

WHEN A STONE IS JUST A BENCH

Genesis 18:1-15

Matthew 28:1-10

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The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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Our Easter story actually begins centuries earlier. It begins when mysterious visitors drop in unexpectedly on an elderly couple at their desert tent. Where the visitors have come from is not readily apparent, though some have suggested that they are angels incognito – without wings, halos, or white garb. What we do know is that they bring startling news... that the elderly couple, whose names are Abraham and Sarah, are going to have a baby. Now, we are talking elderly here. Abraham has just celebrated his ninety-ninth birthday, and Sarah is not much younger; and as Frederick Buechner once described it, the visitors are telling them that they are going to start a family, and Medicare is picking up the tab.¹ The strangers break the news to Abraham, but Sarah overhears from just inside the tent.

What happens next is one of my favorite moments in all of Scripture, a moment so full of humanity. There is no syrupy piety here... no instant compliance or embrace of the divine announcement. Sarah doesn't say, "Well, this must be a message from God." She doesn't come out to bow before the strangers and thank them for the good news they've brought. No, Sarah *laughs*.

Abraham and Sarah have spent years hoping for such news, wanting a child. It has been for them a source of tension and contention. And the years of barrenness have surely taken their toll on Sarah. But now in this moment Sarah can't help herself. She is struck by the sheer incongruity of it all. The thought is so ludicrous. And so, she laughs. She can just imagine what people will think, and she laughs right out loud.

And the visitors call her hand. Actually, the Book of Genesis says that the Lord calls her hand, which makes the scene all the more compelling. Whoever says it, someone asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" A bit embarrassed now, Sarah tries to deny that she laughed, covering her face. But her eyes betray her smile. And the stranger says, "Oh yes, you did laugh."²

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Is anything impossible with God? Are barrenness and decay the last words, or is God capable of doing something outrageous? Well, of course God can... but Sarah laughs. And later she will name the child Isaac, which means "laughter."

Centuries later the story continues, and it continues with another improbable announcement of a birth. This time, the stranger has a name, Gabriel, and Luke records that

¹ I borrow this line, and the essence of this beginning point, from Frederick Buechner's Yale Beecher Lectures, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1977.

² Genesis 18:15.

Gabriel is an angel of the Lord – a messenger from God. This time it is not old Sarah, but a young girl named Mary who receives the surprising announcement. But Mary doesn't laugh. Instead, she is perplexed. She is to have a child? What can this possibly mean? How can she be pregnant? There is only one man in her life, the one to whom she has been betrothed, and she barely knows him. How can this be?

And Gabriel answers her, you may remember, with a response that seems also to answer the question asked centuries earlier by the one who spoke to Abraham and Sarah. Back in the desert he had asked them, "Is anything too wonderful to the Lord?" And now Gabriel, peering into the face of a frightened adolescent, offers words of confidence. "With God," says the angel, "nothing is impossible."³

And Mary, at once meek and strong, hears and believes what the angel says to her, and ponders the promise in her heart, even later when, as Luke describes it, it will pierce her soul like a sword.⁴ Of course, that won't happen until decades later, on a Friday when the sky turns black as night and the child she has borne is put to death on a cross.

From that crucifixion scene, we move forward again, only this time just two days... to the dawning of a Sunday morning... to our story *this* morning. Again, an angel messenger: it is not a mysterious stranger in the desert... nor is it Gabriel, speaking in hushed tones to a shivering girl. This angel seems more brazen... I picture him as a bit like John Travolta's archangel in the movie "Michael," but more luminous and awe-inspiring. With the ground still rumbling with the aftershocks of an earthquake, he sits on the stone that only moments before had sealed the tomb of Jesus. As the women stand nearby, peering into the tomb, he speaks, and his message is every bit as startling and improbable as those of his predecessors.

I can see him smirking almost at the terror of the guards, this angelic herald. Chris Chakoian says she imagines him "crossing his arms and cavalierly tapping his foot. It is the ultimate expression of power, that the stone that would contain Jesus in death is reduced to a bench for an angel."⁵ And the message the angel brings is the most startling and remarkable news of all: that the God who turned barrenness into birth... the God who had become incarnate in a baby born in a stable... that the same God has now raised Jesus from the dead. Death no longer has the final word. God's eternity has broken into ordinary time. And despite the presence of the principalities and powers, despite the illusion that darkness and death are in control here, the truth is that God has the final word, and God's word is life.

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" the angel-stranger had asked. "With God," Gabriel had answered, "nothing is impossible." And now the Easter angel on his gravestone-bench, says to the women, "Sit down, friends, I've got news. He ain't here. Death could not hold him. With God even the impossible is possible."

³ Luke 1:26-37.

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books, 1998, 118.

⁵ Christine Chakoian, in a paper presented to the January 1999 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Ann Arbor. Cf. also Barbara Lundblad, "Transforming the Stone," *Day 1* broadcast, April 4, 1999.

The situation at the tomb had seemed to be under control. Everybody knew that Jesus was dead. The tomb had been secured with a massive stone. At the urging of the chief priests and the Pharisees, Pilate had dispatched a select cadre of soldiers to guard the tomb. Crucified. Dead. Buried. Sealed. Guarded.

But the angel sits on his gravestone-bench, a smile on his face, whistling a bold tune – a melody the women will not be able to get out of their heads, a refrain that will one day inspire George Friedrich Handel, a song the church sings still today – because the angel knows. He knows that despite the plots of the principalities and powers, God has the final word. He knows that what seemed to be the end of hope has been turned into hope's beginning. He knows that there is coming a day when at last God will dwell in human hearts, wiping away all human tears, when death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. The angel knows.

And what he knows is this: that earth has no power to thwart the will of God... that God's will is for life and wholeness, even when it seems that disability and death have the final word... that our hope rests not in human schemes but in God's power to save. The news is this: that though we still grieve over friends and loved ones, still suffer distress and pain, God will not abandon us. The news is this: that with the assurance of the resurrection, we can live and die, we can lay our loved ones in the earth, and still face the future with a measure of courage and confidence.⁶ The news is this: that the same power that rolled away the stone is capable of empowering us in the midst of great tribulation.

Great tribulation. We have seen it in recent weeks. We have lain awake at night, worried about loved ones. We have watched makeshift hospitals go up, as the streets and sidewalks emptied, and the horns and sirens silenced around the city. We have wept at the deaths of medical personnel and teachers and neighbors and dear friends we have loved.

I have been whispering each day an old Jewish prayer, one I have often shared with families gathering at graveside services after the deaths of loved ones. It is called "A Blessing for Those Who Remain."

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.
 In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.
 In the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.
 In the blueness of the sky and the warmth of summer, we remember them.
 In the rustling of the leaves and the beauty of autumn, we remember them.
 In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.
 When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.
 When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.
 When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.
 So long as we live, they too shall live,
 for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.⁷

⁶ John B. Rogers, Jr., "We Who Must Die Demand a Miracle," sermon published in the Easter, 1998 issue of *Journal for Preachers*.

⁷ *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*, New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975, 552.

I love that blessing. Memories are essential to us. But this Easter Sunday, there is something larger and more important than our best memories to proclaim. There is a word of astonishing promise rooted in the improbable news of that audacious angel perched on his cemetery-stone bench.

The poet Anne Porter caught something of that promise in a poem she wrote after the death of a dear friend. With the boldness of the Easter angel she pulled together her trauma and her hope, along with the good news that issued forth from Jerusalem at the end of that first Holy Week:

These are the poems I'd show you
 But you're no longer alive /
 The cables creaked and shook
 Lowering the heavy box /
 The rented artificial grass
 Still left exposed
 That gritty gash of earth
 Yellow and mixed with stones
 Taking your body
 That never in this world
 Will we see again, or touch

We know little
 We can tell less /
 But one thing I know
 One thing I can tell /
 I will see you again in Jerusalem
 Which is of such beauty
 No matter what country you come from
 You will be more at home there
 Than ever with father or mother
 Than even with lover or friend
 And once we're within her borders
 Death will hunt us in vain⁸

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? With God nothing is impossible! The mysterious visitor to Abraham and Sarah's desert tent knew it. The angel Gabriel said as much to Mary. And the Easter angel, sitting on that stone, knew it, too. He knew that despite the treachery and tyranny, darkness and death that seemingly had carried the day, the power of love had once again been set loose in the world. He knew how the story was going to end. From his cemetery bench he had seen and heard it all. And he told it to the women, and they shared the news with the other disciples, and the disciples told others, and the word spread. Eventually someone told you. Someone told me. And now it's our story to tell.

⁸ Anne Porter, from "Four Poems in One," *An Altogether Different Language, Poems 1934-1994*, cited by John Buchanan, in an Easter sermon preached at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church a decade or so ago.

The power of love is loose in the world. That is the message the Easter angel wants us to share. Love is loose in the world! And God's is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!

Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed!**

Alleluia! Amen.