist this week that gave me some new insights. Joel Schoon-Tanis. I have been reflecting on the Easter story through a one of his paintings included in his book *40: The Gospels*. Schoon-Tanis is a Michigan artist who paints biblical stories and pairs them with childlike commentary that is often phonetically spelled. In the paintings, Jesus is depicted painstakingly, in a sophisticated

and detailed brush style. So, too, are a smattering of flora and fauna. But most of the figures—including all of the non-Jesus humans—are rendered as if by a child, with stick limbs and rudimentary faces. Jesus is set apart; he is Word and light, truth and life.

If the paintings weren't so whimsical and endearing, perhaps Schoon-Tanis's theological anthropology would feel heavy-handed. In the Easter morning scene - happy angels are perched in the entryway of the tomb. The sun is rising, the roses and lilies are blooming. Jesus back is turned to the viewer. In every painting his back is turned; you might catch a fleeting glimpse of his face as he stands transfixed by the person in front of him. The women are on their way back to Galilee. This time, it's Mary. ...Her round face is giddy with delight. Schoon-Tanis writes, "Jesus snuck up on his good friend Mary. He just started talking to her. He could do at least sed, 'Surprize!' or 'Ta Da!' or something." Christian Century, Katherine Willis Pershey 3.29.22

The Risen Christ figure expands one's soul, even without a proper "Ta da!" I don't think Easter is about hoping we would see a Christ figure on the path up Mt. Tam or an angel with snowy white wings on our walk around the neighborhood in Pacheco Valle. What does Matthew want us to know as we consider the story of the empty tomb?

It is not a quiet Easter morning in Matthew gospel. No one is whispering – "Good news! Christ is risen!" No. For Matthew, this is earth-shaking news, surprising news. Matthew alone includes the **shaking of the earth** when the women arrive at the tomb. Actually this is the second major (super)natural event that takes place in the Passion/Resurrection narrative. The earth also shook as Jesus "breathed his last" just a chapter before (27:50). Matthew makes sure we don't miss the significance of both this death and this resurrection. It's no accident. It's nothing normal. The resurrection is earth shaking, disorienting news.

If Friday was a death that shook the lives of some. it turns out that Sunday started a shaking that continues to vibrate until today.

The earth shook, the tomb was empty, and the followers, women and men are changed. Something happened that changed people so much they went out to change more people. Something happened to convince people that the one who they saw led away to be crucified had transcended or defeated death. Something happened to prove that the Holy One offered a truth that outweighed the worst the world could throw at this one called Jesus who taught and embodied love.

The earth shook. The news of the risen Christ changed people. Matisse shook up the world with his art. One critic called him a Beast for this use of bright colors and his paintings that reflected his emotional response to the world and rather than painting realistic scenes.

Then his world was shaken when he could no longer paint. He found new life with paper cut outs. He painted with paper and unusual shapes. His art brought joy to people.

In July 1943, as WWII was raging, Henri Matisse left Nice to escape the threat of bombardment and moved to Vence where he stayed until 1948. Dominican nuns ran a nursing home just across the street. His former night nurse and model was a longtime friend Monique Bourgeois. They rekindled their friendship. In 1944 she joined the Dominican community, becoming Sister Jacques-Marie. In 1947, the nuns were in desperate need of a chapel. They invited an architect to meet with Matisse. He persuaded Matisse not only to decorate but also design the entire chapel which would prove the synthesis of past experimentations. In 1951 it was finished. "This work has taken me four years of exclusive and diligent work, and it is the result of my entire working life. Despite all its imperfections I consider it to be my masterpiece."

Rather than conventionally placing unusual fourteen drawings of the Stations of the Cross in different locations around the chapel, Matisse put them all together in a serpentine S-curve from the lower left to the upper right. : fourteen scenes along the way of Jesus' Passion, his journey of suffering and death. Matisse drew these scenes in an extremely rough, simple style, both because he wanted to capture the chaotic, devastating essence of each scene. And by placing this ensemble on the chapel's back wall opposite the communion table, Matisse creates a clear choreography: when we turn toward God's table & Tree of Life window behind it, we turn our backs on the way of violence & hate, scapegoating, suffering & death.

In this new life, he ventured into new mediums – architecture, stained glass, the use of light and even designed liturgical vestments for the priests. A new chapter, new life resurrection invited others to know Holy light. From the beginning of his artistic career to the end, he changed the rules that the art world had given him – with color, boldness, seeing beauty in the world in ordinary things. (SALT, 2023 Lent Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent)

Easter changes the rules. Easter changes how we understand life and death. Easter challenges us to look for life in the most unexpected places. If we take it seriously, Easter shakes the ground of our understanding. Like the women who went to the tomb looking for the dead body, but then encountering a living presence, they were amazed, they were joyful, they were in awe. Something changed.

Matisse offers us incredible beauty out of his resurrection new life. We hear the choir and handbells ring in Alleluias that can lift us up. Does it change us? Does it change the world?

There may be a lot of silliness and insincerity around the practice of celebrating Easter, but the message of the Easter story itself is far more than a religious selling point. It is a way of expressing the central belief, whether it is expressed cynically or sadly, that life is tragic, but not ultimately so.

Briefly stated, the story leading up to Easter, the story of the "crucifixion," tells how Jesus was condemned to death, falsely accused of religious blasphemy and political rebellion. It is an all-too-familiar tragedy of hubris on behalf of the powerful and suffering on behalf of the

innocent. The tragic storyline that we've all grown accustomed to is that money talks, power wins and anyone who says otherwise needs to "get real" and get out of the way.

But the story of Jesus does not end with his tragic death. The stories of the "resurrection" are Jesus' followers' way of saying that Jesus was not just a fading memory of a religious martyr. In fact, Jesus' followers actually experienced his presence more after his death than before.

Teachings that left them puzzled before his death became their way of life after his resurrection. Courage that evaded them before his death gave them the power to preach and teach and heal and take risks and live in community after his resurrection. The way Jesus actually embodied the presence of God was how they came to express and be guided by the Spirit in them after the resurrection. They embodied loving their neighbor, all their neighbors.

And the reign of God: Jesus always said it was present among them, but they could never quite accept that reality in a world dominated by the Roman Empire. After the resurrection, the reign of God became their way of living. It is not a story of a ghost or zombie sneaking up on people. It is a story of life that ultimately overcomes the tragedy that we've all been told is real life in the real world.

Maybe this Easter, there is not big earth-shaking transformation for you/us, but instead daily reorienting and resurrections and deeper connections to the Holy One and other people.

If you are one who has failed again and again to overcome addiction, resurrection says, "Life is worth trying again."

If you are an LBGQTQ person, facing rejection and ridicule, resurrection says, "It gets better."

If you are a musician or an artist, and wonder if the world needs you, your colors, your melody resurrection says, "The world needs your beauty and music. Your gifts are a source of light."

If you are someone who facing changes in your health. If you are facing a long term illness or cancer. If you are feeling the weight of grief, resurrection says, "You are held in God's love and light each day. The earth may shake, but God is our refuge and strength."

If you were hoping to hear the Easter story summed up in a few words, like "Ta Da!" sorry to disappoint you.

But if you are wondering how people can have Easter hope when it feels like we live in a Good Friday world of heartache and hate, violence and suffering, resurrection says, "You are not alone. The resurrection shows that there is a promise of hope, liberation, and healing beyond our imagination and despite how we got here in the first place. Together we will practice resurrection and the reign of God. We will help each other see hues of hope." Amen.